House for Two, Room for Many

Separate buildings are arranged to create privacy and inviting outdoor spaces

BY DAVID O'NEIL

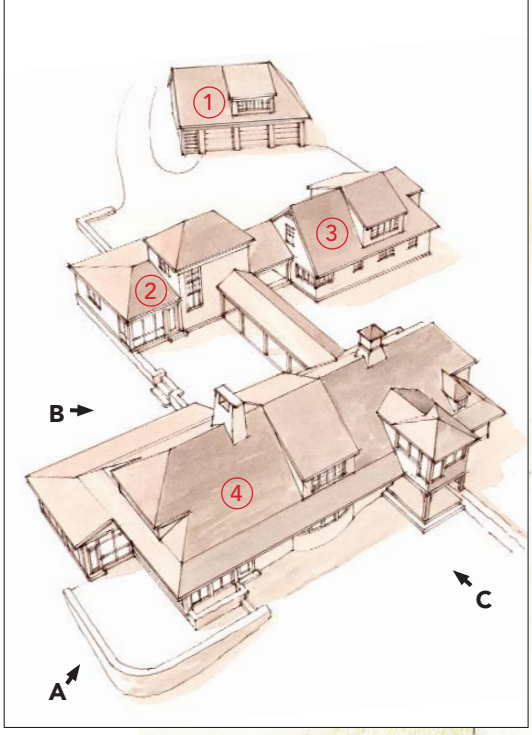
My clients know that Lake Sunapee in New Hampshire is a fantastic place to be in the summer, but living in a lake house during a long winter is another thing entirely. So instead of building their house close to the shoreline to maximize water views, they chose to make the house part of a garden-in-the-woods environment.

They wanted outdoor "rooms" that would trap the winter sun and shelter them from the wind so that they could sit outdoors on sunny winter days. Together, we envisioned a grouping of interconnected indoor and outdoor spaces, an inviting four-season compound modeled after the 19th-century great camps of the Adirondacks and of Maine (photo above taken at A on floor plan).

The key planning principle of the compound was that each distinct function be given its own structure and that the structures be arranged to create great outdoor spaces. Our hope was that the completed compound, set well beyond the minimum setback from the lake, would be barely visible through the trees to a canoeist paddling along the shores of the lake.

Against the slope instead of with it

Our project fell naturally into four components: the main house, the guest house, the



INSPIRED BY THE GREAT CAMPS BUT BUILT FOR FAMILY LIVING

As was typical of the early Adirondack great camps and New England farming compounds, these buildings are situated to create private refuges bordered by communal courtyards.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 3, plus bunkhouse

Bathrooms: 3½

Cost: N/A

Completed: 1999

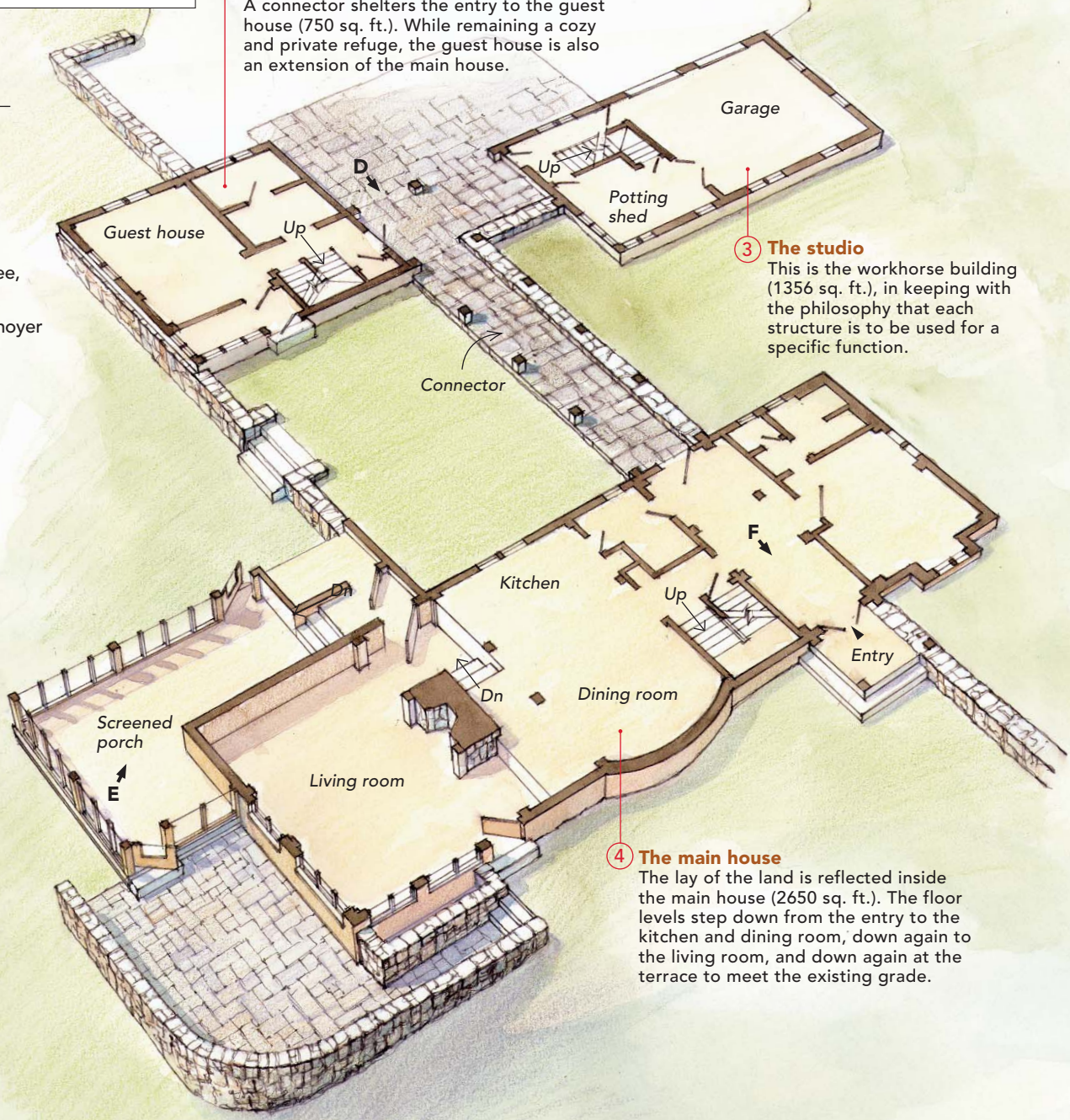
Location: Lake Sunapee, New Hampshire

Architect: O'Neil Pennoyer Architects

Builder: Lee Huntoon, Huntoon Building Construction

Photos taken at lettered positions.

North



1 The bunkhouse
With the bunkhouse (1242 sq. ft.) out and away from the other buildings, visiting grandchildren can relive the "great camps" experience while remaining close to home.

2 The guest house
A connector shelters the entry to the guest house (750 sq. ft.). While remaining a cozy and private refuge, the guest house is also an extension of the main house.

3 The studio
This is the workhorse building (1356 sq. ft.), in keeping with the philosophy that each structure is to be used for a specific function.

4 The main house
The lay of the land is reflected inside the main house (2650 sq. ft.). The floor levels step down from the entry to the kitchen and dining room, down again to the living room, and down again at the terrace to meet the existing grade.

Drawings: Steven N. Patricia

"Modeled after the great camps, individual buildings are joined, establishing common outdoor areas."

studio and the bunkhouse for visiting grandchildren. Our approach to the plan was counterintuitive. Instead of placing the principal buildings parallel to the contours of the land—the more obvious choice—we oriented them perpendicular to the slope (floor plan p. 79). The main house is set at the far end of the compound with a view down the hill to the lake; the studio and the guest house are set at the near end.

A covered connector joins the studio and guest house to the main house, creating a rough H shape (photo above). Using rock retaining walls, we leveled the two outdoor spaces on each side of the connector so that they became landscaped outdoor rooms.

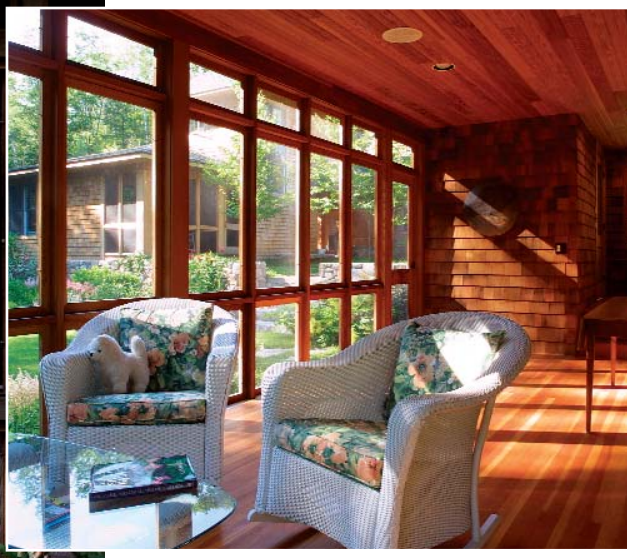
The covered connector joins the components of the compound visually and forms the main thoroughfare between buildings (inset photo above taken at D on floor plan). At the main house, the connector continues inside as the entry hallway. The low ceiling and subdued lighting in the hallway create an intimate, womblike atmosphere, making the open spaces in the house even more dramatic as they lead the eye across the living room and down the woodland path to the shore beyond.

We created one more outdoor space, a terrace, at the lake end of the main house where the grades were lowest (floor plan p. 79). A curved fieldstone retaining wall joins the living room with the adjacent screened porch and encloses a set of stone steps to grade. Guided by landscape architect Shepard Butler, we set large boulders at the base of this wall to help give it visual transition to the ground plane.

Field-testing the floor plan

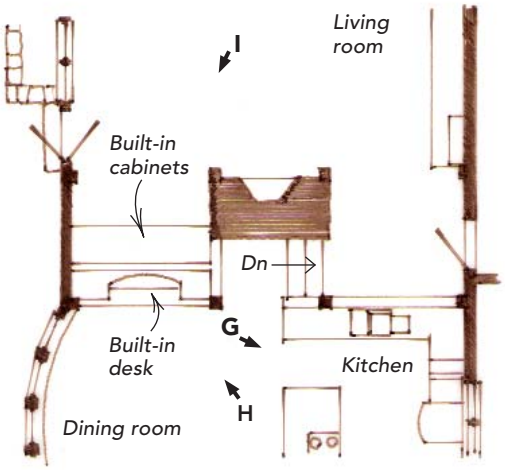
Before breaking ground, we asked the contractor, Lee Huntoon, to lay out the corners of the main house, guest house, studio and bunkhouse on the bare site for us to see. Given the orientation of the buildings down the slope, we needed to check if the proposed

Come into the main house. *Inside the sheltered portico (photo right taken at C on floor plan) is a warm, comforting entry to the main house created with recycled timbers, rich tones and subdued lighting (photo above taken at F on floor plan).*



Four buildings function as one household. *Joined by a covered connector (center photo taken at B on floor plan), the studio, guest house, main house and bunkhouse form a compound. Viewed from the screened porch, it feels like an intimate village (inset photo taken at E on floor plan)*

"Consistent ceiling height unites the living space, while changes in floor elevation distinguish each room."



Rooms that share a view

The kitchen (photo above taken at G on floor plan) and dining room are separated from the living room by a built-in desk (photo right taken at H on floor plan). The living-room floor steps down, in keeping with the contour of the site, but maintains the ceiling height determined by the main entrance. Photo on facing page taken at I on floor plan.

floor-level changes in the plan would work before proceeding further.

The elevation of the entry courtyard between the guest house and studio established the floor level of the connector as well as the main house's kitchen and dining room. The house would then step down into the living room, down again to the screened porch and terrace, and finally down to the existing grade. Field-testing was the surest way to confirm that the terrace wall would be high enough for sitting on but not uncomfortably high on the downhill side.

A giant timber-frame table

My clients chose old-growth recycled Douglas fir for the timber frame. In keeping with their support for environmental sustainability, the timbers were resawn from demolished factories in the Northwest. They reveal their age with an occasional bolt hole or blemish, which adds a historic patina to this new house.

Like a gigantic table with many legs (54, to be exact), the timber frame shelters the entire first floor of the complex. The ceiling remains constant, with each space defined by built-ins and floor-level changes. As the rooms step down, views expand across clearly defined but connected spaces, which expresses the compound's overall concept.

The solid curved knee braces on each column add a graceful touch, softening what could have been very angular structural framing.

The house within the house

Between visits from their children and grandchildren, my clients live by themselves. So we built spaces within the house where just two people could be comfortable: the concept of a house within the house.

In the kitchen, an expansive Fireslate (www.fireslate.com) counter is interrupted by a built-in, diner-style table for two that looks out onto the south garden courtyard (top photo, facing page). A peninsula with a cooktop and ample workspace contains the kitchen without walling it off.

Upstairs in the main house, a fieldstone arch built through the chimney leads to the master bathroom. The tub is designed as a window seat and is surrounded by bookshelves, plants and artwork. The window, like all those in the house, is situated to take advantage of the low winter sun but is sheltered by the roof's overhang when the high summer sun arrives.

Trial by fire

One week before my clients were set to move in, Lee, the contractor, called me at 5:30 a.m. and said, "David, the Lake Sunapee house burned to the ground last night." It was a tragedy for all of us. Only the chimney with its arched opening at the second floor remained standing. The homeowners, the contractor and his entire crew met together to decide what to do.

For the architect and homeowners, this tragedy became a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: Having been able to experience an actual full-scale model, we considered whether we would make any changes to the project before we began again. The homeowners added a skylight over the stair in the main house to bring more light into the upstairs hallway. We changed all the floors from hard maple to fir so that they resonate with the warmth of the fir ceilings and timber frame. And finally, we widened the living-room fireplace 6 in. Once these decisions were agreed to, the builders steadfastly rebuilt the house.

The old inspires the new. *This exact replica of an antique door was built after the original was lost in the fire. Only the handwrought latch and hinges were salvaged.*

Waste from the fire was kept to a minimum. The original concrete foundation, rendered useless by the heat of the fire, was ground up and used as road base to build up the driveway. An antique door that had graced the entry to the office in the main house was lost, but Lee sifted through the ashes and found the hand-wrought hinges and latch. He and his crew created an exact replica of the door using the original hardware (photo above). □

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