

for the past 40 years and have developed a deep love for its natural beauty and landscape. When we began to plan for a retirement home, we knew this was where we wanted to be. As an architect, I had always dreamed of designing my own home, and when we found this piece of land with a view not only of the Catskill Mountains but also the Hudson River, we were ecstatic. Not surprisingly, there was a reason why what seemed to be a prime piece of property had yet to be developed. Site restrictions had effectively prevented previous owners from realizing the larger homes they had hoped to build on this former Christmas-tree farm, which had become overwhelmed with spruce.

The lot is small and narrow—just 1.1 acres and a little more than 100 ft. at its widest. A third of the property is steeply sloped and unbuildable. A previous owner had commissioned extensive engineering plans, and the result was that the local board of health would only approve one building location and limited the size of the septic system to a two-bedroom dwelling. I was confident that I could work with the site restrictions, and with our children grown and out of the house, my wife and I were ready and willing to downsize our own living requirements.

The initial challenge was making the lot buildable. The site needed to be cleared, and the septic-system requirements called for 4 ft. of

Site constraints and a desire to optimize the view drove the design of this subtle small home

BY PHILIP IVORY

# On view

Overgrown spruce from this former tree farm obscured the site's potential for majestic views.

At 1.1 acres and 100 ft. at its widest, the site came with some burdensome restrictions on allowable septic-system size and proximity to neighbors. Careful planning and excavation allowed the architect to push as close to the view as possible.



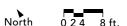
Septic system

### First floor



### **Second floor**







fill at the front of what would become our view. From the outset, we knew that the land-development costs would account for 25% of our budget. Understanding that before starting work on the design saved us a good deal of time, effort, and ultimately, money. We carefully modeled details of the design and studied them closely, which allowed us to know almost exactly what the spaces would look and feel like before construction even began. As a result of that effort, we were better able to negotiate the site limitations and come up with a design that would suit our needs.

The plan came together quickly. Our starting point was the view. In order to take full advantage of the river and the mountains beyond, we wanted to have glass along the house's entire west-facing side. The result is generous amounts of light streaming in from the windows

and doors at the first floor. A second row of windows adds even more natural light. The porch posts align with the structure of the window bays, minimizing obstructions to the light and view and helping to bring the outside in.

However, the sunlight can be overwhelming at times, so we installed remotely operated roll shades from Hunter Douglas. Heat gain has proved not to be an issue. Open windows on the first and second floors coupled with ceiling fans provide a cooling flow of air when needed, and generously sized gable vents support a positive draft up to and through the attic space.

The extensive use of windows and doors in this two-story design required a rigid structure to counteract potential lateral loads. This could not be accomplished by means of wood framing unless we were



Bedrooms: 2 Bathrooms: 2 Size: 1280 sq. ft.

Cost: \$225 per sq. ft. Completed: 2014

Location: Hudson, N.Y.

Architect: Philip Ivory Architects, philipivoryarchitects.com

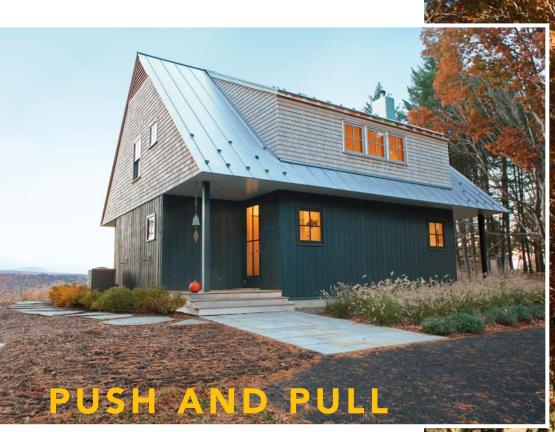
Builder: J.R. Romanchuk and Sons,

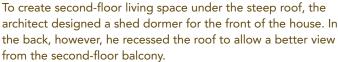
romanchukandsons.com

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flowing into the house along the

western wall.





to sacrifice window area for framed-wall area. My engineer and I settled on a steel-frame structure that forms three bays around the windows and doors, with a major beam above extending the entire length of the west wall. The columns and beam were sized to be concealed within the 2x6 frame wall, with web stiffeners introduced at the connections. Ultimately, the steel frame represented maximum strength while requiring the minimum amount of wall area.

## Making a small house live large

In my residential practice in Philadelphia, kitchens and bathrooms commonly receive a significant amount of attention. That was not the case with this design, where the kitchen and the bathrooms are modest and the details of the open living space received more energy. A lot of consideration went into the look and size of the windows and the doors—how they space out along the length of the wall, where the meeting rails fall in relationship to eye level, and so on. I played with the scale of the openings. The double-hung windows on the west wall are oversize, matching the 8-ft.-tall doors and accentuating the verticality of the space. The horizontal line of the meeting rails is a counterpoint to the vertical and permits an unobstructed view whether one is seated or standing. The net result is that the space feels much larger than it actually is.

Furniture establishes the spaces in our open plan, so those choices were critical. We started with items we knew we wanted and then designed a few custom pieces. For example, the sectional sofa defines the space in front of, and circulation around, the woodstove. The widths and lengths of the furniture had to be considered to ensure adequate circulation around everything. We had a custom sideboard built to match the length of the sofa, which also establishes the edge of the dining area. Its height matches the dimensions of the sofa, and it's deep enough to provide useful storage without encroaching on the space around the dining table. At a dinner party with 10 people, there is plenty of space to circulate freely.

Sharing space is another strategy to make this small house live large. Except for the bathrooms and closets, a pocket door to the guest room is the only interior door separating public and private living areas.



The master bedroom is on the second floor. All furniture is concealed behind walls, creating privacy but never entirely cutting those spaces off from the public areas. The second-floor balcony allows for direct communication down to the living, dining, and kitchen areas.

The walls and trim are painted a soft white. The windows and doors are whitewashed to accentuate the wood grain and to prevent the natural yellowing of unstained pine. These subtle finishes reflect the natural light, contribute to the expansive feel of the space, and frame the most significant colors—those from the landscape.

#### Making a vision a view

We were regular visitors to the site at every stage of construction and even camped out inside the shell once the roof was on. This is not a practice I would recommend to my clients, but for my wife and me, it was a wonderful way to feel more engaged in this personal process. Our builder was very accommodating.

On every project, I believe that a team needs to be built among the architect, the client, and the builder. Experience has taught me that this team formation and good communication are critical to a project's success. Having someone listen to exactly what we were trying to accomplish was essential. That sounds obvious, but it rarely works out that way. It's not always easy on contractors when architects work on their own homes, but we developed a great working relationship with Jim Romanchuk and his crew. And they told us they were happy because as they worked, they got to enjoy the view.

Philip Ivory has been practicing architecture in the Philadelphia area for the past 30 years. Photos by Aaron Fagan.

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