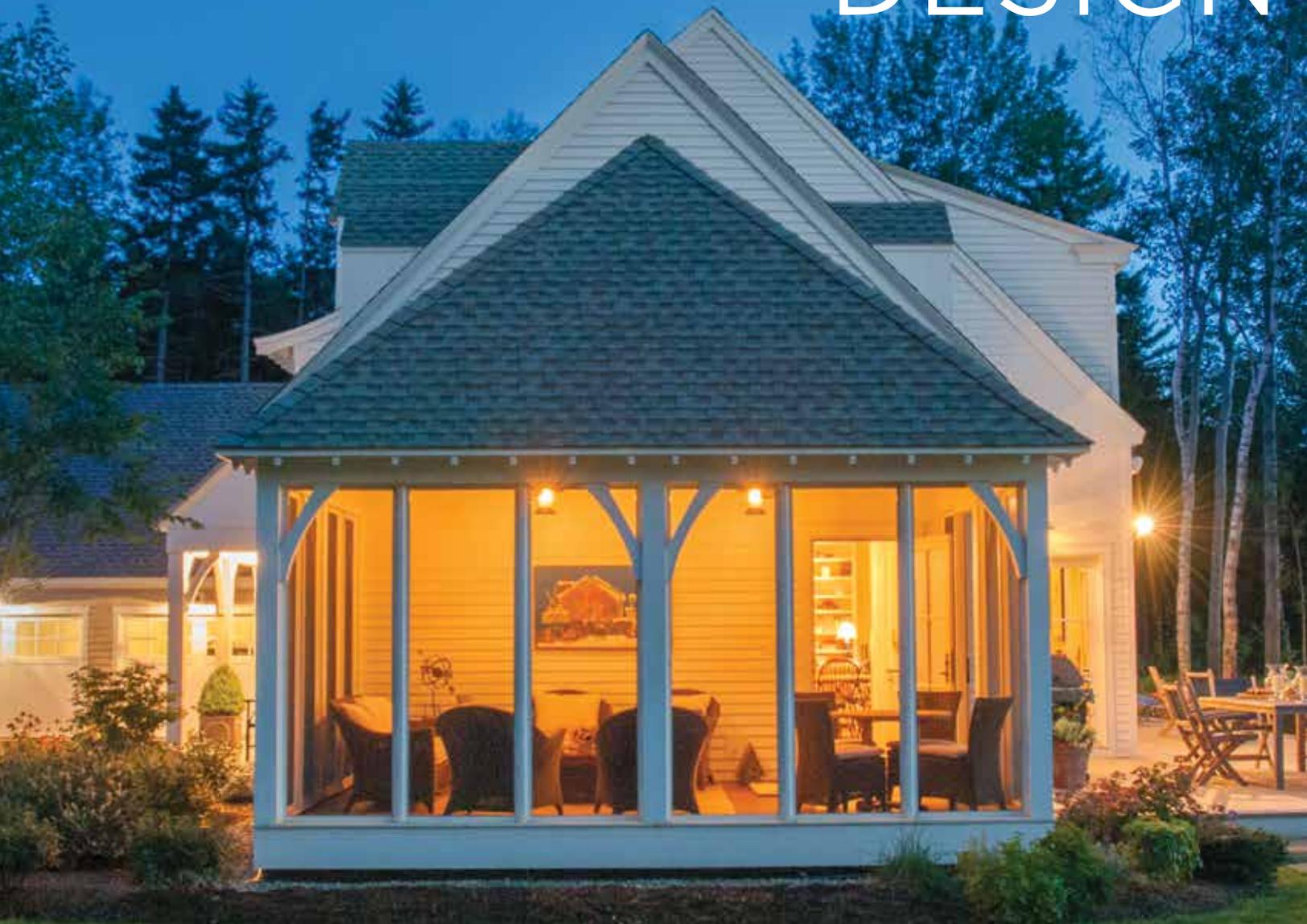


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July 2014

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## THE *IMPERFECTLY* PERFECT SITE

**HARRY HEPBURN BELIEVES SOME OF THE VERY THINGS THAT MAKE A SITE BEAUTIFUL CAN PRESENT UNIQUE DESIGN CHALLENGES**

**I**t happens all the time. An excited client claims to have found the perfect site for a dream home, while their architect is left to figure out how to make it work from a design perspective. As Harry Hepburn of Briburn explains, “When architects approach a site, we not only see the beauty, we see the limitations.” Architects evaluate a site based on the same intangible items a homeowner does, but there are many other factors they have to consider—such as solar orientation (daylighting and heating/cooling loads), zoning limitations that affect size and location, privacy (relationship to neighbors), and relationship to adjacent structures. The result? Often, the “perfect” site actually has a slew of imperfections the design must overcome. *MH+D* asked Hepburn to tell us more.

**Q:** What makes a site “perfect” for a homeowner?

**A:** For many, there is something unique and powerful—maybe even intangible—that they can identify with: views of the water, dramatic terrain, or sentimental value. Often there is one thing clients will latch on to that will become the most important thing about the site to them, whether it’s a large rock outcropping, a special tree, a beautiful meadow, or a spectacular view.

**Q:** What challenges do you most often run into with these special sites?

**A:** Solar orientation is often a problem. Our goal is always to maximize solar heat gain in the winter months and limit heat loss. In Maine that often leads us to design buildings with lots of south-facing glazing and very few strategically located openings (windows) on the north. When a site’s views are predominantly to the east, west, or north, it challenges us to balance a building’s energy performance, and configure the spaces within to emphasize the view. Also, the way we experience a building is drastically affected by its orientation to the sun. We may choose to locate bedrooms on the east so that you can wake up to the sun in the morning and living spaces on the south and west so that you can enjoy the benefit of natural sunlight throughout the day. Building shape and roof orientation are studied to maximize energy gain from the sun and effectiveness of roof-mounted photovoltaic panels. Sunshades or large roof overhangs are considered for shading south-facing glazing from the hot summer sun. In addition, building codes and zoning requirements often affect and inform decisions made during early concept design. Front, side, and rear yard setbacks, maximum height, and maximum lot coverage all play a role. For complex sites near the water we must consider the Shoreland Zoning and resource protection requirements. An existing nonconforming structure and/or lot will often be limited in size by maximum area and volume allowed. We are challenged to create a building that supports our client’s dreams and needs. We embrace the limitations set by the building and zoning codes and use them to create design opportunities.

**Q:** Do you find that proximity to neighbors and privacy is an issue?

**A:** Yes, we consider adjacent structures, roads, nearby transportation, and landscape elements that provide shade/shelter and define views. The more “public” spaces of the home (i.e., kitchen, living, dining) will often be located closer to adjacent structures and roads, while bedrooms will be located on

more remote parts of the site to help minimize noise impacts and create more privacy where privacy is required—as long as it doesn’t interfere with some of the other critical design decisions we’ve been discussing. It’s a bit of a balancing act.

**Q:** So is this a game of compromise?

**A:** More like a game of prioritizing. The most unique and special elements of a site often will influence design decisions and can sometimes create conflict with one’s interest for energy efficiency. For example, this leads to difficult decisions for our clients and often requires compromise—compromise on the view, on the energy consumption and orientation, on cost and the materials chosen. We must ask, “What is most important?” For instance when designing near the water, with views to the north, we must create a balance between the views and the energy efficiency/energy demands. A successful design is one that combines the best of both. These complexities require creative planning and out-of-the-box thinking that often leads to creative, unique designs.

**Q:** How has this translated in your work recently?

**A:** An example of a project with complex site limitations is the “Bent House” in Kennebunk. Our client requested a modern, energy-efficient home that is open to views of the water on the north and east sides. Our first attempt had public spaces (kitchen, dining, living) on the south and east sides with framed views to the north. The owner found positive attributes in our designs; however, she asked us to revise the design to create privacy on the south and west with large areas of glazing on the north and east elevations for unobstructed views of the water. These ideas and goals were in conflict with her interest in energy efficiency. As a result we developed a design that integrates better solar orientation and captures the views. The building was bent and glazing was strategically placed on the south and west to take advantage of the sun throughout the day while glazing was also added to the north and east for the “expensive views.” The private wing is oriented due south, while the public wing is bent to allow sunlight to penetrate the home throughout the day. The amount of glazing on the north was a struggle to overcome given the interest in energy efficiency. We proposed double-stud exterior walls, triple-glazed windows and doors, and highly energy-efficient mechanical, electrical, and plumbing fixtures. The result is a home that is energy-efficient and meets the specific complex site constraints as well as the owner’s interests and goals. **MH+D**

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