



Reconnecting

Vermont designer Milford Cushman's rebuilt home reflects a fresh commitment to creating spaces where beauty dwells

WRITTEN BY **KATHLEEN JAMES** • PHOTOGRAPHED BY **SUSAN TEARE**



THE REMODELED HOUSE evokes a “contemporary camp in the woods,” says Milford Cushman, who deliberately gave it a rustic cabin aesthetic. The siding is Eastern white pine, shingles are Eastern white cedar, and the roof is galvanized metal.

who

MILFORD CUSHMAN

Since 1989, he has led Cushman Design Group, a full-service design firm in Stowe, Vermont.

design philosophy

Consider the “energy and nature of the site” in designing buildings that provide refuge (a sense of security) and prospect (a sense of opportunity), a concept first applied to architecture by Frank Lloyd Wright.

In 1985, Milford Cushman and his wife, Terri Gregory, built a small house for \$36,000 on 8½ acres of land in rural Hyde Park, Vermont. “I had lived in a lot of places, in trailers and camps and shacks,” says Cushman, who today owns a successful architectural and interior design firm, Cushman Design Group, in nearby Stowe, Vermont. “I was ready for a piece of land and a place to call home.” They named the property Raven Beach for the ravens they occasionally spotted there — they believe the birds bring blessings — and for the land’s origins as an ancient inland sea.

It was a simple house, built mostly by their own hands: 900 square feet, with one bedroom, one bathroom, a mudroom, and an open kitchen, dining, and living space. It was heated by a wood stove and constructed with affordable materials that were standard for the day. The property was a former government-funded tree farm, and its new owners were “militant” about protecting the towering pines that dominated the site. “In my design process,” says Cushman, “the ground,



CUSHMAN AND WIFE Terri Gregory, on the screened porch (LEFT) that, along with exterior decks and walkways (BELOW BOTTOM), integrates the house into “the community of trees and wildlife.” The new living room (BELOW) offers space for their art collection, which includes paintings and photography by Cushman.



literally, is the starting point. The site, the land itself, is sacred. Our primary goal was to create an intimate connection between our land and our lifestyle. Through mindful decision making, we integrated ourselves into the community of trees and wildlife.”

Over the next two decades Raven Beach expanded with the addition of four out-buildings: a pottery studio for Gregory, a two-car garage, and two storage buildings. The house itself grew, with a bigger living room, a partial finished basement, a guest bedroom, and a screened porch.

Eventually, Gregory temporarily set aside her career as a potter and joined Cushman Design Group, which has clients from New England to Alaska and the Bahamas. But by June 2008, although the firm was having its best year ever, Cushman says, “my

Source of Inspiration

Cushman found renewal in the words of Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh:

I have arrived.

I am home.

In the here.

In the now.

I am solid.

I am free.

In the ultimate I dwell.

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life felt out of control and chaotic. And then I crashed. I moved into a severe depression. I was working, but I could barely carry on a conversation. Panic attacks, ringing in my ears, blind spots in my eyes. ... Terri was my angel for the next year and a half.”

Then one day in the summer of 2010, his quiet recovery well underway, he saw the bright morning glories in the garden at Raven Beach, their flowers a flash of color and hope.

It was then that he and Gregory committed to a sweeping renovation of the house. They would create an oasis, a place of refuge and renewal that would reflect their com-

THE HOUSE IS primarily heated by a Tula wood stove (ABOVE LEFT), located at the boundary of the entry and the open kitchen, dining, and living space. The entry, which doubles as a classic Vermont “mudroom” (ABOVE RIGHT), has two galvanized metal walls.



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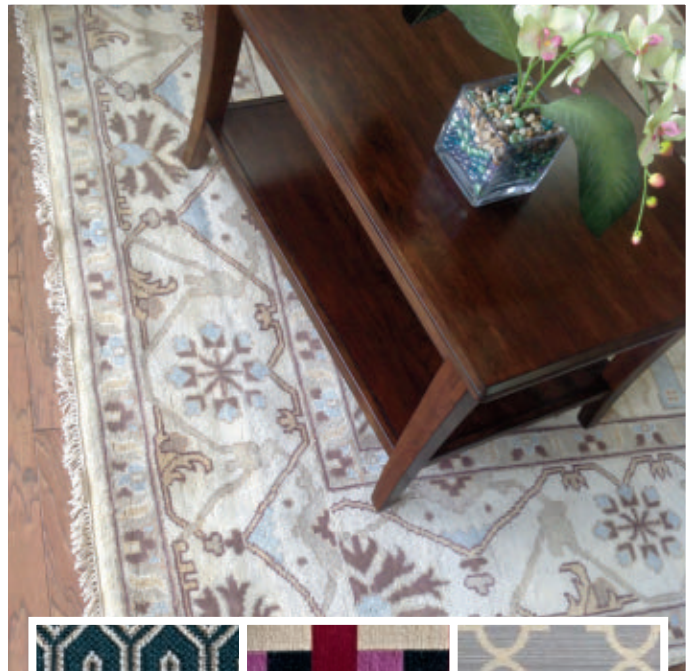
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A FARMHOUSE TABLE, custom made by Vermont Farm Table, in the dining area (ABOVE LEFT) seats eight; the door at left leads to the master bedroom. The kitchen counters (ABOVE RIGHT) are pigmented concrete, poured on-site and finished with a hand-troweled texture.

mitment to each other, to their longtime home, and to design that, as Cushman puts it, “solves problems, explores beauty, and creates places for people to live their lives fully.”

Their goals were to upgrade the building materials and to elevate the home to the highest standards of energy efficiency. They also decided to draw on their shared love of camping and live on-site while the work was underway.

In June 2011, Cushman and Gregory packed 90 percent of their furniture and belongings into a mobile storage container and settled into the ground-floor bedroom with



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DIY Lessons

“Until we designers spend our own money on our own projects,” says Cushman, “we can’t fully grasp the magnitude of stewardship that’s inherent in advising our clients. We knew this project would add to our knowledge and refresh our leadership of the firm.”

The ‘Why’ of Design

“I consider myself to be a translator,” says Cushman. “The projects that I find most intriguing are those where the clients are willing to delve into what’s behind their design requests, to explore something spiritual.”



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FROM THE SCREENED PORCH, Cushman and Gregory's cat, Raven (ABOVE), looks out over the lawn and 1,100-square-foot vegetable garden. The house is sheltered by towering Red and Scots pine trees planted in 1946, when the property was a government-funded tree farm. In summer, the screened porch (FACING PAGE) is a favorite spot, day or night.

“computers, clothes, special books, our TV, sound system, and two cats,” says Cushman. For a makeshift kitchen, they moved their disassembled cabinets and refrigerator from space to space and cooked on a two-burner camp stove.

Over the next nine months, the house got a third bedroom, a second full bath, and an expanded kitchen. The ceiling in the entry and living room was raised and the small entryway and mudroom was enlarged and windows added. With the new plan there was now wall space for their paintings and photography. In the basement, they added a walk-in closet, a storage area and laundry room, and a pantry.

Cushman and Gregory looked to suppliers within 500 miles for building materials such as galvanized metal roofing, triple-glazed windows and doors, red oak flooring, and Eastern white pine siding. Only a few items, “chosen for their durability, and, in some cases, simply for their beauty,” such as ceramic tile from Spain and Italy, were not locally sourced.

Local consultants helped “push the energy

efficiency as far as we could,” says Cushman. Fiberglass insulation was replaced with dense-pack wood cellulose, while a state-of-the-art exchanger was installed to maintain indoor air quality in a house that was now airtight. Lighting was converted to LED and old fixtures and materials, from wood to copper wire, were re-used or recycled.

Through it all, a new design aesthetic emerged, as Raven Beach became what Cushman calls “a contemporary camp in the woods.” The house, now 2,300 square feet, showcases the natural materials and colors of a forest cabin. It is cozy, warm, and sheltering, the place of hope and safety that Cushman envisioned.

“What do most people yearn for?” he asks. “They’re looking for places of connection — to each other, to beauty, and to light. Here, we are safely tucked inside, yet we can fling open the doors and look out over our gardens, through the trees and toward the mountains. We have a sense of opportunity. And we remember what beauty is.” ▲

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