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VERMONT HOMES AND GARDENS

A Kit Home's Historic Charm Endures

A 1920s bungalow stands the test of time.

For those not familiar with the style and process of a popular system of house design and construction during the first half of the twentieth century, a “kit home” was a practical and economic, albeit customizable and attractive, alternative to traditional residential building. Interestingly, the pre-cut lumber and supplementary building materials—along with as-

sembly instructions—were loaded on a railroad boxcar or two at the company’s mill and shipped by railroad. The carpenter or contractor hired to fabricate the house (or the customers themselves) then unloaded the boxcars and began constructing the house, based on the predetermined design and floor plan, on the customer’s property. In the case of this particular kit house,

the railroad was just down the street, making it very handy to transport the lumber to the site. There are several kit homes on this street nestled together, a stone’s throw from the desirable Five Sisters neighborhood.

The neighborhood in Burlington’s South End is lovely and quiet, and is situated directly across the dead-end street from a park. Homeowner Marilyn Richardson purchased the house in 2015; the renovations took five months, and she moved in to the 1920s bungalow “three Christmases ago.” She and her contractor/carpenter son, Matt, were the renovation team extraordinaire and worked closely together on the almost 1,000-square-foot (when you count the closed-in porch now sun-room space) historic home.



The eye-pleasing renovation of this house and artful landscaping belie the fact it was originally a mail order catalog offering, sold in kit form to be assembled on site by the buyer or a hired carpenter.



Think small: the homeowner installed smaller-than-average kitchen appliances, such as the European refrigerator (with a built-in wine rack) to conserve precious floor area and space for the Vermont verde granite countertop. The dining room sports refinished maple floors and a beautiful cherry table purchased locally.





Apart from stripping and refinishing woodwork, the living room (and front door) are original. The framed advertisement for "The Sunlight" model describes various options and finishes available to the buyer.



The two-bedroom, one-bath house on a modest 5,532-square-foot landscaped lot came with an impressive list of comprehensive materials back in the mid-1920s. A black-and-white framed paper in Marilyn's hallway documents for the purchaser complete plans and specifications, and inventories the included materials: pre-cut lumber, lath, a choice of plaster and lath or sheet plaster/plaster finish, asphalt shingles, pine or oak doors, maple floors ("they must have decided to get an upgrade because the original floors were pine," relates Marilyn), lath and cedar shingles for the exterior, the framing—a choice of Douglas fir or Pacific Coast hemlock—interior doors, a medicine case, windows (since replaced), "and even shellac, varnish, and paint," she adds with a chuckle.

The language used to describe "The Sunlight," the appellation of this specific model, also amuses Marilyn. The framed print describes "the arrangement of the floor and how appropriate it is" for the homeowner, as it's "only a few steps to here and then a few more to there." She laughs, "Well, yeah, it's only 950 square feet!" She reads on: "Careful planning of The Sunlight relieves the usual household drudgery." Hmmm, that's a nice feature to have. Marilyn mentions that there are a lot of kit houses on her street but that they're all very different. I wonder if they all alleviate household drudgery...

Fast forward to three years ago. Marilyn, a retired professor with a creative eye and a penchant for aesthetics, and her son Matt, a builder by trade, did all of the renovations together. "We



Efficiency throughout: placement of furnishings in the bedrooms and selection of a space-saving, wall-mounted toilet in the bathroom conserve precious space but don't compromise on quality and appearance.



were a team," she explains. She had a vision for the design from the beginning, and he understood and was attentive to his mother's goals. From the hanging abstract sculpture by local artist Ethan Bond-Watts to the pale green glass subway tiles and hard-to-find European refrigerator, Marilyn confidently put her vision in full gear with the help of her "very skilled" son. She also wisely did her own research to take her design and objectives in the direction she envisioned to make them a reality. For example, she explored the options for maximum efficiency ovens and chose a double oven that "can cook 90 percent of what you cook in the top oven, which is very small, so it's much more efficient." The bottom oven is large enough for a Thanksgiving turkey. She also sought to find a small refrigerator (turns out it wasn't so easy) and installed a European model that has the added bonus of a built-in wine rack. These two were key to accommodating Marilyn's two-fold purpose of integrating efficient yet small appliances that are essential attributes for her small kitchen.

The countertops and deep farmhouse sink are Vermont verde granite, sourced locally, while the cabinetry is a simple, white Shaker style that beautifully complements the light, airy space. A cozy seating area at the end of the kitchen is imbued with natural light from large windows and new French doors that lead out on to an expansive deck and well-manicured garden area in the backyard. Tall, mature trees bring out the appeal of the private, inviting area—just steps from the house, an aspect Marilyn's dog, Lily, seems to appreciate. Back inside, opposite the sink and stove, a small inset area built to resemble a hutch houses a microwave, additional lower cabinetry,



A small alcove in the kitchen provides extra work space and room for the essentials: storage, a microwave, and a coffeemaker. The mudroom (right) just off the kitchen is also cheerful and efficient.

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and glass-front upper cabinets that serve as additional storage. Also on that wall is the door down to the mudroom, a door to the cellar, a desk, and the aforementioned stainless steel European refrigerator. Matt built a beautiful door with a transom, which leads to the cellar. The mother/son team also restored all the wainscoting in that entryway. "He's a wonderful craftsman," adds Marilyn with more than a little admiration in her voice.

Although the kitchen was completely gutted, nothing in the living room or the dining room was changed, other than refinishing the original, narrow-board, maple floors; those two rooms "are basically the same," Marilyn explains. Matt reproduced all the trim to synchronize with the original woodwork; they also kept the original front door—after stripping "65 million layers of paint"—and had it stained a rich walnut. Period glass doorknobs and reconditioned wainscoting on the sunroom ceiling are also a fitting balance to some of the more contemporary elements. And speaking of the dining room, she purchased a gorgeous cherry table from Vermont Furniture Designs in Winooski that comes with "two giant leaves" for entertaining. It's a bit tucked away until company comes ("Why would you want to walk around it all the time?" asks the ever-practical Marilyn), in which case she happily pulls it out into the wide-open dining space between the living room and the kitchen.

When asked where Marilyn got her design inspiration, she modestly replies, "It's just, I guess, who I am. I grew up on a farm; we learned to do things and to make things." She also recently traveled to Germany where she visited the Christmas markets and came back with ideas for flower arrangements, another passion and predilection. Her mudroom, which also accommodates the washer and dryer, is a cheerful and delightful brilliant blue and lime green combination that could lift any dreary mood (wouldn't the original designers be so pleased, as these colors also mitigate "household drudgery"?). Matt commented to his mom that when he walks in there "he feels like he should say, 'go Seahawks!'" The space is also very utilitarian and provides a place to hang jackets and to store boots as well as affords more storage in closed cabinets.

Two small but comfortable, light-filled bedrooms and a single tiled bathroom round out the not-quite-1,000-square-

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Just outside the kitchen door is this deck, where even Lily, the homeowner's dog, can relax without going too far from the house; backyard trees provide a sense of privacy even though neighboring houses are close by.

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foot cottage bungalow. To conserve space in the bathroom, Marilyn opted for a high-efficiency, wall-mounted toilet—which prompted responses from friends such as “I want one of those when we renovate!” The walk-in, handicap-access shower and higher vanity height are also helpful components as one gets older—“I wanted to live here forever,” she comments.

All in all, both mother and son thought the renovation process went “totally smoothly,” and Matt adds, “My mom was so organized!” Marilyn for her part couldn't single out a favorite room: “I love the whole house! It's a great house, just perfect. The flow, everything; I love all of it!” What a happy, apt tribute and the antithesis of household drudgery. **F**

Marisa Crumb enjoys hiking, kayaking, and all forms of chocolate. Carolyn Bates is a professional photographer who lives and works in Burlington, VT. To see more of her work, visit carolynbates.com.