

At Ease on The Cliff



You might think it's easy for two people whose businesses involve designing and furnishing other people's homes to design their own living space.

But when interior designer Jennifer Sell and her husband Francis Farrell decided to build a house, it took more than three years to complete. Settled in for several years now, it seems to have been worth the wait.

"We live easily in our home. We named the house 'At Ease' because that's the way we feel

when we walk over the threshold," Sell said.

The home is located on Cliff Road where the surrounding properties were once part of the Westmoor Farm that preceded today's Westmoor Club. In 1964 this part of the island was farmland, not the exclusive enclave it is today. Westmoor Farm was owned by Francis "Franny" and Barbara Holdgate, who raised their family there. Westmoor had horses and a riding stable, but in order to derive income in the off-season, the Holdgates also built a lodge for the sport of rabbit-hunting.

In 2004, Sell and Farrell acquired the "rabbit

lodge," as they still refer to it, with the intention of renovating it and turning it into their home.

"After considerable thought we concluded that it wasn't economically feasible, so we downsized the structure, relocated it on the property, and renovated it into what is now our guest cottage," Sell said.

For several years the couple lived in the cottage while making plans for what would ultimately become their modest, 2,700-square-foot, three-bedroom, two-and-a-half bathroom house.

Living in the cottage gave them the opportunity to study the property on which they would



build their new home.

"We could observe the way the wind blew, the position of natural light throughout the day, how rainwater and snow came and went. This is important information when siting any house," Sell said.

Deliberate in all things, this couple incorporated their observations into a document that expressed their lifestyle and how they imagined living on the property. They also prepared a notebook containing inspiring photos of styles and details they liked. The notebook and document became excellent communication tools to share with their architect.

Sell graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in interior design and went on to study architecture and decorative arts at the Parsons School of Design in New York City

and Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. She has been an interior designer for more than 25 years and, as a longstanding member of the American Society of Interior Designers, she brought knowledge and experience to the project.

When it came to her own house, however, she admitted that designing other people's homes is so much easier because the vast selection at every stage of the project has already been filtered by preferences and experiences.

"As a designer, it's my responsibility to help create a home that is about them, not me, to reflect a sense of place appropriate to where they live, who they are and what fits their lifestyle. Experience has taught me the importance of asking the right questions to solve the puzzle," she said.

Opposite: Interior designer Jennifer Sell stands on the farmhouse-style front porch of the house she designed and built with her husband, Francis Farrell.

Above: The house opens up in the back to a bright space encompassing the kitchen, dining area and an intimate seating spot tucked into the bay window. French doors allow access onto the patio, and the garden, surrounding the property, can be seen from all windows.

Right: The front hallway is a marvelous study in colors, textures, Nantucket folk art and paintings. Dark walls contrast with the white shipap ceiling and complement the various shades of stone floor. A private stairway leads to a second guest bedroom. The artwork is by Hunter McKee, Mary McGuire and Francis Farrell.



To help edit the interior-design options for her own home, she found a unique approach: imagining her husband as her client.

Farrell owns The John Ruggie Shop on India Street. Opened in 1951 by his mentor, John Ruggie, the shop is filled with unique art, antiques and accessories, or as Farrell describes it, "things for the imaginary beach cottage."

It is there that the couple met, became friends and ultimately married. Sell said she respects and is comfortable with Farrell's style and taste, and they agree on their lifestyle, but of course had to compromise and meld their two visions and tastes into one, just like with all her clients.

When she began the project, Sell knew that her home should be practical, aesthetically pleasing and reflect the island. It also needed to work well with their lifestyle as a couple and provide a joyful space to share with others. With these goals in mind, the couple began working with architect Outerbridge Horse Associates, based in Washington, D.C. Sell had worked with the firm on previous projects in Washington and Virginia, and appreciated its talent and unwavering "can-do" spirit.

"Building our house was a partnership with our builder, Eric Junghans, our architect, and ourselves. It was a good fit," she said.

It was important that the house be adaptable to year-round living and comfortable in all seasons. For example, in winter the living room



should be cozy for reading by a fire, so they chose a Rumford-style fireplace, designed with a shallow depth that radiates more heat while still drafting well.

The paint colors and material selections were all inspired by a misty Nantucket day.

"Because the amount of living space we occupy in winter is less than in summer, we de-

signed a zoned HVAC system to isolate parts of the house in the colder months. When spring arrives, we expand. It's a ritual," Sell said.

What is unique about the house is that each primary block of the first floor—kitchen, living room, guest-bedroom wing—has its own foundation joined in a staggered fashion. This was done to increase southern exposure and to bring the outside in. As a result, the house has good circulation, abundant light and feels more spacious than its square-footage might imply.

It has a welcoming long center hallway with the guest wing to the right. There's a bedroom and bath on the first floor, and a stairway to another bedroom above, completing this private wing where guests can come and go at will, without disturbing the activities in the rest of the house.

Straight ahead is the living room, an inviting space with a soaring ceiling and lots of windows. Beyond is a smaller hallway, surprisingly painted Nantucket red and decorated like a small sitting area. From here there's another stairway to the left, leading to a large and luxurious master suite on the second floor.

To the right, the space opens up to a large, sunlit kitchen, dining area and an intimate seating space. French doors open onto a spacious deck surrounded by a magnificent garden and trees that provide total privacy.

In the summer the couple spend a lot of time

in the kitchen preparing food and drinks and spilling out onto the outdoor deck, lawn and garden that surrounds the back of the property.

"The kitchen is my favorite room," Sell said. "It is the heart of our home. I sometimes work at the kitchen table, spreading out floor plans."

She credits the architect for the beautifully-scaled rooms.

"We never feel like a room is too spacious when we are alone or too small when we have a gathering," she said.

After careful consideration about a closed-off kitchen and formal dining room, they chose an open plan that encompasses a dining area to accommodate their casual lifestyle. They've come to appreciate the multi-purpose aspect of the room. The island acts as a buffet or a work surface and they can interact with others while making meals or have others join in the prep work.

The cabinets, chosen with care, look like furniture, and the overall color palette was influenced by the year-round colors in nature on the island: off-white and pale stone for the walls, cabinetry and floors. The old oak ceiling beams and the dark-stained finish for the wood island base infuse the space with warmth and character, much like a farmhouse kitchen.

During the design process, Sell and Farrell said they kept in mind the people with whom they most wanted to share their home. While growing up as the daughter of a career military officer and one of five children, Sell's family moved frequently. Each new home brought a new set of geographical, cultural and historical experiences and taught her to be sensitive to places, surroundings and different lifestyles.

Unwittingly, she honed a skill for observation and with each move, she noted and admired her mother's resourcefulness in creating functional as well as pleasing rooms in the new homes.

"Each room felt familiar because we had our cherished possessions, and thus memories with them," she said.

This process of making a house a home is ingrained in her psyche and what ultimately drew her to study interior design. She knows that each homeowner has his or her unique attitude about what feels like "home" and she

said that her greatest pleasure is in helping them express this through interior design.

Sell feels that a good house design evolves. The couple buys things selectively and has furnished their home carefully, considering what is appropriate to Nantucket's identity and its unique sense of place in the world.

"In our house, partially because Francis is a collector, things such as artwork and accessories often change," she said.

Sometimes they find new things that they prefer to feature. Sometimes they become aware of a missing element, and that creates change. Sometimes even moving a few things around can give a new sense of space or interest.

"And sentimentality. As the years go by, the house seems to contain the love and good karma left behind by visits from family and friends," Sell said.

Sell and Farrell feel that living on Nantucket is a blessing, and the aim of their home-building experience has been to embrace the island spirit and be reminded of it every day. ///

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A passageway leads to a hallway dramatically painted Nantucket red. From here, to the left is a stairway to the master suite and to the right, the spacious kitchen area at the back of the house. It's a delightful transition from quiet space to one conducive to activity.

Advice on building and decorating your home, from Jennifer Sell, nationally-recognized interior designer.

- When making renovations or building a new house, start with a good architect and builder with whom you feel comfortable. From the outset, hire a professional designer who has a basic understanding of trade vocabulary, and who has experience in construction techniques and project scheduling.
- Choosing an interior designer is personal. You might find him or her through a friend whose home you admire, or from an advertisement, or word of mouth. You and your designer should have a good rapport and a clear understanding of how you want to live in your home.
- Review the designer's portfolio of work and check his or her references. Participate fully in the design process by expressing your needs and priorities and establishing a clear scope of the work and budget. Most important: Asking questions will give you a sense of whether the design professional listens and responds to you.
- The process often involves budget constraints, which a good designer endeavors to resolve through experience, professional and trade relationships. He or she should be motivated to reach the finish line on time and within budget, which makes for happy clients and a successful project in the end.
- When beginning a project, each room's function should be carefully considered. Questions should be addressed, such as: how many people will live in the house or will be gathering there? What are their ages? Do you have pets? Do you want a place to play cards or games in the living room? Do you have specific pieces of furniture, like a grand piano, to be considered? From there it's important to develop a master furniture plan that optimizes function, flow and comfort.
- The individual components of the plan can be acquired all at once or over time, with a plan for how this will be done, i.e. in order of which pieces will be purchased first, etc.
- Buy the very best quality of furniture, accessories and art that you can afford so they will last and you will not tire of them. Always incorporate things dear and authentic to you.
- The kitchen is an important part of the house. Think hard about how you want to use this room. Ask these basic questions: Who will use the space? How do you see yourself entertaining? It might be different in your Nantucket vacation home. What other functions will occur in this room (kids' homework, etc.)? What do you need to store? Do you require separate areas for a pantry or for caterers? How many areas do you want to have for eating and serving? How much time are you willing to devote to cleaning and maintenance (floor, cabinet, counter materials)? Prepare a list of how and what you cook and bake. Research appliances and review them in person.



The couple enjoys the back deck that is completely private. The trees, flowering bushes and plants are contained by a stone wall around the property. Farrell enjoys tending to the garden.