



Transformations

An island gal and her home undergo some alchemy together

By Lisa Stiepoek

“Oh my God I have serious house envy,” the photographer on this assignment said as we made our way up the stone path to Liz Dowling’s house off Lakeside Drive. My thoughts exactly.

She and I see a lot of homes in our work out here and people would probably be surprised to find us swooning over this simple Cape. But that’s the beauty of it. The Dowlings restored their island cottage into, well, an island cottage — the kind that’s increasingly hard to find out here as one after another disappears into visions of grander and bigger.

Here, the site remains the star, and all you want to do is pull up an Adirondack chair on the porch and spend the afternoon watching birds catch air waves over Fresh Pond. But we are on assignment, so we bypass the chairs and make our way inside Liz’s little cottage, where our envy intensifies when we see what Liz has done with the place.

There’s a kitchen, living room and den downstairs with two bedrooms upstairs. A modest layout , which Liz says was exactly

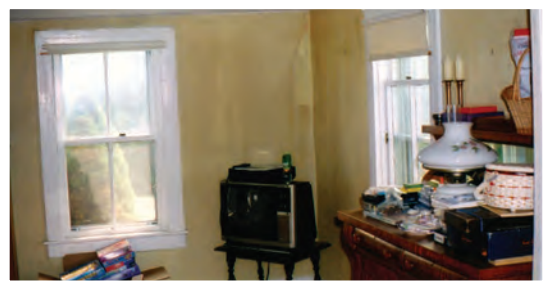
what she and her husband had been seeking for years until they found their Lakeside Drive cottage in 2001.

“The setting was beautiful,” says Liz. “And it was really classic, a beautiful Block Island cottage.” But it needed some work.

First some cleaning out. “We bought it from Dr. Dalton, who had two sisters and among them 17 children. There were probably 20 mattresses in the house. Head to toe all the way down the long porch, then five in one bedroom and three in another,” says Liz with a laugh.

“And the ceilings were falling down,” she recalls. “You’d walk from room to room and emerge with plaster dust on your head.” So there were some structural issues to attack before she and her family could move in or even think about doing any decorating. They spent that first winter fixing the worst of those problems, keeping in mind, says Liz, that we wanted it to look like the cottage it was and had always been.

After that, Liz was able to turn to what she loves most: interior design, a hobby she’s just beginning to turn into a business. It’s not been a lifelong hobby or even pas-



THEN—When the Dowlings bought their home in 2001 it needed the usual cleaning out and some structural repairs. At right is an outhouse they turned into an outdoor shower.



sion. Rather, it's one she was forced into by marrying an opposite as they say. "I can clean out any room in a couple hours; my husband on the other hand never gets rid of anything," explains Liz. "We still have all the furniture we had when we got married."

She's learned to reuse, rewrap, and reupholster. Which is what she did here.

The family's first weekend in the house was Memorial Day 2002. Time to turn to the cosmetic and, for Liz, the first order of business is always color. "I like a lot of color. Color is kind of my thing," she says. But before she could paint she had to get rid of the wallpaper that covered every wall, which is quite a chore when they are horsehair plaster. "We hired Jim Murray who worked miracles. He got every bit off inch by inch and then he painted the inside. We got lots of color in there right away. The bathroom red, the kitchen yellow, and we kept the living room white but painted one of its walls yellow to tie into the kitchen," says Liz.

She was in her element now. "I'd been pulling pics from magazines like *House Beautiful* and *Coastal Living*, so I sort of knew what I wanted. I wanted it to look beachy, clean, and comfortable — so people could come in with their sandy bathing suits and not feel uncomfortable at all. I went with seagrass or Dash and Albert rugs you can just take outside and hose off."

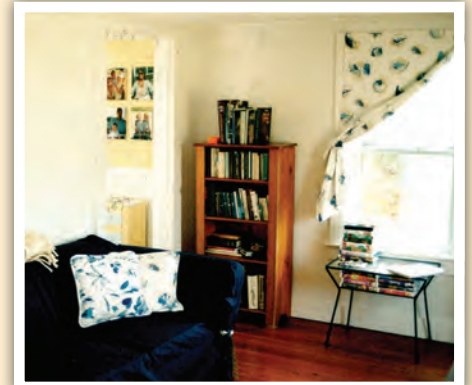
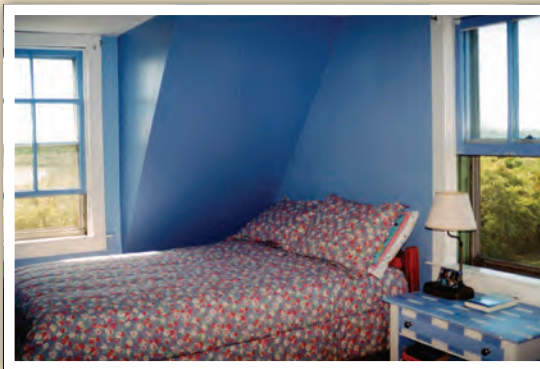
All the design happened slowly over time and working around long term projects, such as all the windows being replaced, adding a porch, and dealing with a terminally outdated kitchen ("We had a dishwasher on wheels with a hose that attached to the sink faucet and then basically just swished the water around.")

Everything Liz did with the house she did in phases under time and budget constraints.

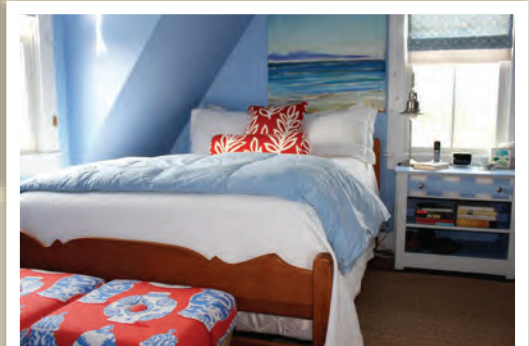
"Nearly everything in the house on Block Island is something I found, or was given to us, or something we repurposed from another place or use. There are ways to creatively do things with less," she adds. "For instance, you can really spruce up a room with paint and a few throw pillows."

Indeed, one of the first things you notice when you enter the house is Liz's choice of fabrics on throw pillows, curtains, and throws. Friends who visited ended up asking her to help them decorate their own homes or offices. It happened enough that this January she decided to make it into a business.

So far, she's worked on a home on Fire Island and a friend's office in Connecticut. You can see, and read about, those projects as well as her island home on her design blog, thewryhome.com.



MIDWAY—The family wanted to preserve what they could of the original cottage and were operating on a budget, so improvements happened in stages. After the main structural repairs were done, Liz transformed the look of the place by adding bright colors to the walls, throwing fabric onto old couches, and adding pillows.



NOW—A complete kitchen overhaul and adding an open porch and a stone walkway were some of the last of the major projects completed on the house. The bedrooms and living room demonstrate Liz's flair for fabrics. She admits to spending a lot of time at island shops, particularly Lazy Fish and Glass Onion and throughout her home displays island artists, including Mike Bryce, Jessie Edwards, Marilyn Bogdanffy, Malcolm Greenaway, Meg Boyles, KC Perry, and Stuart Littlefield.