



**THE ABSOLUTE MINIMUM** The house's straightforward architecture complements the woody site. Facing page: The ocean view is framed by the simple understated design of the entry hall.



DESIGNING

# An Island Prize

A MAINE ARCHITECT DESIGNS AN AWARD-WINNING HOUSE IN CASCO BAY FOR OWNERS WHO WANTED A MINIMALIST RETREAT. **BY STACEY CHASE**



Photographs by BRIAN VANDEN BRINK

Suhail and Leila Bisharat had lived in the Middle East for so long that when the couple decided to build on Maine's Chebeague Island – suddenly surrounded by water, not sand – they opted for an elegant minimalist house with a wall of glass facing Casco Bay and an ocean view from every room.

Suhail, 65, a retired geologist and former director of The Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts in Amman, Jordan, and Leila, 64, a consultant on international public health issues and former director of planning and coordination for UNICEF, hired a Falmouth, Maine, architect to design their decidedly anti-desert sanctuary. The residence earned architect Carol Wilson one of the American Institute of Architects New England's 2006 Honor Awards for Design Excellence.

"The thing that struck us about the house is its absolute simplicity. It's the most honest, straightforward little house, and it seems timeless in that way," says Lawrence Speck, chairman of the AIA jury that selected it and an architect at PageSoutherlandPage in Austin, Texas.

Leila's father's family was among the early settlers of Chebeague, an island approximately 5 miles long and 3 miles wide and a 15-minute ferry ride from the mainland town of Cumberland. She inherited the 3-acre bayside parcel on which the new house sits, as well as additional island property with an 1870s farmhouse.

Originally, the couple planned to erect a simple pergola by the water – a place to throw dinner parties or relax with their three daughters and two grandchildren – and live in the old farmhouse, a 10-minute hike up Grasshopper Hill.

But the concept of their retirement home evolved. "We thought, 'Why just sit and look out to sea occasionally when we could be here all the time?'" Leila says.

The Bisharats' ultramodern retreat is nestled among a screen of birch trees, seaside ledges, and underground springs, including some known locally as the Dropping Springs, which cascade over rock cliffs and empty into Casco Bay.

From the street, the property looks like a modest ranch-style house with entryways beneath double dormers. But the 8-foot-tall, ocean-facing glass wall brings drama to the facade. With a southern exposure, it also takes advantage of passive solar heat during Maine's long winters. Protected by a deep overhang, the wall opens onto a 12-foot-wide stone terrace.

The 81-foot-long one-level house has a single bedroom inside its 2,218-square-foot rectangular footprint. "It's really one large room," says Leila. It is visually broken into sections by a custom room divider (with a chalkboard on the back side that often displays the grandkids' art), couch, fireplace, and bedroom wall. His-and-her desks are tucked neatly into a bedroom alcove and hidden by folding doors. Two uninterrupted corridors run the length of the house: The southern passageway is formed by the wall of glass and the northern passageway is a utility zone off of which are the baths, laundry area, enviable storage, and a mudroom. "When you're dealing with

a small house, you gain a lot in privacy by using a linear plan," Wilson says. "It gives you a physical separation that stacking doesn't."

The sleek, sophisticated simplicity was arrived at deliberately, say the Bisharats, who note that during construction, they constantly questioned how much was too much. "We kept coming back to ourselves and asking, 'What is the absolute minimum we want to be comfortable?'" Leila says.

The Bisharats hired The Tozier Group Builders of Falmouth, Maine, to erect their getaway, and the project took seven months to complete.

Avid collectors of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art, the Bisharats have created a gallery feel with stark, winter-white walls and a decor that seamlessly juxtaposes Maine and the Middle East. At night, the glass wall is covered with spinnaker-cloth curtains custom made by Maine Sailing Partners of Yarmouth that billow like real sails when heat pours from the floor ducts. Mahogany bridal chests from Saudi Arabia and Egypt stand beside Damascene dressers embellished with mother-of-pearl inlay, and a Bedouin kilim adorns the bedroom floor.

"Every morning you wake up, and it's exciting!" Leila says. "You are just drinking in the sea and the landscape, and it's different every time you look.

"We have lived in a lot of old houses with lots of ins and outs and small rooms, but there is something very liberating about a space like this," she adds. "The linearity of it helps you to be free of any unnecessary distractions. It's tremendously uplifting."

Stacey Chase is a freelance writer in Portland, Maine. E-mail her at [storychaser@earthlink.net](mailto:storychaser@earthlink.net).



**LONG AND LEAN** The open floor plan is broken up by a custom room divider, which delineates the kitchen from the living space, and the fireplace, which separates the living area from the entry hall and bedroom beyond.



**SUITE SERENITY** The home's lone bedroom is a study in tranquility. Facing page: In the living area, the homeowners have mixed modern Middle Eastern art with antique furnishings.



### IN GOOD COMPANY

When Carol Wilson was elected to the American Institute of Architects College of Fellows in 2005, she became the first woman, and only the fifth architect, in Maine history so honored. In winning the prestigious lifetime appointment, which is based on an architect's portfolio, she joined the ranks of Gridley Barrows, Alonzo Harriman, John Calvin Stevens, and Phillip Wadsworth.

Noted for modern designs deferential to the Maine landscape, Wilson, 54, founded her own firm in 1985. She says she has a classic love-hate relationship with her art. "What I love about it is it keeps both sides of your brain on full tilt. The thing I can't stand about doing what I do," she adds, "is I'm constantly reminded that it's a puzzle."

In addition to the 2006 award for design excellence for the Bisharat house, Wilson was the recipient of an AIA New England Award for Excellence in Architecture in 2004. She also won a 2006 award for Excellence in Architecture from AIA Maine, her fourth such honor.

"Her work may appear fairly simple and straightforward, but it is very sophisticated," says Andrew Pressman, a Washington, D.C., architect and contributing editor to *Architectural Record*. "Her work is magical and poetic in the way it resonates with each site."

Maine's only living AIA fellow is philosophical about her own work. "You're trying to capture your own time and your own place," Wilson says, describing her passion for modern American architecture, "but represent it in a way that's timely, so that it won't just mark this moment.

"So that it will also endure." – S.C.

#### Architect

CAROL WILSON

Falmouth, Maine, 207-781-4684, [carolwilsonarchitect.com](http://carolwilsonarchitect.com)

#### Contractor

THE TOZIER GROUP BUILDERS

Falmouth, Maine, 207-797-6222, [toziergroup.com](http://toziergroup.com)