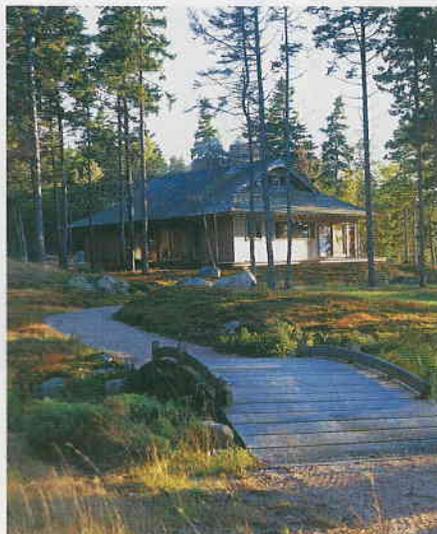


Furnishing a Whole House

Sometimes no theme
is the best theme of all

BY JOE TRACY



there is one ferry a week out to the little island off the mid-Maine coast. Miss it, and you have to catch a ride with a lobsterman, or pilot your own boat. It is nearly an hour's trip each way, and when the weather is iffy, as it frequently is, you'd do better to delay your crossing. Aside from being remote and often inaccessible, the island is practically unpopulated. Several miles across, it has barely four dozen year-round residents. Its low hills are ringed with a rocky granite shoreline and covered with small, craggy birches and conifers coated with lichen and moss. All year long the island is buffeted by the spray and the weather like a sailboat out to sea. What would lead someone to build a house here? All these things. And a desire to make a place where, when you finally get there, you have a profound sense of arrival.

One man's urge to build such a place and to fill it with furniture that would deepen the sense that you had arrived in a special place led to the commission of my career. This island house was the first time I got to do what I've always wanted: to make furniture for one person over a long period of time, getting better and better at anticipating what they wanted and delivering it. By the end of this job—a total of four man-years of labor between me and my assistant, Todd Ewing—I had filled the house with furniture and developed the feeling that I could make anything that my client could imagine.

SUITE APPROACH LEAVES A SOUR TASTE

There is no driveway leading to the house. You park up on the road, and walk several hundred yards down a pea-gravel path that winds through the undisturbed woods to the house. As you approach the house the surf you've been hearing appears through the trees. As a furniture maker, how do you design pieces that can compete with that experience, with the wild blend of nature's creation? You'd be a little crazy to try. But I took some cues from the natural order—or disorder—of things as I designed the pieces for this house.

Most importantly, I had no overarching stylistic plan. I specifically avoided designing everything so that it would look unified. Just as various species of plants differ widely

No identical twins. Just a loose family resemblance prevails in the furniture Joe Tracy designed for this summer house in Maine. He resisted the temptation to tie everything together with explicit stylistic links.

The only bridge is on the island. It is a long boat ride from the mainland, but Tracy's Western red cedar footbridge (above left) welcomes you once you've arrived.

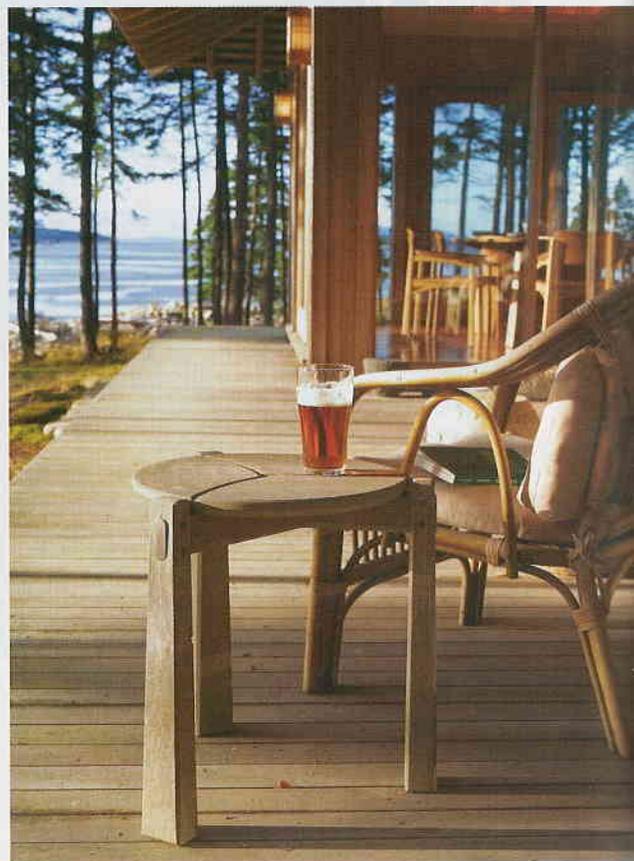




Dining in the woods. The natural surroundings influenced Tracy's table and chair designs (above), all of which have legs that widen at the bottom like the trunk of a tree. For a client with an eye for Japanese design, Tracy made outdoor end tables (below right) whose tops were inspired by the Japanese *mon*, a stylized family crest.

but grow together, I let various pieces of furniture differ from each other. Each piece I designed for the house is shaped by its own location and function, not by the way the other pieces look. As much as I admire Frank Lloyd Wright and the brothers Charles and Henry Greene for the way they designed total environments, I think it can be a fatal mistake when you are doing a whole interior to design pieces that look too much alike.

Which is not to say that I went in for crazy contrasts. I used a limited palette of materials—mostly bubinga and mahogany—and drew inspiration for all the pieces (though not too literally) from my informal study of Japanese design and from the natural surroundings—the lichen-covered trees, the crashing ocean, the large surf-smoothed granite rocks on the beach. Aside from these common threads, however, I didn't do anything special to tie the different pieces together. If there is a unity in the work, I suppose it came from my client and his decision to have one craftsman take the project from start to finish.



BIRCH BARK CALLING CARD

The house was halfway built when I first heard of it. The owner called after seeing some folding screens with birch bark panels I'd made for a restaurant. He asked me to make some wall coverings of birch bark for his new house. At that point there was no talk of any other work; he didn't even know that I was a furniture maker.

I built the wall coverings using birch bark I bought from a Native American canoe maker on a reservation north of Ottawa; when he found bark that wouldn't work for his canoes, he sent it down to me. I might have simply papered the walls with the bark, but I discovered that it was far too challenging topographically to be attached with any adhesive that relied on surface contact. So I tacked the bark sheets onto plywood backers and made a framework of mahogany strips to overlie the bark.

It was only after I'd been on the job a few weeks and the owner had been to visit my shop that he broached the subject of my designing some sofas for the living room. Then, after the sofas were delivered, he wondered about a coffee table and perhaps a dining table and chairs. This is the way the job proceeded. A piece at a time.

FURNITURE FIXED TO THE HOUSE

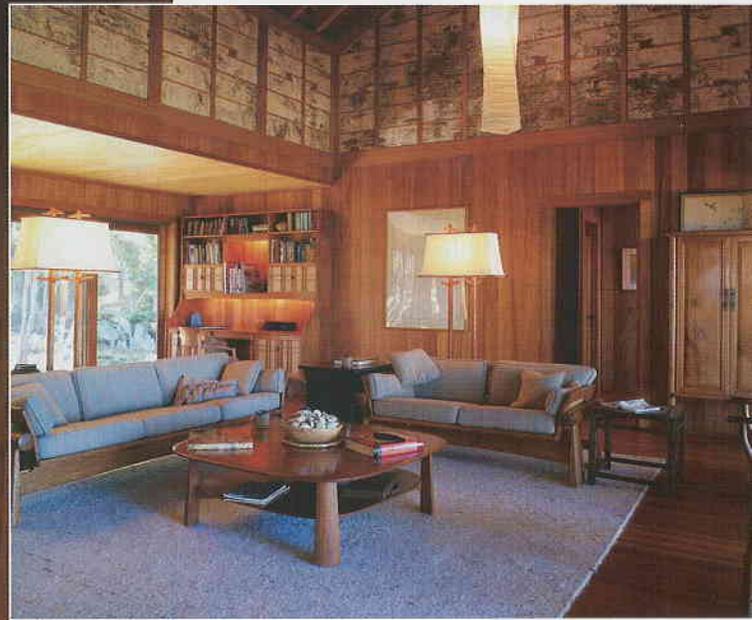
I designed a lot of work for the house that fell in the gray zone between carpentry and furniture making. The main structure of the house was made by others, but that left me everything inside: the furniture, but also interior doors, cabinets, closets, lofts.

For the passage doorways, I designed mahogany frame-and-panel doors with pegged joints and ebony handles. Such heavy doors give a feeling of security and privacy when you close them. However, for the closets I made very light sliding doors, with thin mahogany frames and shoji paper panels. I thought the shoji paper doors would make an interesting close com-

Sliding privacy. Translucent shoji-style sliding screens cover the glass doors that lead from the bathroom to the porch (right). The center drawers below the unusually high sink are false, hiding a hinged step-stool that swings down for underage toothbrushers.

Divided lights. The pattern of dark dividers on a light background established in Tracy's birch bark wall coverings is developed further in the sliding shoji closet doors and bedside lamps and even in the individually tilting caned headboards (below).





Working vacation. Paper-paneled pocket doors retract to create a knee space and turn this living room cabinet into a desk (left). Tracy hung the piece from the wall to keep it from dominating the room. In the photo above, the Chinese furniture is antique.

plement to the birch bark wall panels. And because all the walls had been paneled with mahogany by the builder, I was looking for ways to introduce more light-reflective colors to brighten the rooms.

To make the moderate-sized rooms seem larger, I built furniture in when I could. My client knew he would want to work at this house, but would also want the evidence of work to disappear when he was finished. So I built the piece in the photo above, a cross between a desk, a hutch and a bookcase. I attached it to the wall to make it seem less imposing. And I used pocket doors with shoji paper panels to

cover the knee space at the center as well as the cabinets on either side where work materials and a stereo system are stored.

GETTING LIGHT FROM A STONE

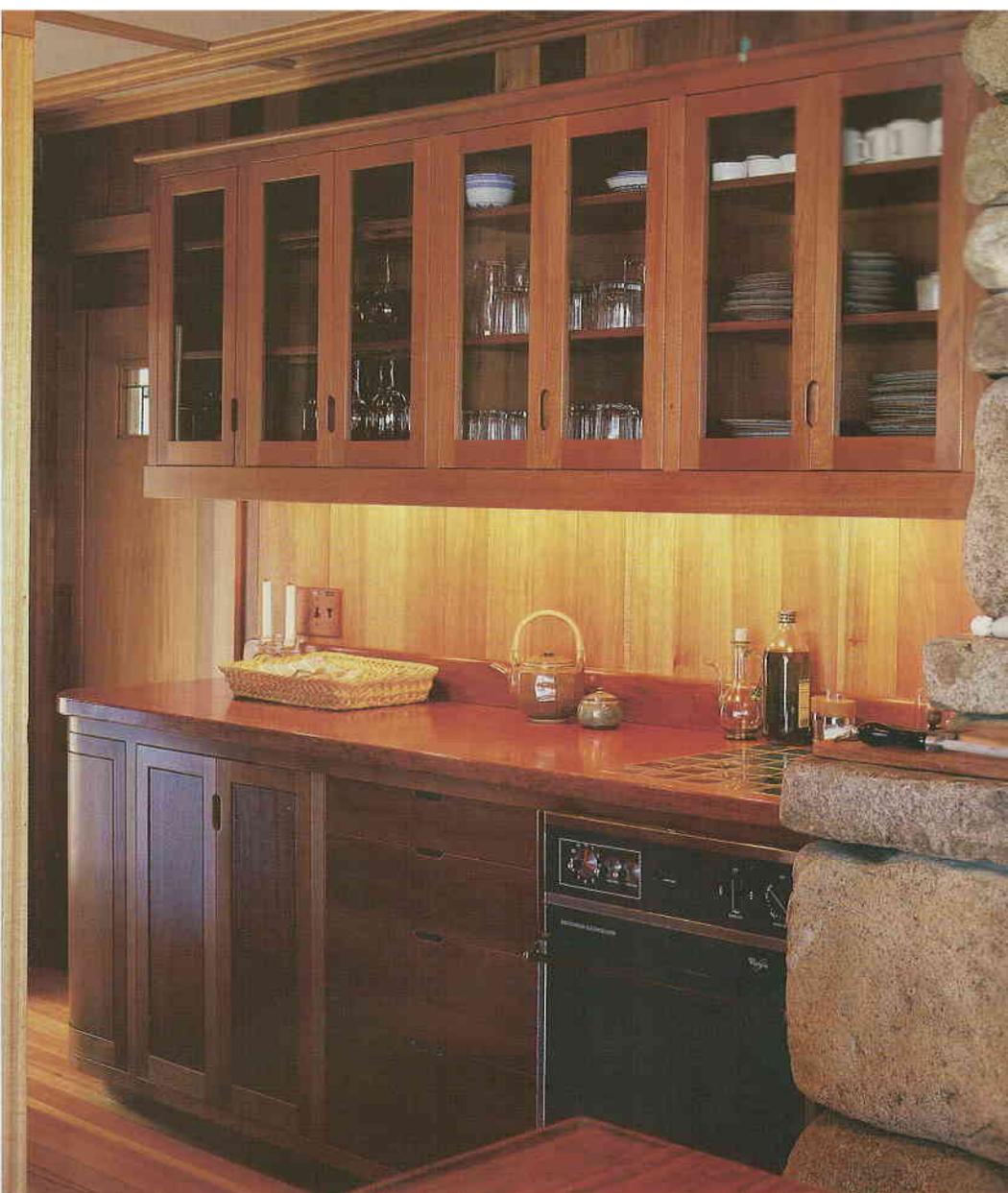
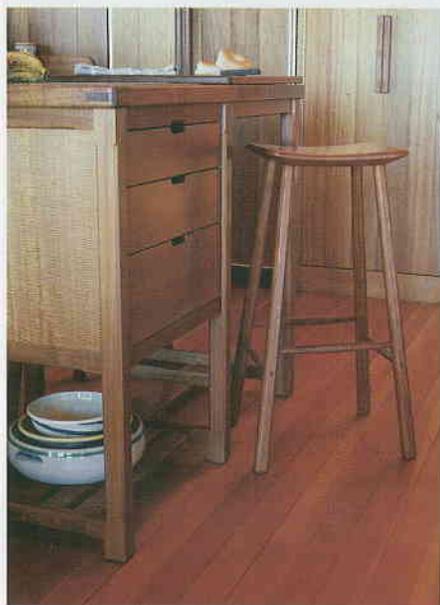
The bubinga standing lamps I designed for the living room (see photo on p. 53) were not only inspired by the island, but they also contain pieces of it. In several of the island's ocean-facing coves I had come across unique egg-shaped granite stones formed by wave action during the frequent winter storms. Seduced by their smoothness and serenity, I gathered several. With their weight, their origin and their

perfect elliptical form, these stones spoke to me powerfully, almost mystically; they demanded respect. I thought of using some in floor lamps, but how could I manage to do that without trivializing them? It was clear that they had to have a function, to be an integral part of the lamps, not an accessory or a gimmick.

I decided to place the stones at the bottom, where heavy things feel most at peace and where they would best stabilize the lamps. The stones rest in a hollowed-out portion of the lower crosspiece. They are clamped at the top firmly by a sliding upper crosspiece and wedges. This arrangement permits

"There you are!" Glass-paneled doors make the dishes easy to locate in a house used only seasonally. In deference to the kitchen's massive stone hearth, Tracy designed simple cabinets.

Island on an island. Sit here and you can gaze out at the ocean. But Tracy's elegant stools and movable kitchen island (below) were designed for function, to provide the cook with a place to prepare food while sitting down.



easy removal for moving or shipping. I hope it also does the rocks justice.

FURNISHING THE OUTDOORS

I designed a number of outdoor pieces for the house, beginning with tables for the porch and the garden and ending with two footbridges. For the footbridges I used Western red cedar and left it unfinished. Over time, it has taken on a beautiful silvery color. The most ambitious outdoor piece was the long bridge (see photo on p. 52). I had never built a bridge before. After poring over numerous books on Japanese footbridges, and armed with a seat-of-the-pants sense of engineering, I built

a 24-foot laminated red cedar bridge that is both light and strong. By tying together the railing and the arch below the planking, I created a sort of truss that delivered excellent stiffness with a modest amount of material.

WHOSE HOUSE IS IT, ANYWAY?

For another designer, a museum show might be the ultimate commission—a chance to make a range of pieces with no constraints. But for me, furniture making is about pleasing a client. I aim to make people comfortable, and regardless of how much I may like the way a particular piece comes out, I'm not happy with a job until my cus-

tomers is. I feel that designing to suit yourself and designing to satisfy someone else are two distinct disciplines.

To succeed at designing to satisfy someone else, time is of the essence. A lot of time. The longer the relationship, the better you get at making furniture that pleases you both. So I much prefer to build a number of pieces for a single customer rather than single pieces for a range of customers. With many of my clients, that is the way it develops over the years: one commission flowers into many. The island house was a wonderful example of this. You may not get spread as broad this way, but the depth more than makes up for it. ■