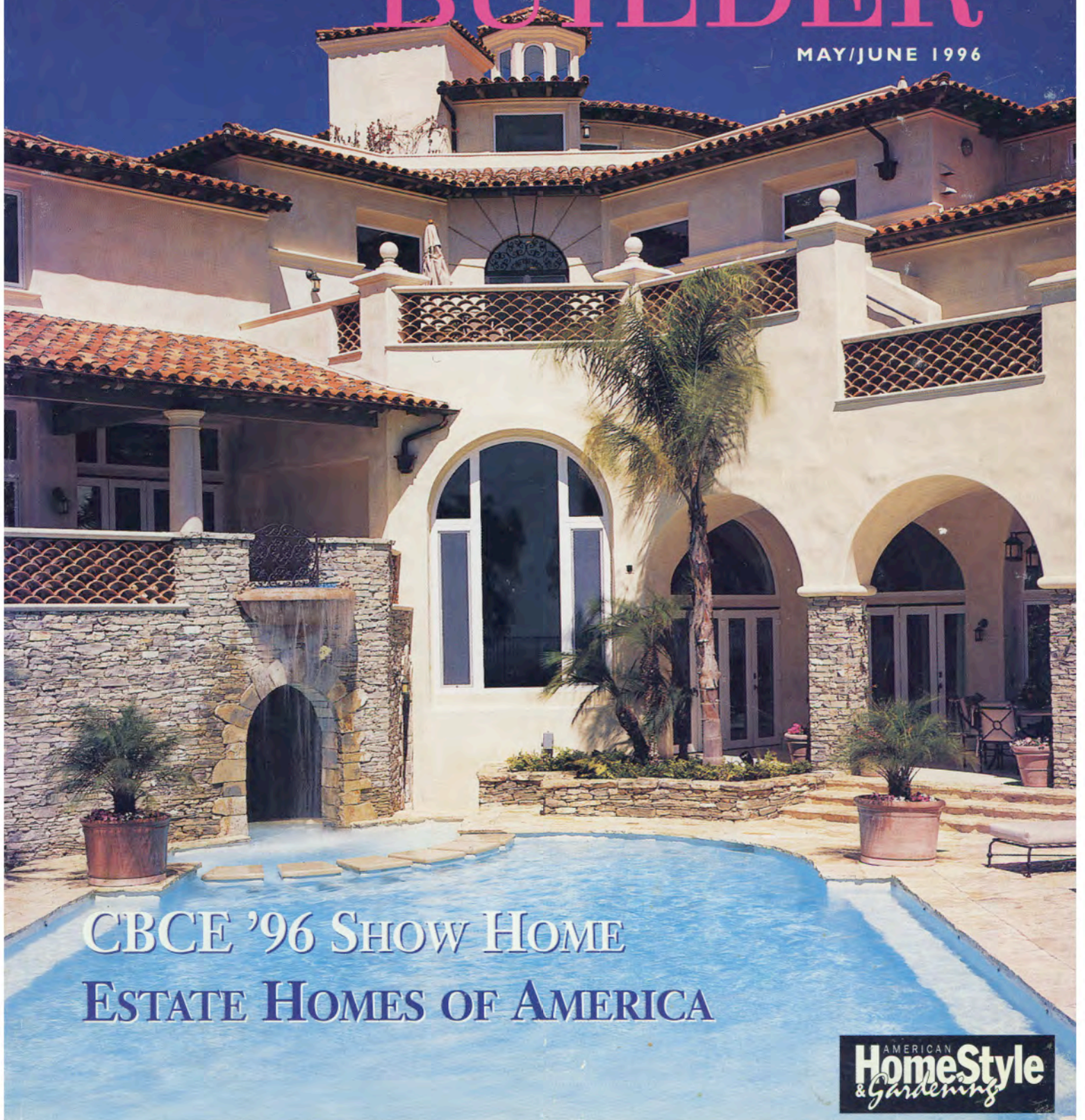


THE BUSINESS MAGAZINE FOR BUILDERS OF PREMIER HOMES

# Custom BUILDER

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CBCCE '96 SHOW HOME  
ESTATE HOMES OF AMERICA

AMERICAN  
**HomeStyle**  
& Gardening

# Two-Part

This screened-in sun porch, with its knotty pine floor and ceiling, has the same simple, user-friendly trim and detailing as the house proper. The owners requested cedar shingles for the interior walls, to reflect the island's traditional architecture.



# Harmony



*The shell of this vacation home on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, came ready-made—customized by four clients with a shared dream of summer living*

*by Matthew Power*

**I**f you don't count shipping, there's nothing especially unusual about building a customized, factory-engineered Deck House on Martha's Vineyard. But for the builder, this island project offered the kind of human dynamics that give Woody Allen movies their odd, dis-comforting appeal. Two couples. Four clients. One house.

"They are good friends and have been good friends for a long time," explains builder Michael Renahan. "They shared rental property on the island for a few years and decided that rather than pay the extremely high rents we get here, they would build something. They bought a piece of land, waited a couple of years, then decided to build on it."

The two couples—the Cohen family from New York City, and the Power family from Massachusetts—chose a prefabricated Deck House system (see sidebar on Page 48) early in the process. The clients wanted a "no-nonsense" home that they could use as rental property for part of the year, then move in without having to worry about serious repairs or maintenance. They had seen other Deck House vacation homes on the Vineyard, and the system's clean, open architecture with accents of wood met their two-family, dual-duty expectations.

When the couples first contacted Deck House, Ed Fanning, an in-house designer at the company, showed them some predrawn plans. They borrowed a few details and added their own requirements. After a few weeks, a floor plan evolved. But getting there required a few early compromises, like burying half of the house in the slope of a hill.

"In the town of Chilmark," Renahan explains, "You can't build anything over 24 ft. high. So you have to have a reasonable, low-pitched roof. The 24 ft. is from average mean grade, so if you're doing something fairly lofty, you try to put it on the hillside, to gain the extra four feet from main grade."

Deck House recommended Renahan, one of their approved builders, to the clients. He now works exclusively with Deck House envelopes for all of his projects. Most packages include all necessary walls, windows



ALL PHOTOS: RICK SCANLAN

The open, functional kitchen space, below and opposite, underwent a major design change during construction when an architect-friend of the clients suggested removing the dropped ceiling and adding a "bridge" to hold track lighting above the island. The owners ordered the fireplace mantel and custom tile surround (facing page, below) on their own, and the builder simply nailed the mantel in place when it arrived.



and doors, but Renahan increases his bottom line by using his own vendors and subcontractors for roofing, interior finishing and foundations—items not specified in many Deck House packages. He and the clients later select cabinetry, appliances and other special features such as the custom mantelpiece in this Vineyard home.

Renahan's involvement, however, begins only after Deck House and the clients arrive at a complete set of plans. They then sign a separate contract with him to execute the construction. Clients always have the option of hiring an outside builder, but most prefer to work with an approved builder.

In this case, both sets of clients came to the table with a strong, mutual concept about the home's theme. Rather than building an "upside-down house," they put the two master bedrooms on the second floor, leaving the shared living room, kitchen and children's bedrooms on the lower level. Because of the slope of the hill, the family room actually lies half below grade, so it stays cooler in the summer months when the Cohen and Power families spend the most time in occupancy.

The families agreed to rent the home during the off season, a decision that helped simplify many tough decisions. "Things had to be more durable," Margo Cohen explains. "It's a very uncomplicated house. We didn't have too many choices. We tried to keep the price down, so we chose things that were within certain allowances."

Compared with stick framing, says Renahan, Deck House kits enable him to take on larger projects with a much smaller crew. At key points, he hires a half-dozen carpenters and drywallers from Serpa Construction, a

small subcontractor from nearby Edgartown. "It takes much less time to complete the shell," he notes. "I'd say I'm saving as much as 50 percent on labor."

"Anytime I need another component, Deck House will get it to me quickly," the builder adds. "Plus I have my own shipper at the factory, who's specifically assigned to me."

Rough-in went smoothly, with clients dropping in occasionally to check on progress. As the couples began to apportion private space, however, the families' varying preferences surfaced.

"Everybody has a different view after the frame is up," says Renahan. "We did a lot of heavy changes in the bathroom areas, only because both bathrooms were designed to be the same. But when they got into the bath that they



decided was going to be their side of the house, things had to change. Mrs. Cohen wanted to have a whirlpool tub. Mrs. Power didn't really care about having a whirlpool tub. She went with a tile shower, and the Cohens went with a small tile shower and a whirlpool."

Some other major changes took place in the kitchen, where the original plan called for a pantry and door to the outside (next to the stairs), and a lowered, flat ceiling. "It just didn't work," Renahan notes. "We all thought we should keep some continuity with that open space. The Cohens had an architect friend from New York, Hugh Weisman. He walked around while we were framing and suggested taking out the ceiling and putting in that light bridge. On the back side of that is all downlighting. That one modification just totally changed the look of that room."

Other changes involved the configuration of the home's windows and the type of siding. "We really worked at dividing the big, long casement windows," says client Elizabeth Power. "We definitely wanted it to look more like a cape. Also, we wanted more of a

## Pre-Manufactured Deck House Pushes the Custom Envelope

“This is a very skeletal house by nature,” explains designer Edmund Fanning, of Deck House, Inc., “so the materials we use have to be the best available. Otherwise they’ll look like garbage, and so will our houses.”

Fanning, who lives in a Deck House of his own, cites quality control as the primary advantage this premanufactured system has over typical stick framing. The company manufactures all structural components—including custom mahogany-framed windows—at one central plant in Acton, Massachusetts, then ships complete home packages all over the United States and the world.

“We are a manufacturer and architect combined,” Fanning asserts. “We produce a post-and-beam, panelized, pre-cut contemporary home. It can take on a lot of different exterior appearances, but by virtue of the post-and-beam system, we’re able to create wonderful, open interiors with flowing floor plans.”

Deck House handles much of the front end of a building project. The company typically makes the first contact with clients, who then meet with staff architects. In many cases, the clients simply look through Deck House’s numerous stock designs, and then plug elements from one plan into another to arrive at their final plan. In this case, however, the clients chose a fully custom layout, which Fanning developed with them prior to contacting the builder.

After the company is paid in full, they usually have all components ready to ship “before the builder is ready for them,” says Fanning, often within four weeks. The company manufactures all doors, windows, storm doors and wall components at the Massachusetts plant, and will supply other building materials such as insulation and roofing if requested, although many builders prefer to order directly from their own distributors.

Construction costs for a Deck House structure compete with standard stick framing, but both Fanning and builder Michael Renahan assert that the quality of Deck House materials puts the home’s “finish” on a higher plateau. Ongoing communication with the plant during every project makes almost-immediate manufacture of new windows, doors or other components possible if the clients want changes mid-job, although any materials not listed in the original contract carry an extra cost.


The home’s 2x4 walls may raise a few eyebrows among builders who normally frame with 2x6. Fanning insists that the construction details compensate for lower R-values by making envelopes exceptionally tight, “because of the way Sheetrock and siding overlap the windows and doors.” All window frames also include a gasket that compresses against the rough opening.

Deck House designers often try to orient the home to take advantage of solar gain. The post-and-beam structure allows for wide expanses of glass, enough to illuminate the entire home. And if clients don’t like the look (or environmental ramifications) of using the company’s mahogany windows, Deck House offers the option of using Pella wood windows.


For custom builders, working with Deck House ultimately means sharing some of the responsibility and creative input on a new home. But the loss of control on the creative end may be more than compensated by the level of assistance and speedy response possible when working with a highly efficient manufacturer. Knowing that someone else will take care of marketing and literally bring clients to the doorstep makes it easier to devote full attention to detailing the project at hand.

“We try to do 1½ houses a year, only so that we can pay attention to details,” Renahan says. “We take our time so that the client gets a custom home just the way they want it.” ■

For more information on Deck House, Circle No. 056.



With its post-and-beam wall system, Deck House allows builders to install long, uninterrupted spans of glass—ideal for serious entertaining—in larger, more modern homes such as this clean, contemporary example with soaring window wall and signature wood-clad ceiling.



Rather than dividing the home into “boxes,” the clients liked the concept of exposed cathedral-style ceilings combined with 8-ft. walls. The partial walls also form natural storage areas.



shingle look. We worked hard to avoid a huge combination of woods in the house. We did maple cabinets and maple flooring.”

Renahan poured a full foundation, part of which became the living room, the rest for storage. Like other vacation homes in the area, the home has no garage. “You have to consider where we are,” he says. “People are here mostly in the summertime. They think they don’t need a garage. They don’t leave cars here. Then, after a short time, people accumulate the grill, the bicycles, the small boat—all this stuff they have to store. A basement is almost a necessity here, either that or a garage.”

Vacation homes, of course, represent a more tenuous personal investment than a full-time home, a fact that likely contributed to the successful merger of these personalities. When they grow tired of each other, the families can drive away (provided the ferry is running).

“Amazingly enough, it really wasn’t bad,” the builder says. “Both clients do interior design, so they were informed. There weren’t a lot of changes, and the major ones were definitely for the better. The designer’s got the tough job. He’s working for two families, trying to make everybody feel equal. We did three-way phone calls, that kind of stuff. But it really wasn’t bad at all.” ■