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Moody Hues

A COUPLE BALANCES THEIR SUNNY MIAMI BEACH LIFE WITH A SWANKY, STYLISH COLONIAL IN CAPE PORPOISE

by Debra Spark
Photography Jeff Roberts

One day, a developer friend called Steve Oraham and Jim Samson at their Miami Beach home to say he'd found a "great house in Cape Porpoise and you're really dumb if you don't buy it." A bit of exhortation that was a joke (in its putdown) but earnest enough. "He was probably sick of us staying in his house," Samson opines. More joking. But the truth was he and Oraham had been coming to the Kennebunks for twenty 20 years, so owning made a certain sense.

The house their friend had in mind for them was a Cape Porpoise colonial, a post and beam built in 1760 with two rooms downstairs and two rooms up, a modest space made grander by the addition, in the mid-1800s, of back rooms and a connected barn. Oraham and Samson purchased the house but eventually felt, if not buyer's remorse, some real anxiety about what the property required. The front part of the house had been divided into two apartments, the floors were caving in, shutters were falling off the exterior, and the heating system consisted of three potbellied stoves. Being designers themselves, Oraham and Samson were no strangers to substantial rehabs. (They own Orson Design Group in Miami Beach.) Even so, Sarah Steinberg of Steinberg Custom Designs in Cumberland remembers reassuring Oraham at an early walk-through: "It's OK. I can do this,

and I can see it." What she could imagine, and what she, the homeowners, and Kevin Lord of Kennebunkport's Thomas and Lord Builders could eventually produce, was a shored-up home where the many rooms that formed the back part of the house were converted into a single great room with cathedral ceiling and exposed original beams, while the front house remained largely intact. The four rooms from the 1700s were converted into three bedrooms and a living room, and bathrooms were added to allow each bedroom a measure of privacy and to create a downstairs powder room. The old white pine board floors and original front staircase were preserved. The only addition was a screened porch, which Kennebunk architect John W. Einsiedler says he designed to "wrap up the house."

The project required a crane to lift off the entire back roof of the house, so Lord could replace beams that had rotted, pour a foundation where there had once been rubble stone, install radiant heating under a pre-engineered white oak floor, and add a wood-burning fireplace. The latter was a priority for Oraham and Samson as they wanted to visit in fall for Thanksgiving and in the winter for snowy weekends, but also because they viewed the fireplace as a starting point for the home's aesthetic. "I didn't want a typical, happy-Fourth-of-July summer house," Samson says. "I wanted a moody, edgy feeling." And, indeed, the home

seems less like a sunny Maine vacation cottage than a low-lit, swanky establishment combining period details and antique furniture with stylish, midcentury modern touches.

Black is the surprising predominant color, inside and out. The exterior is painted "squid ink," a black with a gray-blue undertone. It's sufficiently unusual that Lord has had several people call his offices to inquire about the color, and others have knocked at Oraham and Samson's door to ask. Originally Samson had thought of painting the house a chocolate brown, but the couple's best friend, a production designer in Los Angeles, said, "If you are going to do it, just take it all the way."

They took it all the way inside as well.

The kitchen, which dominates one end of the great room, has flat-panel cabinets that Samson describes as being "between black and elephant gray." Even the refrigerator has black flat panels, so stainless steel is at a minimum. "I just wanted a backdrop of this color," Samson says. At the other end of the room, the fireplace's bricks and surround are painted black. The floor is finished with a gray wash. Furniture and shades are brown or gray, as with two French art deco chairs, which are covered in a gray mohair. White walls and white V-match paneling between the old ceiling beams keep the room from getting overly dark. Upstairs, one bathroom is tiled all in black; another is black and white. A bedroom comforter is white with black frame detailing. The effect is subdued and elegant, the palette of the design letting the eye catch on unusual features—the zebra rug in the family-room area of the great room, the metal meshing that is used in place of glass for a large kitchen hatch door, a gold ball that is the top of an old flagpole from a defunct Maine car dealership, and two red cotton velvet chairs in the living room. (The latter, purchased from Corey Daniels Gallery in Wells, feel like movie theater chairs and sit, appropriately enough, facing a TV screen that has been incorporated into a built-in bookcase fashioned by Thomas and Lord.)

"You have to mix high and low. That is the whole trick," says Samson, and by that he means, in part, that you have to mix original finds with

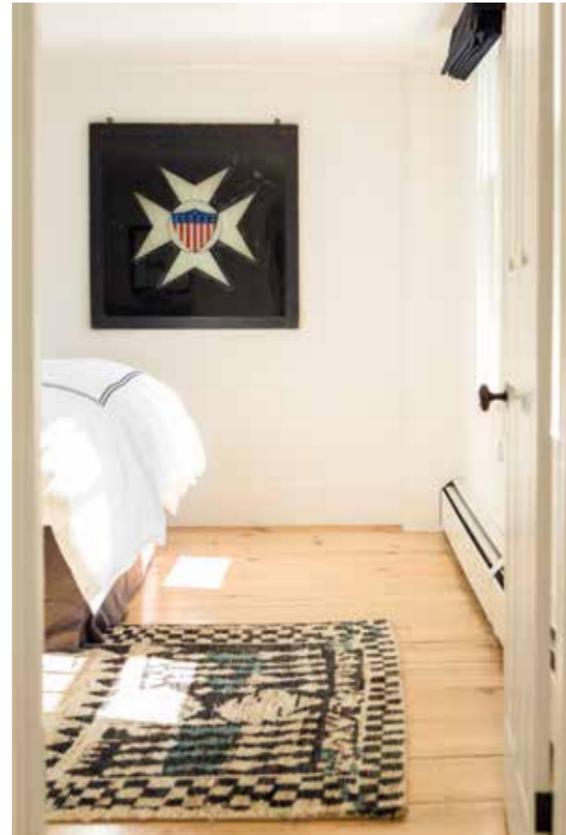


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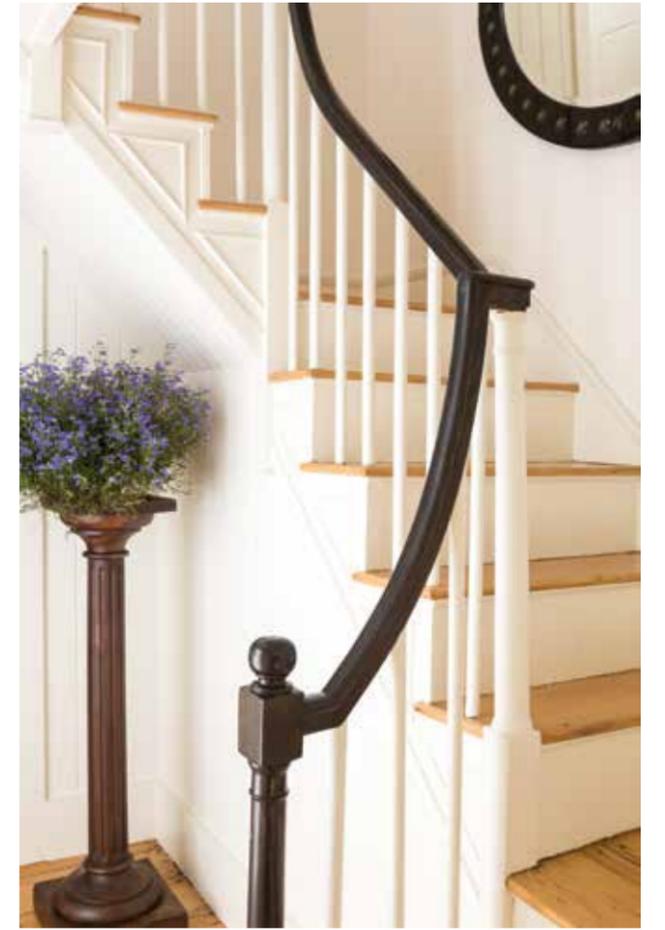


things that you might discover at a favorite store. For instance, the dining room area of the great room has a rosewood Saarinen table with a black base and Eames chairs from Design Within Reach. Elsewhere, upholstered sofas and chairs are from Restoration Hardware. Meanwhile, a 1900s sideboard is from Antiques on Nine in Kennebunk and midcentury chairs of rosewood and black leather are from Carboni Antiques in Wells. A lamp made of a candlestick holder was fashioned by Smith-Zukas in Wells. "It's like FirstDibs dot com right here in Kennebunkport," Samson says of the array of local antiques options he's found. That said, some pieces come from his more far-flung travels. Oraham and Samson bought a chest of drawers at a flea market in Parma, Italy. They once owned an antique shop in Miami and after living with the chest for years, they sold it at the shop. Later the woman to whom they'd sold the piece was moving into a new apartment, which she wanted Oraham and Samson to decorate. Seeing the old chest, Oraham and Samson expressed interest, and the woman gifted the chest back.

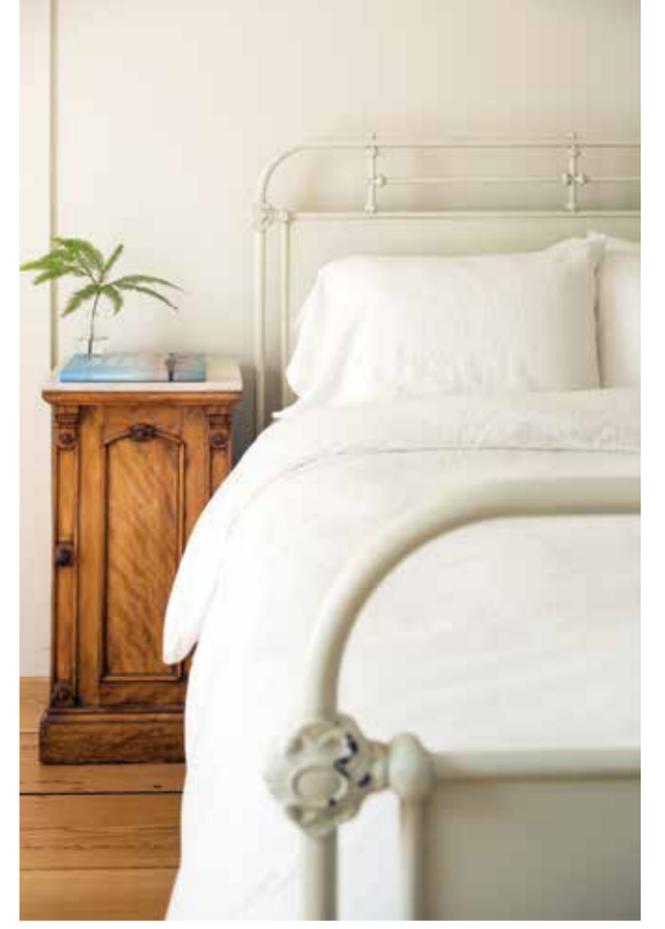
Outside, Ted Carter of Buxton's Ted Carter Inspired Landscapes helped reshape the grounds. The "utility" part of the grounds (the driveway and parking area) were moved away from the immediate side of the house and replaced by gardens and entertaining areas. The result, as Carter says, was "a more gracious approach to the house," and a clear delineation between where cars sit and where people live, thanks to a picket fence interwoven with hydrangea. "Ted really changed the house," says Samson. "It became a garden house—before, it was a house with a driveway next to it. He is responsible for the rolling hills and the gravel driveway to the barn."



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Carter talks about his own work in spiritual terms. The fencing “is adorned with the sacred feminine,” he says, which is his description of the plant material, and he speaks of healing the land after the violation of breaking up existing ledge and restructuring the ground. He applies this sort of language and thinking to the entire Oraham and Samson project, which he sees in light of their life in general. Miami is all about sun and light and going outside. “It’s yang,” Carter says. In Maine, the couple can be more interior. “When they come here, it’s cooler. It’s shadier. It’s more yin.” This makes the Cape Porpoise house not just a home, but the very thing one might wish for in a life: balance. Balance that comes in a most appealing container. **MH+D**

For more information, see Resources on page xx.

- BRIGHT IDEAS 
- Spray foam insulation
 - Andersen 400 window series

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