



A House That's Half Porch



In this compact floor plan, the outdoor spaces work as hard as the indoor

BY AL PLATT

Designing a vacation house is different from designing a primary residence. Primary residences meet the needs of everyday life, which generally demand lots of storage and privacy. Vacation homes are special places that may imply a way of life only dreamed about in the real world. Dreaming rarely involves storage; it more commonly involves things like lounging on an oversize porch, in front of an oversize fireplace, with a beautiful view of the mountains. But despite the differences in designing vacation and primary homes, there are similarities as well.

Quality, cost, or size: Something's usually got to give

For every project, whether primary or secondary residence, there are three interrelated variables: size, quality, and cost. Most people understand this relationship immediately. Everyone has a quality threshold below which they would not do the project, and most people also have some notion of a cost limit. In most cases, the variable most easily modified

is size, especially for a vacation house. The objective is usually to build no more house than necessary and to build it as well as the budget permits.

The owners of this house, Beth and Steve Womble, wanted a small retreat with generous areas for informal gatherings and meals but with limited storage and overnight guest accommodations (photo above). Because this vacation house isn't far from their main residence, most guests live close enough that they don't spend the night.

Achieving the lowest possible cost wasn't the main objective; making a comfortable and lasting building for themselves and their children was. However, limiting the size and simplifying the shape were tactics we used to save money, which then was spent on better-quality finish materials and the craftsmanship required to make the most of them. No drywall was used. With age and wear, the all-wood interior will look even better in 25 or 50 years than it does today.

Size affects cost in a number of other ways, too. The small enclosed area of this cabin takes less energy to heat and cool, which is another

Three porches, one house. A screened porch for entertaining features a Tennessee-stack fieldstone fireplace (photo facing page, taken at A on floor plan). The long, covered porch (photo above, taken at B on floor plan) acts as a sheltered entry, an exterior hallway, and a place to enjoy the sunrise with morning coffee. A deck at the rear is a wonderful place to enjoy sunsets over the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Put money into details rather than square footage



Keeping down the size affords fine craftsmanship.

Builder Tim Robinson of Homeworks was able to sweat the details, such as aligning the battens perfectly with rafters and windows, and custom-cutting the boards of the loft railing to expose two Ws (for Womble, the owners' name).

Interior finishes are all natural: wood, stone, and tile. No dry-wall was used in this cabin. Using stock rather than custom cabinets in the kitchen allowed the Wombles to choose a higher grade of wood (cherry) while staying within the project's specified budget.

An important place to spend money is on frequently used items. Parts used as often (and vigorously) as doors, windows, and kitchen faucets should be chosen for durability, efficacy, and good looks, not for price. Photos above, above right, and right taken at C, D, and E on floor plan.



important consideration for the frequent start-ups common to vacation houses.

Compact design forces discipline yet provides freedom

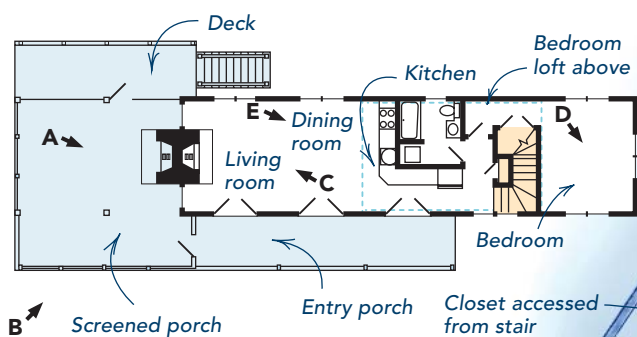
Among the many ways a small cabin can succeed as a retreat is the limit it imposes on accumulating stuff and the subsequent freedom it grants from taking care of that stuff.

The Wombles have especially appreciated this simplification. For them, the cabin is a place to establish and enjoy a selective and evolving collection of furniture, art, crafts, books, and plants.

To be effective, a compact design must be thought out. For example, the kitchen, the stair, and the entry porch are each to some degree unusual to make the most of the cabin's limited space (floor plan, facing page).

WHEN YOUR HOUSE IS HALF PORCH, THE OTHER HALF BETTER WORK PRETTY HARD

At just less than 1000 sq. ft., this cabin cost about \$200 per sq. ft. But with almost 800 sq. ft. of livable porch, the price drops to around \$120 per sq. ft., including site work, well, and septic.



The kitchen is L-shaped, but in reverse of what's typical, with the working sides on the outside of the L rather than inside. Wrapping around the bath and laundry, it concentrates the plumbing above the only enclosed foundation bay. There is room for more people to work together, and they are more or less facing each other. The leg parallel to the French doors also acts as a buffet table: As dishes are prepared, they're lined up for serving.

The stair occupies the other concentrated area of the cabin and encloses the HVAC return ducts. Winder stairs make sense here. They take less depth on the floor plan by converting landing platforms into stair treads. The price is a wider footprint; the geometry is such that the central wall they wrap around must be wider than standard 2x4 interior walls to meet code (and safety) requirements. By exploiting this apparent drawback, both return ducts were concealed, and a pantry, clothes closet, storage closet, and a built-in shelving unit were added.

The porches serve several functions

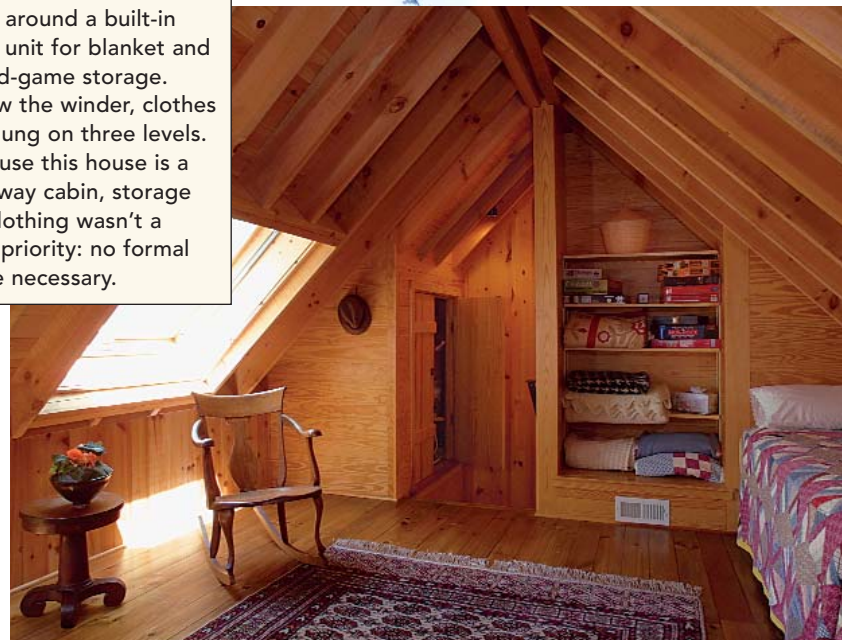
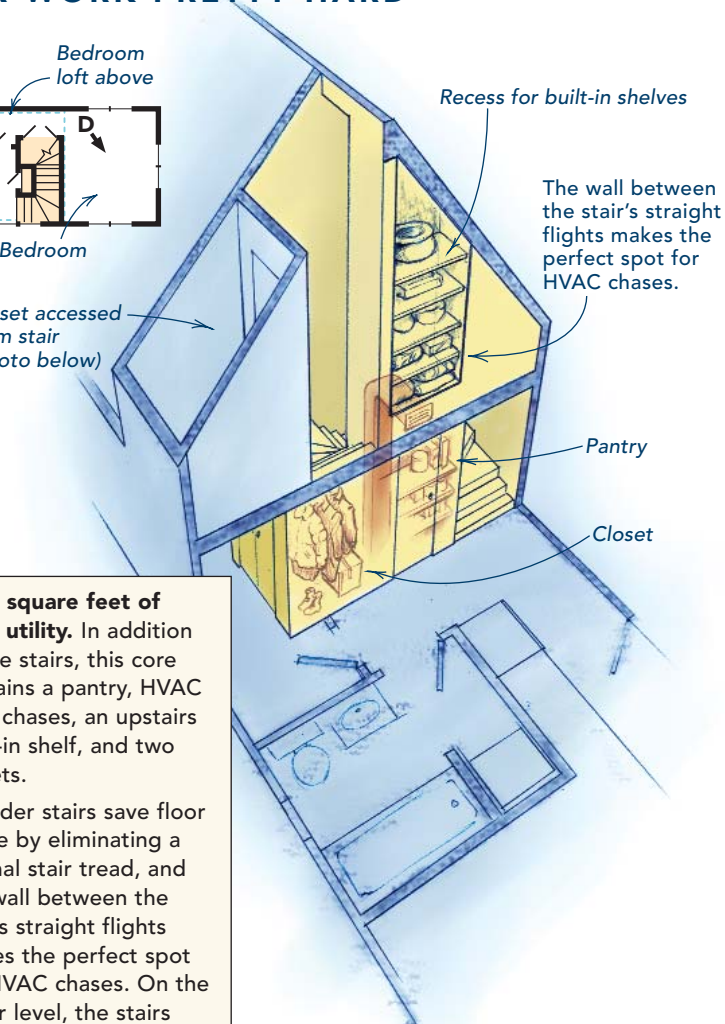
The exterior spaces include a large screened porch with a fireplace, the covered entry porch, and an uncovered deck. The combined porches nearly equal the enclosed area of the cabin, and they serve several purposes.

The long, narrow entry porch shelters three pairs of French doors and serves several purposes beyond its entrance function: It is a hallway to bypass a busy kitchen; it provides room for the serving line for buffet-style meals set up in the kitchen; and it becomes a depository for the overflow of things that would otherwise clutter the interior living space. A breakfast table, plants, visiting dogs and dog bowls, ice chests, groceries, wet shoes, umbrellas, coats, hats, and fishing gear all find a home here, which helps to preserve the interior space and condition of the cabin and the tranquillity of the owners and their guests.

The big screened porch is as much a living room as it is a porch. In the mountains of western North Carolina, this porch and its fireplace are usable year round. The Wombles spend many winter days with a blanket, enjoying the fire, the view, and the low afternoon sun. In fact, it's now a Christmas tradition to spend a day on the porch. □

Fifty square feet of pure utility. In addition to the stairs, this core contains a pantry, HVAC duct chases, an upstairs built-in shelf, and two closets.

Winder stairs save floor space by eliminating a normal stair tread, and the wall between the stair's straight flights makes the perfect spot for HVAC chases. On the lower level, the stairs wind around a built-in shelf unit for blanket and board-game storage. Below the winder, clothes are hung on three levels. Because this house is a getaway cabin, storage for clothing wasn't a high priority: no formal attire necessary.



Al Platt is an architect in Brevard, N.C. Photos by Daniel S. Morrison.