



Susan Jennings and Peter McMahon (above left) perch in the loft. Above right: Salvaged windows open the house to the trees. Below left: In the living room, only the doors and floodlights were bought new. Below right: The house floats over a flood plain.



# BUDGET BEACH HOUSE

*Using salvaged materials and their own labor, a couple build a light-struck Cape Cod vacation home for just over \$25,000*

BY SUE HERTZ

Driving through Hoboken, New Jersey, in their Chevy pickup truck one evening about ten years ago, Peter McMahon and Susan Jennings spotted a mason bricking up a printing plant and tossing the discarded steel-casement windows in a pile. McMahon stopped the truck.

"Are you throwing these away?" McMahon asked.

"Yes," the mason answered. "If

you can cart them away, they're yours."

The next day the couple returned, broke the glass panes to lighten the load, and stacked the 5-by-5-foot three-inch steel frames in the back of their truck. They weren't sure what they would do with them—perhaps give them to some friends, maybe use them themselves. An architect, McMahon had always wanted to design and build his own house, but times were lean and

the dream house was still a fantasy. Frustrated with designing for clients buildings he didn't like, he had left architecture to make furniture, and his income was meager. Jennings, who has a degree in architecture from Yale and was a graduate student in art at Hunter College, earned even less.

A year passed, the couple married, the frames gathered dust in their garage in Union City, New Jersey. But then >

PETER AND SUSAN: PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUSAN JENNINGS FOR HOUSE BEAUTIFUL. SEE WWW.HOUSEBEAUTIFUL.COM



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they had an idea. Why not build a house next to McMahon's mother's in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, the town near the tip of Cape Cod where his family had always owned a summer place? The lot was large, steps away from a marsh, and a ten-minute walk from the beach. McMahon's mother agreed to the plan. In fact, she liked it so much that she offered to take out a home equity loan for \$25,000 that they could pay back. In the summer of 1991, McMahon and Jennings set out to build a vacation home without exceeding the amount of the loan.

Seven years later, the handsome house with the curved aluminum roof and wall of windows—steel-casement windows—stands, enveloped by scrub oaks, scrub pines, and locust trees. Just 650 square feet, it has a sleeping porch, sleeping loft, one bath, and a room that serves as living room and kitchen. A six-foot-wide deck borders two sides of the house—darting out into the brush, and in some spots, built around trees. Influenced by modernist designs of the 1950s with their sleek contours, the structure is unique, even in Wellfleet, where many famed architects have designed houses overlooking the sandy landscapes. And if they hadn't had to install a new well and septic system, which they share with McMahon's mother's house, they would have met their budget.

Since McMahon and Jennings and some skilled friends did much of the work over six summers, labor costs were minimal. And, of course, they didn't need to buy land or hire a designer. In addition, what helped them build an intriguing home for what many people spend to renovate a bathroom is an appreciation for inexpensive materials and a knack for salvaging.

To blend indoors and outdoors, McMahon and Jennings made the entire east side facade a wall of glass. In a sense, McMahon says, "we built the house around the salvaged windows." A clerestory high on the west wall floods the room with sunset's orange glow. The curved ceiling, which reaches thirteen feet at its peak and is made with >



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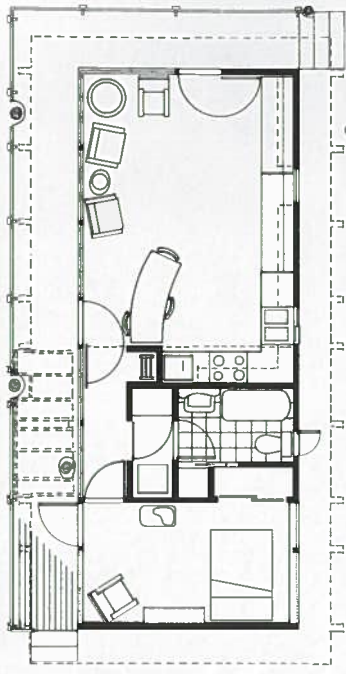
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*Above left: The cedar siding is placed vertically on the ends of the house and horizontally on the sides. Above center: The large living room/kitchen has glass on three sides, letting in natural light from sunrise to sunset. Above right: The owners built the deck around trees on the site. Below: On the sleeping porch, Calvin Klein sheets and blanket.*

tongue-and-groove pine planks, flows from the windows like a rainbow.

The couple looked to the modernist masters to help them overcome the dilemma of building near wetlands, using books instead of costly experts for solutions. They set the house a few feet above ground on six columns to “minimally disturb the flora and fauna,” McMahon explains. To avoid placing one of the cement columns that support the house on the part of the site that is a flood plain, they cantilevered the nine-foot beams. Thus it appears that part of the house is floating.

At every turn they sought low-maintenance, affordable materials. The floor, the kitchen cabinets, and the built-in bookcases are plywood. Instead of recessed or track lighting, rooms are lit by inexpensive exterior floodlights. Above the steel-casement windows, McMahon installed fixed plate glass. The aluminum roof, he claims, will never need replacement. The nine ceiling beams that curve with the arc of the roof are composed of pieces of wood glued together, ordered from an outfit that was going out of business. For all nine beams they paid \$1,600.

Although they had to ante up full price for the three exterior doors, the



exterior cedar siding, and the pine ceiling planks, most of the other materials were salvaged. Scavenging is “a genetic talent,” McMahon says, one that he inherited from his mother. The scavenging gene is what caused McMahon to spot the steel-casement windows. The gene that propelled him to the Wellfleet dump to collect all of the interior doors. The gene that allowed him to detect a Navajo blanket amid the trash in an Allston, Massachusetts, Dumpster. All of the appliances (except for the cooktop) and most of the furnishings were salvaged by McMa-

hon, Jennings, or one of their friends

In other hands, the array of “dump pickings,” as McMahon calls them would look like, well, dump pickings. But with their trained eyes, McMahon and Jennings have given the castoffs new life. In the bathroom, the clawfoot tub which a friend discovered on a sidewalk is flanked by an unpainted newel post (dump) on one end and a sink (dump) with a shelf of curved glass over it (McMahon found the glass, but he had a craftsman cut the curves.) In the living room/kitchen, one wall is lined with kitchen clocks collected at yard sales by McMahon. Four bent-plywood chairs by Thonet, which McMahon snapped up from a church basement during a rummage sale, surround the kitchen table. A few feet away are the two Heywood Wakefield chairs that McMahon bought at a yard sale. What furniture they didn’t find, McMahon built. Jennings’s artwork and that of their family and friends adorns the walls.

The result is a house dear to Jennings and McMahon, who has returned to architecture and is now with the New York firm Demetri Sarantitis Architects. Nothing could be better, they say, than sitting in the southeast corner of the deck, staring into the trees. ■