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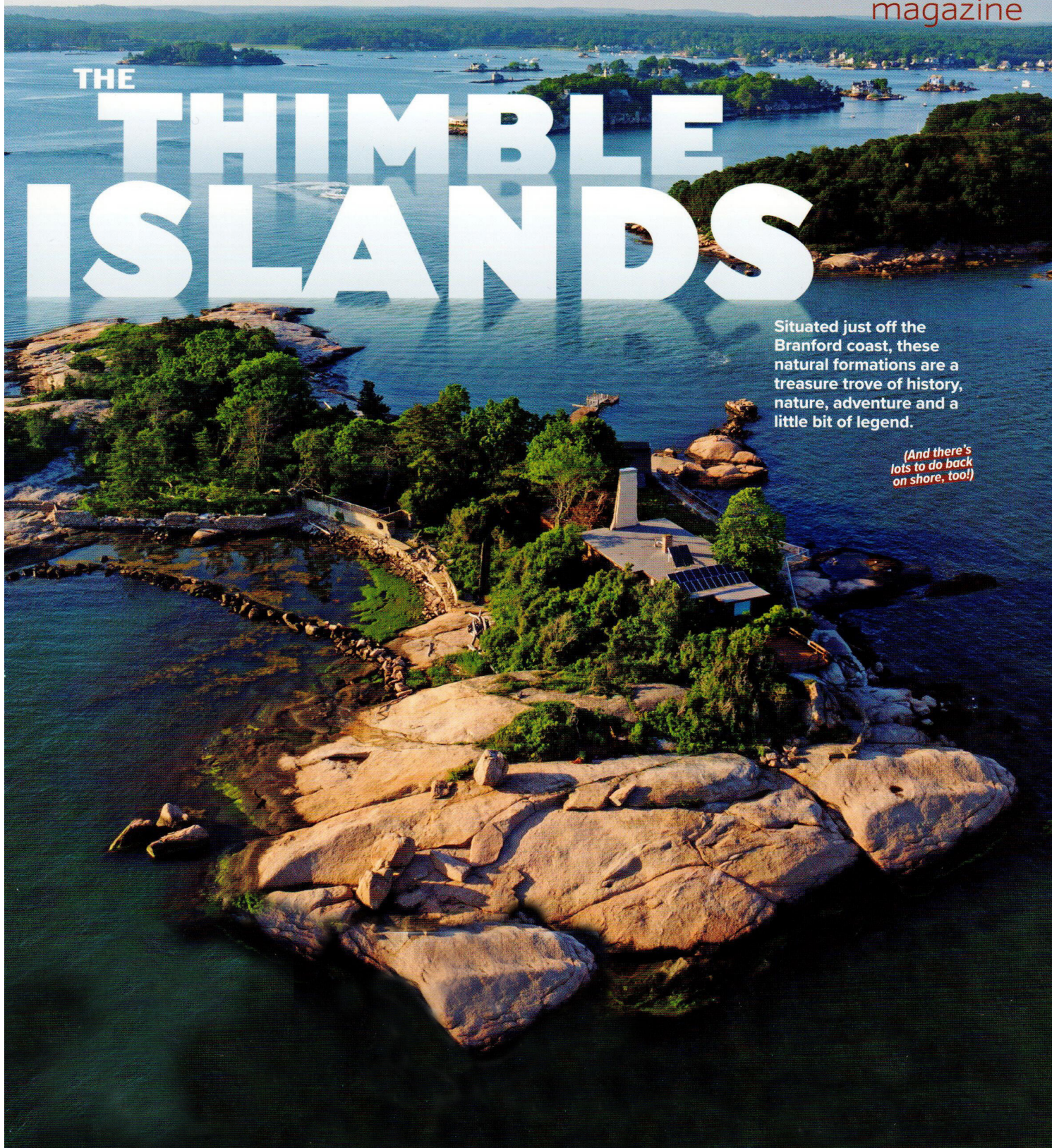
Connecticut

magazine

THE THIMBLE ISLANDS

Situated just off the Branford coast, these natural formations are a treasure trove of history, nature, adventure and a little bit of legend.

(And there's lots to do back on shore, too!)





Sea of Tranquility

Seeking a private retreat, two architects design a Fishers Island house atop a rocky hill overlooking the ocean.

By Jennifer Carmichael

Architects Charles Haver and Stewart Skolnick have spent their careers creating timeless homes with impeccable attention to detail. The rich tradition of New England vernacular architecture inspires their designs while they stay grounded in 21st-century lifestyles. So it's no wonder the couple and founders of Roxbury-based Haver & Skolnick Architects took the same approach when designing their weekend home—a retreat on Fishers Island, an unspoiled 9-mile-long islet off the coast of New London.

↑ The uniquely shaped home was designed to maximize views of the sea, with the living room and balcony placed on the top floor.

"We live in Roxbury in an 18th-century house with a large barn behind it, which we restored and now use for our design studio," says Haver. "It makes for a very short commute. But because we live and work on the same property, we like to get off this little corner come the weekend."

The couple used to escape to Fire Island, off the coast of Long Island. And while it had a fantastic beach, the commute from Connecticut was long. After hearing about Fishers Island from a work colleague, who had a house there, the couple did some investigating.

Wedged between Connecticut's shore and the North Fork of Long Island, the island's only ferry operates out of New London. With a mere

250 year-round residents and acres of protected woodlands, fields and ponds, the island intrigued them. Upon stepping on the island, they loved its rustic landscapes, scenic beaches and rare tranquility in an ocean-front community.

"Fishers Island has a large land trust, and the homeowners are ecologically minded and very interested in keeping the island undeveloped and natural, which we favor," says Skolnick, adding they have a Connecticut ZIP code yet pay taxes to New York State, as the island is officially part of the Suffolk County town of Southold.

"Plus, we're both year-round swimmers, and Fishers Island is a perfect fit because it has many ponds and the ocean," continues Skolnick. "While we swim mostly indoors in the winter, we swim in the ocean in the

summer and ponds in the shoulder season because they are a bit more temperate."

As architects, they started trying to find an existing house they could renovate. But nothing met their criteria: a relatively small place with a few big rooms on a large property. Smaller homes tended to be close together, and the pair sought privacy. After looking for a few months, they concluded they'd be better off creating something new, and started looking at land.

"With the ocean mist, soil conditions and sun, the island has tremendous growth, some good and some not so good, like invasive species," says Skolnick, who notes that the conditions on the island, and no deer, make for a gardener's paradise. "So when we bought our property, we couldn't walk on it because



■ The living room's clean, shiplapped boards and understated décor allow the coastal vistas to shine.



↑ Unlike their Americana-themed, Colonial home on the mainland, this one features European antiques and contemporary artwork.

→ In the kitchen, Calacatta marble counters, back-splash and shelves are clean and contemporary.

it had become overgrown with dense brush and vines, completely obscuring the views."

While the island is narrow, with ocean views from any point, the couple needed to figure out what type of view they had. The previous owners, who had yet to build on it, had erected a makeshift tower of two-by-fours to climb up to see the ocean. So they knew it was out there but had to do a lot of clearing to see it.

"There's something sacred about building on land that's not developed," says Haver, who notes that their site is within a residential park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., a landscape architect, city planner and son of the legendary designer of Central Park, also known for his wildlife-conser-





■ Exposed ceiling beams feel right at home in the seaside retreat, and an Italian daybed is a great spot to check out the surroundings.

vation efforts. "One hundred years later, we were the first to do so, but we kept Olmsted's original mission in mind, creating a meadow of native grasses as the setting for the house."

They bought the land in 2012, about eight years before starting construction in 2020, so they had a lot of time to think about it. Each time they sketched a design, they continued asking themselves what was essential. They knew they wanted a meadow. And knowing that these take years to develop, they began grooming the land to create one about two years before starting construction on the house.

"We ultimately wanted a small house—one large bedroom, one bath, powder room, kitchen and one large room to act as living room and dining room—that was maintenance-free and fit us," says Skolnick.

Influenced by the island's eclectic shin-

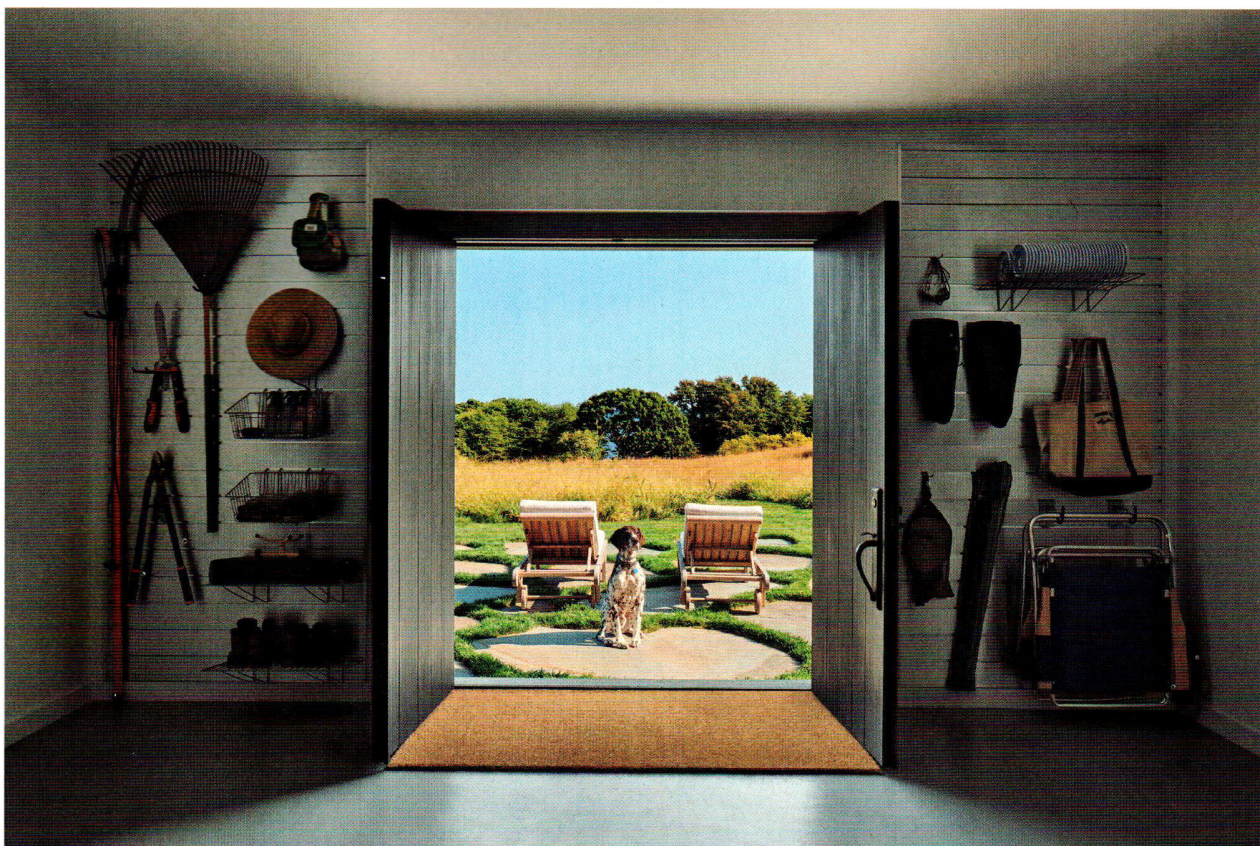
gled cottages built at the turn of the 20th century, the 1,200-square-foot house is clad with Alaskan yellow cedar, often used near oceans because it's durable and turns a beautiful silver/gray. The foundation wall is a Connecticut fieldstone. And bronze railings and aluminum-clad windows require no maintenance. The one part that requires painting, and only every few years, is the mudroom door.

With an upside-down approach, typical for island homes, the second-floor living room captures the panoramic ocean views at the top of the building. Porch-like, with glass on three sides, it also offers a balcony. Its crisp white interior with shiplapped boards don't compete with the outdoors and form a backdrop for antique furnishings and contemporary abstract art.

"We live in a Colonial house with a lot of Americana antiques, and so with this

EVERY HOME HAS A STORY

Each month we share the story of a Connecticut home, including new builds, additions, renovations, restorations, plus interior designs. If you'd like to see your home featured, send a summary of what makes it special, along with 3–5 photos, to editor@connecticutmag.com.



house, we decided to pair European antiques with contemporary paintings," says Haver.

The interior also features rift, quarter-sawn oak flooring, custom hand-hewn beams, and an interesting lantern or light fixture in every room to tie them all together. The kitchen features a pyramidal ceiling, Calacatta marble counters, and cantilevered shelves.

Skolnick notes that they address the landscape simultaneously with the architecture whenever they work on a project. And they like to design a few unique experiences. One of them is at the rear of the structure, facing the sea, as a terrace of jumbo bluestone pavers are carved into irregular shapes, corresponding to the many boulders on the property. The outdoor shower surrounded by ocean, meadow and woodlands is another.

"The outdoor shower is perfect for shampooing our dog, Keeper," laughs Haver. "Everyone gets wet, but it's a fun, family experience."

"We pretty much come every weekend throughout the year," he continues. "That's the beauty of having a second home nearby—we use it. Even in the winter, it's beautiful and always about 10 degrees warmer than where we live full-time. And we practically have the island to ourselves."

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