



This new  
Old  
**House**

**TV's home renovation guru Steve Thomas makes a small space live big on Hupper Island**  
by Rebecca Falzano | Photography Trent Bell | Styling Janice Dunwoody



his wife have worked on six houses together, including transforming their historic home in Salem, Massachusetts. Even the island setting wasn't intimidating—Thomas is an expert sailor who spent much of his life on the ocean. How hard could a tiny little house on a near-shore island be?

Well, as it turned out, pretty hard.

The existing structure was—in Thomas's words—"a lowly mess." The house was perched on a hill overlooking Port Clyde Harbor and the open ocean beyond, although the low ceilings and unfavorable layout that did nothing to enhance the view. When faced with the daunting task of making the home his own, Thomas fought the voice inside him urging him to tear it down and build anew. He even went so far as to look into hiring a heavy-lift helicopter so he could build a custom modular home ("It was \$100,000 just for the helicopter, so...we had to forget that," says Thomas). After studying the possibility of a larger home on the site, he decided to work within the existing dimensions to preserve the home's character and original footprint. "It was important to honor the existing structure," he explains. "People on the island know this house. It contributes to people's sense of place and their connection to the island."

Knowing he would have to gut the place while sticking to the original footprint, Thomas took his own advice. "I always recommend to clients that they live in a house first—paint it, watch the sun rise and set, figure out where the breezes blow—before doing anything. So we basically camped here for eight years." This gave him time to orchestrate his plan of attack. Then he had a friend over, architect Hicks Stone of the New York-based firm Stone Architecture, and from the depths of the dark living room, Stone began to draw. "In about a half hour we had a design concept," recalls Thomas. "It was almost perfect."

The goal was to use the design to drive functionality instead of adding square footage. "We wanted to generate as much spatial interest and aesthetic elaboration as possible," says Stone. Drawing on his love for Maine's traditional architecture, particularly the work of John Calvin Stevens and William R. Emerson, Stone worked closely with Thomas to design a home that, while small in size, was large in personality and mirrored the shingle-style homes in the area. The concept required crisp and simple detailing, much of which Thomas would finish himself.

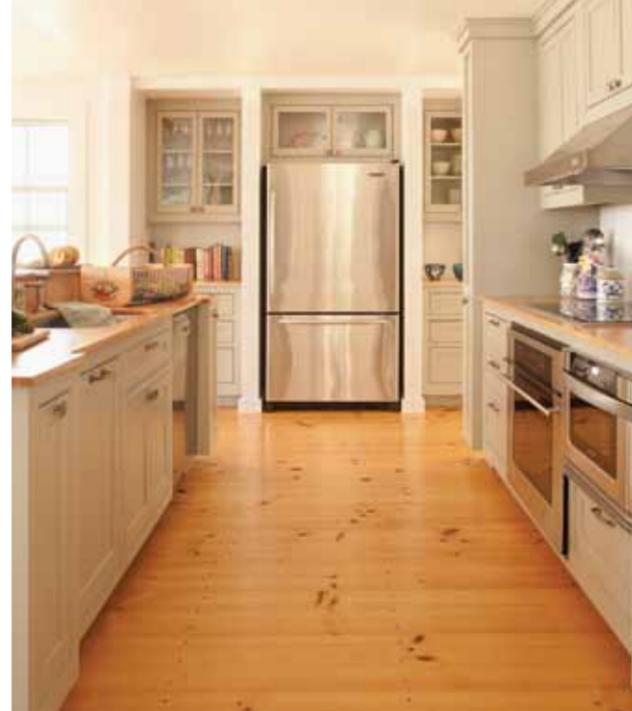


Behind the main house, a modern timber frame barn (above) was erected in just three days, the subject of a two-hour special on Thomas's show *Renovation Nation*. "The barn is very sophisticated in that it is a custom one-off but pre-engineered and pre-cut. We thought about how we would make it green in the unconventional sense of the word 'green,' using the best of Old World timber framing techniques and modern-day engineering methodologies," explains Thomas. The timber frame, built by Connolly & Co Timber Frame in Edgecomb, is a hybrid structure with structural stick built walls and a hybrid frame core. The team developed a conceptual framework that would allow the barn to be preassembled, kit up, transported on a truck or barge, and erected quickly anywhere in the world—even on an island. The open, airy living area (opposite) was designed with a low line of windows to maximize views of Port Clyde Harbor and beyond.

Thomas's wife, Evy Blum, and architect Hick Stone's wife designed a small kitchen (immediate right) to work with a crowd ("Hicks and I stayed out of it," admits Thomas.) Woodworker Mark McKelvey fabricated the kitchen in custom-designed modules. Thomas shipped McKelvey the appliances and had him build around them to simplify installation on the island.

The bathrooms (right, middle) were designed to be not much more than adequate: a walk-in shower, no tub, basic fixtures, and pure white give them a clean look.

Thomas chose to maximize space where it was needed most, borrowing from less-used places such as the bedrooms (far right). Through the bedroom window, glimpses of the natural ledge are visible, a key component of the landscape design by Gary Koller, former chief horticulturist at Harvard's Arnold Arboretum and Anne Cox of Hedgerow Design. Thomas himself was involved in excavating the ledge: "I became obsessed," he says. "I would spend hours out there using the backhoe on my tractor. The more I found, the more I wanted to uncover."



With a footprint peaking at a modest 1,500 square feet, the design relied on some tricks of the trade to make the small space feel more expansive. "It was about creating an *intensely designed* 1,500 square feet," says Thomas, who began with an open floor plan centered around the kitchen. ("You can't get people out of the kitchen anyway, so why not build around it?") The design also raised the ceiling in the living area, giving the room more height and depth. "Probably the single most ambitious move," says Stone, "was to reframe the living room ceiling so that the Thomases could have a vaulted space rather than a simple flat ceiling. Oddly enough, the original home wasn't planned to take advantage of the views." Thomas also wanted to maintain some critical lines—the longitudinal axis, in particular, running the length of the house. Maintaining the lower line of windows that runs the perimeter of the living space was critical for the views. "I pushed that line as far as I possibly could, structurally," says Thomas. Additional tricks included intensively redesigning space where it was needed most and preserving wherever it wasn't—in the bedrooms, for example, which in the summer months, are primarily used for sleeping anyway. "It was simply a matter of reorganizing the interior in a more logical and generous fashion, and embellishing the exterior with details that were emblematic of Maine's traditional architecture," says Stone.

Of course, at this point, the smart design was only on paper. When it came time to actually start building, the house presented no shortage of logistical hurdles. The very thing Thomas loved about the island—its remoteness and sense of place—was the very thing that made building on it all the more difficult. "Logistically, it was insane," he says. "The cost of building on an island tends to run about thirty percent more. It drives the cost up relentlessly unless everything is there and sequenced, and job flow is absolutely enforced." Thomas cut costs by running the project himself, doing much of the work on his own, and limiting the size of the team

he hired to a few key members, including carpenter/builder Dana Meklin and plumber Jon Gallager. Thomas bought an old dump truck that he brought over on the Port Clyde barge. "We almost sank that barge a couple of times. It was just unbelievable." For certain elements of the home—the kitchen, for example—Thomas took a modular approach that took advantage of modern fabrication methods. The custom kitchen cabinetry was built by local woodworker Mark McKelvey, whom Thomas met at a home show in Boston. "I said, 'Here's the deal: I'll ship you all the appliances, and I want you to build everything in your shop. Set it up and make sure it all fits because we're going to put your truck on a barge and, once it gets here, there's no turning back.'" McKelvey prebuilt the kitchen in modules and installation took just a couple of days.

A recurrent theme throughout the project was Thomas's willingness to splurge on materials and good workmanship, often trading upfront costs for lower downstream costs. "I wanted the house to be as simple and easy to operate and maintain as possible, so it wouldn't be a burden on me or my family," he says. "Island living is complicated enough as it is." Because of this, Thomas invested in higher quality exterior materials that would require no painting, staining, or maintenance down the road. And to further tie the home to the land, Thomas used as much local material and labor as possible. "In a remote location like this, you're connected to the greater community through design."

Today, when you view the shingled house from the water, it looks nothing like the original and, yet, like it's been there all along. While very little of the original structure is left—save for a few walls, the roof, and the floor—what was saved is more important: the home's imprint on its island, its sense of place, and that elusive yet tangible crown jewel: its Maine character.



- A Ramp to Deck
- B Guest Bedroom
- C Mudroom
- D Living Room
- E Bathroom
- F Laundry Room
- G Kitchen
- H Dining Room
- I Deck
- J Master Bathroom
- K Master Bedroom
- L Outdoor Dining

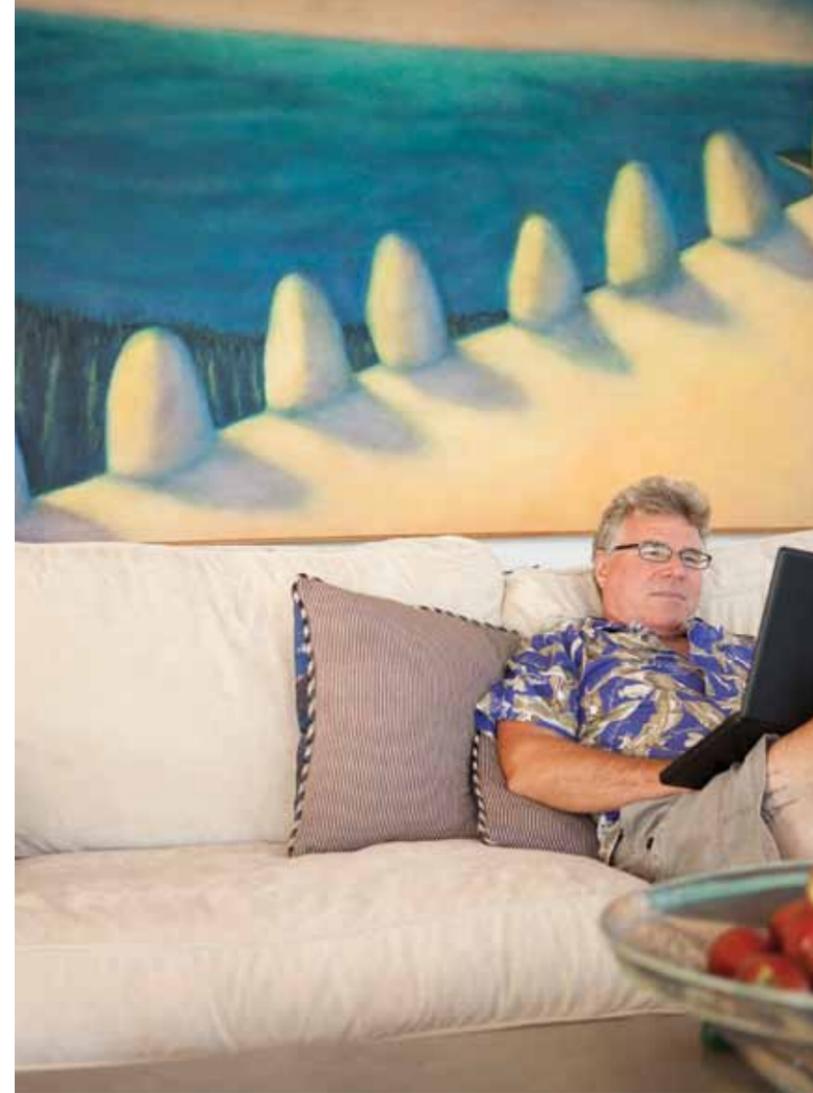
One of the Thomases' standard poodles on the second floor of the barn (below), which is used for storage and guest overflow. The lumber was cut off the St. George River and milled in Belfast. Virtually all the materials but the cedar sidewall shingles, the roof, and windows are local. "Each load had to be transported during a 45-minute tide window," says Thomas. "We had one chance a day."





Thomas at home on the island (opposite). The interiors, which the Thomases did themselves, echo the home's simplicity and open feel (left). Minimal, modernist furniture hints at a Japanese aesthetic and artwork (only a portion of the couple's growing collection) fills the walls. "Evy's design and decorating sense is evident throughout the house," says Thomas.

Lunch with views of Port Clyde Harbor under the shade of a fabric structure by Duvall doesn't get much better than this (below). While this may be a serene scene in the summer, in the winter, Port Clyde Harbor can experience winds of up to 90 miles per hour. Exact detailing was necessary on the exterior to brace the house for harsh weather conditions. The roof was constructed with synthetic wood/rubber shake shingles that will, over time, gray out to resemble a traditional wood shingle. The shingles have a 100-year lifespan and are fireproof—an added bonus for Thomas since, as he quips, "fire trucks don't swim."



#### BRIGHT IDEAS



- Small footprint
- Original shape and footprint
- High local material content
- Enviroshake roof shingles composed of recycled rubber tires and wood flour
- Used exterior materials that require no painting, staining, or maintenance (western red cedar trim, eastern white cedar shingles, PVC-clad windows)
- Simple electrical and plumbing systems
- Future use of photovoltaic panels to make the property energy neutral
- Low-e, argon-filled, and PVC clad for no maintenance
- Generous windows for ventilation
- Landscape composed of all native plant materials and rocks from the site

For more information, see Resources on page 102.

MH+D