

“Who says a cottage can’t be contemporary?”

A traditional exterior cloaks a modern interior in the 1904 cottage that architect Steve Schappacher and designer Rhea White transformed on Shelter Island, New York

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The shingled facade of an antique fisherman's cottage holds a surprise behind its old doors: a newly renovated interior that's as bold and hip as its owners.



Before-and-after photos and floor plans: See the metamorphosis of Steve and Rhea's home and learn their tips for melding "cottage" and "contemporary"; visit cottageliving.com





In a small house, every nook and cranny should be utilized, such as this space under the stairs for built-in cabinets. The homeowners' general contractor surprised them with the flat-screen television(!).

For a pair of modernists,

the charming little fisherman's cottage on tiny Shelter Island, New York, posed quite a challenge. With worn cedar shingles and Victorian-like details, it certainly wasn't the usual starting point for interior designer Rhea White and architect Steve Schappacher. "She's such a great little house, we just couldn't resist," says Rhea, who bought the old girl with Steve, her partner in life and business.

Sought for the contemporary look and sleek interiors of their architecture and design firm in New York City, the couple found this an entirely different assignment, albeit a fun one. "Of course, we're adaptable. We work with the character of a house, the people who live there, and what their lives are like. We respect spaces rather than forcing something," says Steve. But this cottage was a true departure from their work, which usually takes the talented pair to industrial lofts and chic mid-century jewels. "I didn't have a clue! The house is so charming, I had to come up with entirely new sources," Rhea says.

As soon as the couple stepped foot inside the cottage, they envisioned how they'd live in it. "We know exactly what we want to do as soon as we see a place," Rhea says. In this case, they saw "French doors here, a pergola and a fireplace there," among other things.



The living room's white backdrop is the perfect canvas for Rhea's graphic color combination of black and white. "I know a beach house is usually white and blue," she says, "but we went with white and sand with black accents."



One year later when their broker dropped by, she was stunned to find that the husband and wife had implemented everything dreamed up that first day. Rhea is a concept person—she comes up with ideas in the middle of the night, and then Steve stays up trying to figure out how to make them work. “Our first evening in the house was so much fun,” Rhea recalls. Lit by their car’s headlights and filled with music from the stereo, the couple poured some wine, pulled out their sketch pads, and began drawing plans.

To give the shabby and dated interiors a fresh new feel, Rhea immediately lightened up the entire house. The original floors, which appeared to be paneling laid in a different direction in each room, were pulled up. Rhea bleached and whitewashed new tongue-and-groove floors, then painted all walls and ceilings on the main level the same shade of white. “When adjoining rooms are all one color, it expands the space and connects the rooms, making it one entity,” she says. This is especially effective in such a small area. The same principle was applied upstairs with sandy-colored walls, inspired by the beach. Previously, each bedroom had its own multicolored “Candyland” scheme. Acoustical tile ceilings, linoleum floors, and fiberglass showers all had to be removed. “It was pretty bad,” says Rhea.

Before they could go forward with any more decorating, structural changes took precedence. Rotting locust posts supporting the house had to be replaced, requiring the whole cottage to be lifted. An odd warren of tiny rooms and pantries making up the dining room lost some walls to become one open space. A pair of windows from the former



Weekend guests leave their mark on the chalkboard wall in the kitchen. Pantry doors, at right, conceal a washer and dryer. The textured tin panes are reminiscent of an old pie safe.

Rhea “rhearranged” (as she calls it) several pieces of furniture in the dining room (opposite), including the chandelier with black spray paint and the store-bought dining table top that she painted with white milk paint and distressed.



1 In a corner of the pool house, a trundle pulls out for afternoon naps. A new set of French doors opens to the pool.

2 Steve and Rhea decided to go for Baroque with the most ornate black billiards table they could find, which pops in the white room. But the frozen margarita maker, a gift from visiting friends, gets the most use. "It was in their own best interest!" jokes Steve.

3 The owners converted an outdoor shower into a full bath (far left). The cedar shakes will fade eventually to the same silvery gray as the house.

4 The shower wall, at left, is steel-framed tempered glass, which pays homage to the industrial-style windows in Steve and Rhea's New York City loft.

dining room were installed in the living room to add more light and enhance the view. The impractical kitchen was completely reconfigured. Steve, who loves to cook, decided to place the range close to the room's only window. The couple realized they had space for a narrow center island and made sure the sink was just large enough for a lobster pot. They chose dark Vermont soapstone countertops and placed the sink opposite the range to offer the same view of the pool out the window.

The pair converted an old toolshed in the backyard into a pool house with new French doors, increasing living space by 300 square feet. An outdoor shower was enclosed to create the only full bath downstairs. Accessible to the outside, it's convenient from the pool. The couple took care to keep original details—recycling trim, materials, even windows. "It's not amazing or fancy; this is a simple fisherman's cottage, but it was important to us to maintain the house's flavor," says Steve. And the neighbors appreciate

that. "Everyone expected us to tear it down or build a big addition," Steve says. "That's not what we're about."

Decorating on a shoestring budget, Rhea found most furnishings at retail outlets, estate sales, or on the street. But they all had to make the cut under her keen design eye. She found the perfectly weathered and chipped dining chairs under a snowdrift and coated

them with lacquer to ensure the patina wasn't going anywhere. Her love of black and white is evident throughout the house. And although that combo also graces the couple's sophisticated New York loft, Rhea found a way to make it work for the casual cottage with a sweeter, softer spirit.

"Every time we did something the house sparkled a little bit more," she says. The house has personality, but Rhea and Steve insist that it's their guests who fill it and inform the tone. "We have grand intentions of going kayaking around Taylor's Island, but this is like a resort; no one ever wants to leave," she says. ■

Cottage Icon: Pergola

An architectural structure that's attached to a house and creates a shady retreat in the garden, a pergola has an open design ideal for climbing vines. Steve customized this one with support beams that mimic his century-old front porch columns. To order or design your own pergola, call 800/344-5103 or visit baldwinpergolas.com.