



ARCHITECT ELIZABETH HERRMANN sits on the birch daybed she designed. When needed, it pulls out to serve as a pair of twin beds. A sleeping loft is above. The entrance elevation (FACING PAGE), with its stained cedar walls, is an exercise in simplicity and clean geometry.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL



ARCHITECT ELIZABETH HERRMANN BRINGS
THE TINY HOUSE CONCEPT TO NEW HEIGHTS

WRITTEN BY WILLIAM MORGAN • PHOTOGRAPHED BY JIM WESTPHALEN



"YOU GAVE ME A JEWEL BOX," the delighted client told architect Elizabeth Herrmann when his small house was completed in only four months and within its modest budget. "The house is so well done," he said, "you have made it impossible to add to it." Given that his new home has a footprint of little more than 400 square feet, that was no mean compliment.

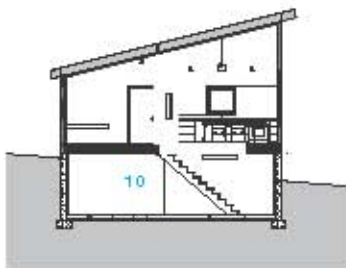
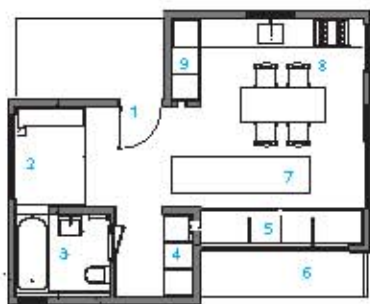
For her part, Herrmann observes that with a tiny house, "everything is right there — so it gets noticed — and it has to be done with great care." So this house in rural Vermont had to be more than a trailer or a converted gypsy caravan. The architect insisted that what she designed be "first and foremost a lovely place to be, with all the variety of a much larger home."

Its spectacular setting is one reason this cabin-sized house never feels like a claustrophobic box. The client, a painter and contra-dance caller, purchased an acre plot in the country, the most prominent feature of which was a dramatic view of Camel's Hump, the third-tallest peak in the Green Mountains. Anything here could

be dwarfed by the landscape, but the view of the mountain was integrated into the house via a picture window.

The taller side of this wedge-shaped structure faces the mountain, while the other side shelters private spaces, like the bath and sleeping area. The entrance is at the lower end of the sloping frame, where a corner has been notched out to form a welcoming porch. There is a similar bite from the cedar-sheathed, shed-roofed building on the opposite corner. These playful planar changes offer relief from the severity of the cubic form. Herrmann, whose firm, Elizabeth Herrmann Architecture + Design, is in Bristol, Vermont, describes such "unpredictable" offsets as

ALTHOUGH THE HOUSE is only one room, the architect has cleverly shaped the space to its variety of uses. In this view, the daybed/sleeping loft is to the left, the "master bedroom" is straight ahead, and the entrance and kitchen storage is on the right. The passageway to the bathroom and more storage is suggested by a strong shadow behind the birch-lined bookcase, which creates a sense of depth in the otherwise flat wall.



- | | |
|-------------------|--------------|
| 1 ENTRY | BUILDER |
| 2 BED | Northern |
| 3 BATH | Timbers |
| 4 STORAGE | Construction |
| 5 DAY BED | |
| 6 SLEEPING LOFT | |
| 7 BASEMENT HATCH | |
| 8 KITCHEN | |
| 9 KITCHEN STORAGE | |
| 10 BASEMENT | |



A NOTCH for the entrance porch and a bump-out for the sleeping loft mitigate the exterior's cubic form (TOP) into something lighter and more playful. The seemingly randomly placed windows (ABOVE) form an abstract composition that features the Vermont landscape. The hatch to the basement staircase (CUT-AWAY ELEVATION, LEFT) is outlined on the floor in front of the daybed.



“the logical and whimsical expression of its contents, its functions, and views.”

A variety of window sizes respond to the house’s internal functions and to the views. (The oversized square picture window facing the mountain is a bit like “an aunt who talks too loudly at a party,” the owner jokes.) The vertical slits and the horizontal bands, which Herrmann calls “sleeping windows,” both frame and edit the views, giving each “room” a distinctive focus. Set against the flat white walls, the geometric window arrangements create an homage to 1920s Modernism, an aesthetic ideally suited to such a minimal expression of living space.

The client had a specific program — “a beautiful, tiny, energy-efficient house, large enough to square-dance in,” he says — and a budget of \$150,000. In an unusual progression of house-making, the size decreased to stay within budget. There were certain economies, like the \$35 Herrmann-designed wall lamps

IN KEEPING WITH the less-is-more aesthetic, the walls are free of decoration. In the kitchen (ABOVE), the window over the sink acts as a changing natural canvas. Everything was done elegantly but unostentatiously, as the \$100 stove, the plumbing-pipe light fixtures, and showerless bath room (RIGHT) demonstrate. The upward thrust of the roof (FACING PAGE) points toward the distinctive shape of Camel’s Hump.





made of galvanized pipe, but scale and the sense of spaciousness were not compromised.

Must-haves included a bathroom, a sleeping area, kitchen, storage, a dining/worktable, living space that could accommodate overnight guests, and a sleeping loft. To keep the living space uncluttered, a full basement for storage, mechanicals, and laundry is accessed through a hatch in the floor. There is a designated space for everything, perfect for an artist who travels a lot and who wanted “a small house for someone who doesn’t want to own a house.”

It is important, says Herrmann, to have “those transitional

spaces that give a sense of arrival or simply a change of scale appropriate to use,” so they are sculpted to define purpose. For example, the “bedroom” is tucked under the lowest part of the roof, while the bathroom is approached through a storage area rather than being directly off the living space. Neither static nor confining, the home pleases its occupant. “I never feel cramped,” he says.

In a small house, Herrmann notes, the “intimacy of spaces requires a level of finish that has to stand up to close scrutiny.” The materials palette was kept light and simple. The walls are painted drywall, while the windows, framed in wood with periph-



eral shadow lines, constitute the only embellishment. Custom kitchen cabinets are white, the countertop white concrete, and the storage cabinets birch plywood. Typical of the attention to detail throughout, local maple, cut in short lengths and laid perpendicular to the view, gives the floor a waterlike texture. The only bursts of color are the yellow door and a red lampshade over the table.

With a 12-foot ceiling at one end, and each wall offering an individual composition of windows and views, this does not feel like a one-room house. Move the table and the daybed, and there is enough room to square-dance. It is a misnomer to label this a micro house; rather, it is a distinctive and substantial dwelling that happens to be small.

THE EYE IS drawn to the mountain framed by the picture window (ABOVE), but a subtler note is the tokonoma to the left, a built-in recessed shrine, which the Japanese typically install in an entrance hall to display prized aesthetic objects. At night, the small but multifaceted house glows from within (FACING PAGE), creating a sculptural composition.

Given its size, affordability, and possible template for similar houses, it is a laudable design exercise in social responsibility. As Vermont Public Radio commentator Don Kreis opined on-air, "Only the wealthiest among us can afford an architect-designed house," but, he added, Elizabeth Herrmann's jewel of a house "is a distinctly Vermont rebuttal to that notion." 🏠

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The client had a definite idea about what his new house in the country would look like. In the spirit of the frugal Vermont farmer, the painter/musician wanted something that evoked a 19th-century farmhouse, perhaps with peaked dormers and some gingerbread ornament. He also chose his builder first and then looked for an architect, interviewing five possible designers. What should have been a practical decision became an emotional one: Going with architect Elizabeth Herrmann "felt right," he says.

For the caring and responsible architect, a small house can take as much time and effort as a bigger — and better-paying — commission, and Herrmann's work increased as she struggled to stay within the budget. At

the end, she had spent two years designing and building this 430-square-foot house, yet, she says, "everything went well" through the entire process.

Her primary task was to convince her client that his farmhouse vision would be too costly, and that a no-frills Modern style made the most sense. When the client agreed, the builder lost interest. Christopher North, the new contractor, likes contemporary and was intrigued by the challenges of the wee building. He and his crew at Northern Timbers Construction of East Middlebury, Vermont, developed a sense of ownership and pride in the project. While left unstated, it was clear the workers identified with someone who, like them, was not wealthy.