



# ILLUSIONS OF *Grandeur*

A modest waterfront dwelling  
is more than meets the eye

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*By Chris White • Photography by Dan Cutrona*



## IN CHRISTOPHER PRIEST'S 1995 NOVEL,

The *Prestige*, which would later become a 2006 movie, the author explains that great magic tricks contain three parts. “The Pledge” introduces the audience to something that appears ordinary, but of course is not, then “The Turn” makes that item do something extraordinary. The last part is the payoff that elicits the standing ovation. Priest writes, “Every magic trick has a third act, the hardest part, the part we call ‘The Prestige.’” Such is the case with the New Seabury summer home of Wellesley residents Heather and Rob Shanahan, where an apparently modest, traditional Cape is but an illusionary facade to an expansive, complex dwelling of contemporary West Coast beach flair.

The Greek thinker Anaxagoras, known for bringing philosophy to Athens circa 450 B.C., claimed that “Appearances are a glimpse of the unseen,” and the Shanahan house is proof. In Priest’s terms, its front face is “The Pledge,” an unassuming—though handsome—Cape house. Builder Scott Goldstein of S.G. Custom Homes in Mashpee states, “It’s very deceiving. From the road, you’d never know this is a four-story home.” The front features two main gables, one forming the roof over the garage, the

other above the entryway. A half-dome window and an offset smaller gable draw the two peaks together and break the symmetry, the result of which seems to further reduce the scale of the house and understate its actual footprint. Located within New Seabury, a development that began back in the 1960s, if the home stands out with its street exterior, it does so in its classic shingled look. It looks like one of the more traditional homes in the neighborhood. “This was definitely the effect we were hoping for,” states owner Heather Shanahan.

The Shanahan’s house takes its “turn” with its extraordinary interior. Passing through the door, one steps, almost as through a wardrobe, across the North American continent, all the way to California. Deborah Berger of Maven Interior Design in Wellesley implemented a “Santa Monica beach house” concept, created around the fusion of white and dramatic “color moments.” For example, the kitchen is all white, but the three hanging glass chimney lamps are aquamarine, and the mosaic of blue rectangular tiles above the sink and oven span a range of ocean hues. For the home’s most dazzling color bursts, Berger commissioned Black Crow Studios in Los Angeles to create two abstract watercolor murals on custom wallpaper. The first provides a key focal point with its swirling, ethereal blue in the home’s central dining room and entryway. The second greets visitors at the top of the stairs, where it wraps the surface of a rounded wall. The size of the pieces, and their



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contrast against the white surroundings, produces the sensation of inhabiting a wave’s barrel. Suspended above the stairwell, a large light fixture sculpted in the shape of a man-o-war jellyfish only enhances the trompe l’oeil of underwater depth. In the walkout basement, another bright mural covers an entire wall—a photograph of blue, green, orange, and manila colored ropes. Says Heather Shanahan, “These works are exceptionally cool. They’re such statement pieces.”

In addition to the Santa Monica theme’s sleight-of-hand, a number of other appearances continue the magic’s “Turn” and help to conceal the unseen. One of these is the walkout basement, which feels much more like a first floor than a cellar due to the way it opens to the pool deck and to the same views of the water that the upper stories enjoy. Down here, what could have simply been a kids’ play area actually serves two other functions: one of the movie room, and one of party central. While the two purposes may seem incongruous, the Shanahans built with two key intentions: family enjoyment and entertainment. Berger, who first collaborated with the Shanahans on their Wellesley home,



states, “They’re big entertainers; hosting people is a large part of who they are.” It’s fitting, then, that what appears to be a bar downstairs is actually almost a full kitchen, providing access to popcorn and ice cream for the kids and easy access to the pool area for bartenders and catering staff. Goldstein states, “There’s plenty of space. At one of their parties last summer, there were over 100 people down here, and no one was tripping over each other.” Another clever trick is the service pantry, which looks like a normal room, though one with intricately built-in cabinetry and drawers. Its true purpose, however, is not to house spices and boxes of pasta but to serve as a staging area for summer adventure. A side door leads directly from the pantry to a



walkway leading to the dock, where the Shanahans keep their 42-foot motor yacht. “There’s a fridge, an ice maker, coolers, and everything you’d need for a day on the boat,” says Berger.

The crown of the Shanahan’s home, up on the top floor, contains what may be its most precious, though hidden, gem: the roof deck. This area also has its own bar, complete with a kitchenette and miniature dishwasher. Berger notes, “They’re totally outfitted on every floor.” Goldstein describes this “crow’s nest” as “a modern take on the traditional widow’s walk.” “You can watch boats come in and out the river all day,” he says, “and they won’t even know you’re here.” Of course, this area is completely hidden from the street, as well. It’s the perfect escape within this hideaway of a home. Berger elaborates, explaining, “I chose a wraparound sectional that hugs three sides of

the deck. We had some good laughs about that because I called it the make-out sofa.” On a more serious note, she adds, “We really wanted the view to be the star of this house.”

And here is where the true magic of the Shanahan home comes into play, for the view leads to “The Prestige.” From an interior design perspective, Berger had to essentially design the opposite of what she had created for the Shanahans in Wellesley, where she had used color—the house featured fuchsia walls—more wildly and vibrantly. Berger says, “Heather wants the ‘wow!’ What no one has seen before.” But in Popponesset, the key to this “wow” effect was more minimalistic, and it was found by bringing in the light and the views. The “color moments” are there to complement and enhance rather than to control the theme.

Goldstein, along with Falmouth architect John Dvorsack played

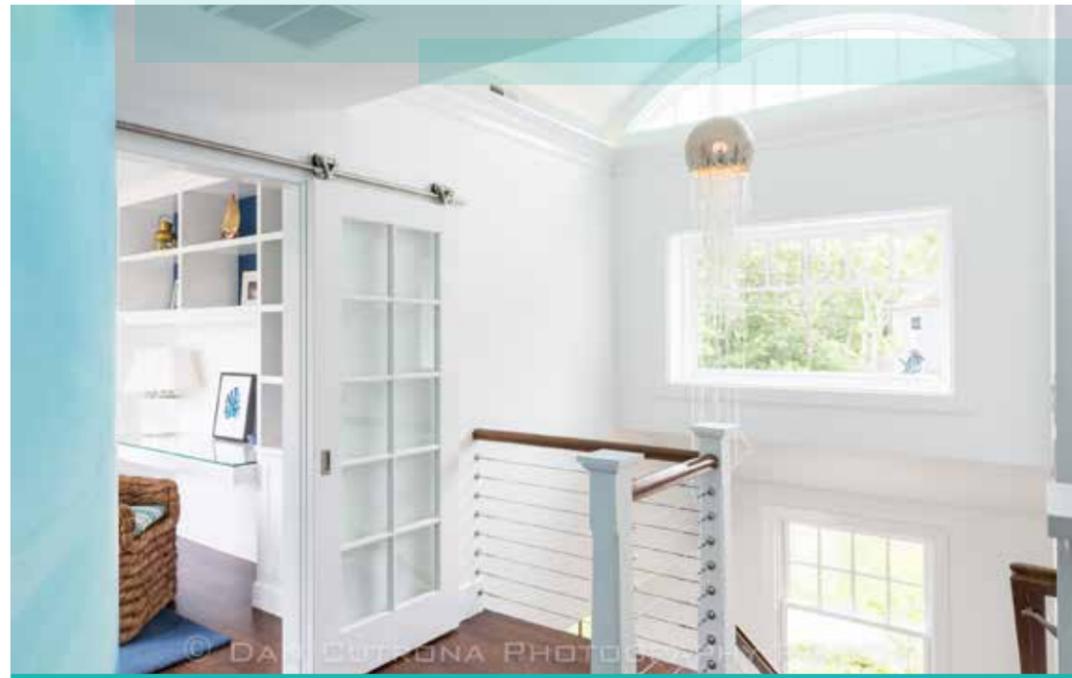


equally critical parts in achieving the ultimate goal. Dvorsack's design of decks on each of the home's four levels and large windows that Goldstein expertly installed, drink in the colors of Popponesset Island, the river, and the beach. There is also the massive 14-foot window seat on the main floor, Berger notes. "We ended up widening it to the width of a twin bed," she says. Dvorsack adds, "The roof deck and bar is my favorite space. Its views looking out to Nantucket Sound are spectacular." Scott Pimentel of Falmouth did most of the finished carpentry work, including the many custom built-in features throughout the home, such as the mantle in the living room, and the beds in the boys' room, which resembles a playful captain's quarters from a luxury sailing vessel. Pimentel also crafted the intricate staircase that expands into a bench at the entryway, which Dvorsack ranks among the finest elements in the home. "It took Scott three days to build this one piece," Dvorsack says. "And the pieces of white oak in each of the other stairs were chosen specifically for their

grain patterns."

Heather Shanahan couldn't have been more pleased with the team's synergy. "Scott, John and Deb had never worked together," she says, "but this was truly a collaborative, creative effort. There were no egos involved; it was really impressive." Unfortunately, Shanahan was battling cancer during most of the building process, so she had to put her faith in the team as she recovered. She says the knowledge of her new home's progress provided a source of strength. "We had had a tough six months leading up to our home's completion," she says. Berger adds, "The Shanahans didn't want to see anything before the last Friday in June of 2015, when they would move in."

The circumstances surrounding the project would enhance the element of surprise and impart an additional layer of importance. Says Berger, "It was really fun on a lot of levels, but it ramped up the pressure, too." From an architectural standpoint, the project required a certain amount of wizardry to surmount a number



of challenges. To begin with, there was already a house on the lot. Goldstein knocked this down and excavated the old foundation in order to pour a new one. Dvorsack states, “The project was complex with respect to the site constraints. The lot was on the small side, and the design ‘program’ was extensive, including a pool, a spa, and a large patio.” Then there were the various building challenges inherent to site lines and height restrictions, New Seabury’s architectural review process, zoning, and environmental requirements. “We had to be very efficient with the allocation of space to comply with lot coverage,” Dvorsack continues. “An example of this was to combine the entry and dining room instead of having two distinct spaces.” One of the reasons the home is unassuming from the street is that New Seabury has a fairly dense population. “Great care had to be taken when locating the footprint of the house to respect the views and privacy of the adjacent properties,” Dvorsack says.

As the move-in day approached in June of 2015, the designing and building teams raced to complete the Shanahan’s home. Berger states, “In the six days leading up to it, we brought in everything—down to the Q-tips in the bathrooms.” Then, on the last Friday of the month, the family arrived for the magicians’ final act, “The Prestige.” Heather Shanahan states, “It was completely surreal. And the house was just beautiful. But what was equally important to us was the realization that so many people had worked together to create that moment for us. The entire team knew that seeing the house at the ‘big reveal’ had been the light at the end of the tunnel for us during my recovery and treatment. It was just a great moment.”

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