



Susan Heilbron and Andy Goldman designed their new home to accommodate "aging in place."

Andy Goldman and Susan Heilbron design a home for forever.  
BY LAURA D. ROOSEVELT

# The Final House

When you're, say, 30something, and you're designing and building your first house, you might think about whether each child gets his or her own bedroom, and whether the basement might be turned into a rec room. When you're 70something and building your last house, your design decisions are of a different nature.

Andy Goldman and Susan Heilbron were 72 and 62, respectively, when they began work on what they consider their final house, a three-story structure on the Menemsha Inn road in Chilmark. Their ages, and the fact that Ms. Heilbron has multiple sclerosis, led the couple to work closely with their builders (John Abrams' South Mountain Co.) to design a dwelling that would accommodate potential wheelchair use and otherwise meet their needs for the rest of their lives — a home that would allow for what has become known as "aging in place."

"I said to John Abrams, 'I'll bet I'm the oldest guy for whom you've ever started building a brand-new house,'" says Mr. Goldman. At the time, Mr. Abrams acknowledged that this might well be true, but in the six years since the house was completed, South Mountain has expanded its expertise in the field of aging-in-place

dwelling; consequently, they have attracted more clients who, in retirement, are interested in building aging-friendly houses that might obviate the need to move out of one's home and into a community for the elderly.

Mr. Goldman and Ms. Heilbron have lived year-round on the Vineyard for 20 years, but they began coming here together in the summertime more than 30 years ago. "We got married 29 years ago on May 1st, and in June, we purchased our first Vineyard house," says Mr. Goldman. But Mr. Goldman's history with the Island goes back to 1941, when he began summering here with his mother, grandmother, and aunt. (In 1950, his aunt and uncle, Theresa and Warren Morse, bought a piece of property in Menemsha and opened the Beach Plum Inn.)

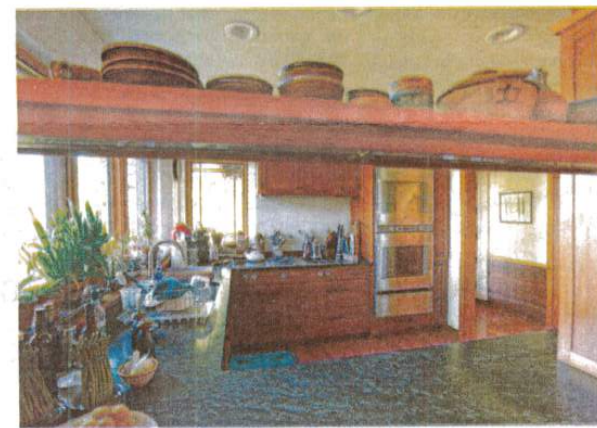
While the couple always knew that they would retire to the Vineyard, actually getting here full-time happened in stages. At 55, Mr. Goldman retired from the State of New York, where he had worked in economic development, most recently as executive vice president for the state's Mortgage Agency. For several years, he was on the Vineyard year-round, while Ms. Heilbron, who, like her husband, trained as a lawyer and spent some of her career working in government, commuted here on weekends. From time to time, poor weather would cause her plane to land in Hyannis or Nantucket. "I might as

well have been in France!" she quips. But on good days, the trip would require only a couple of hours. Even so, it always took her some time to let go of the city and relax.

"Andy would pick me up at the airport," she says, "and we'd come home to our house on Stonewall Pond, maybe walk down to the water for a swim, have a drink, and after a couple of hours I'd finally relax. Whereas Andy was SO relaxed ... that was when it became clear to me that someone was doing it right, and someone wasn't." For a while she tried living here and commuting to New York for meetings. "But that didn't really work, either; so at the end of the day, I stopped working and joined Andy."

The couple's house on Stonewall Pond was "a miracle," but after a while they realized that it was not going to work for them long-term. It was costly to maintain, and for that reason, they had to lease it out in the summertime, renting a smaller place for themselves in Aquinnah. Moreover, the property

Below: Carved rafters are signature South Mountain features. Much of the materials were recycled from other sites. Middle: All the furniture in the living room features lumbar support. Bottom: The kitchen appliances are also aimed at ease of use. The dishwasher, for instance, features two side by side drawers at thigh level.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL CUMMO

was eroding: when the couple purchased it, it was five acres; by the time they sold it 20 years later, it was 4.7. "When you have multiple sclerosis," says Ms. Heilbron, "tension is very bad for you. And living on the water and watching your property erode is tension-producing."

Consequently, the Stonewall property was sold, and Mr. Goldman and Ms. Heilbron purchased the Menemsha Inn Road property in 2007 from the estate of Pulitzer Prizewinning biographer Joseph P. Lash and his wife, Trude, who was a grand dame of the old guard Chilmark summer community. The shack where Mr. Lash wrote (now a potting



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shed) still stands on the property, but the main house was torn down. “Originally,” says Mr. Goldman, “we hoped to incorporate the old house into our plan, but it proved impractical and too expensive.” They did, however, use some materials from the old house; the current house’s deck, for example, is made from its predecessor’s deck. The use of recycled materials in new construction is one of South Mountain’s trademarks.

The couple chose South Mountain for an array of reasons. First, one of the company’s employees, Peter D’Angelo, had done some moonlighting at the Stonewall house, and they liked him and his work. “He was very meticulous,” says Ms. Heilbron. “And that’s who you want building your house. A company of Pete-like people sounded perfect!”

In addition, the couple liked the idea of using a design-and-build company with a long history and a good reputation. And they valued the company’s ethics. “We liked the fact that John Abrams was involved in affordable housing, was environmentally conscious, and had an employee-owned company,” says Mr. Goldman, “all of that as well as being a high-end builder.”

Mr. Abrams and his staff took the couple to see several properties where they had built previously. “Through conversations about our needs, and by observing what we admired about his other projects, he got a good sense of what we wanted,” says Mr. Goldman. The two owners expressed an appreciation for the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, the Arts and Crafts architecture of designers like Greene & Greene, and Japanese architectural forms. They were explicit about coming from a “less is more” mentality; they did not want a big house, but rather one that would use space wisely and compactly. They also reiterated their need for the house to be designed for single-floor, age-in-place living, and they

were in sync with South Mountain’s preference for building (largely with recycled materials) a structure that would minimize fossil fuel use and produce a portion of its energy on-site. When Ryan Bushey, an architect with South Mountain, presented the couple with a sketch of the proposed house — 2,900 square feet plus a finished basement — their response was “Eureka! That’s it!” The house is now named “Eureka.”

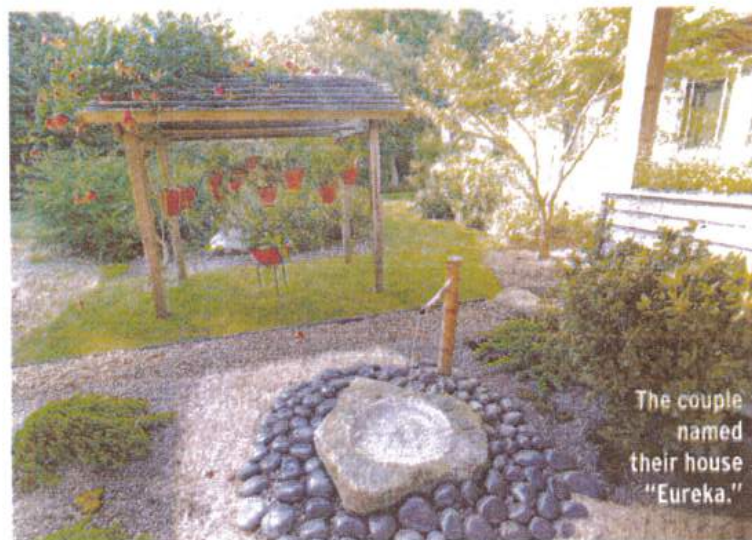
During construction, the owners were onsite daily. A brochure developed by South Mountain for an open house event states:

“They know not only every nook and cranny of the house, but every wrinkle in the process.” Mr. Bushey notes that “they were great at understanding boundaries. They didn’t micro-manage. They were super curious and engaged, but not meddling or distracting.” Indeed, their deep involvement in the project may have saved time and money by preventing change orders. Early on, for example, Ms. Heilbron realized that, as initially framed, the master bathroom’s shower stall window (which, like much of the house, overlooks a stunning view of Menemsha Harbor and the sea beyond it) was going to be too high for her. The builders were able to correct this early in the process, rather than after the window had already gone in.

Walking through the house, one notes that all of the major action takes place on the main floor. This is where the master bedroom and bath, the living room, the kitchen, the laundry room, the coat closets, the office, and the screen porch are all situated. Upstairs is guest space, but not directly over the master bedroom, so that “I don’t hear pitter-

patter when the grandchildren are here,” says Ms. Heilbron. The finished basement houses an exercise room currently used regularly by both owners.

All of the house’s passageways are wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair, and there are no lips in doorways to complicate wheelchair maneuverability. The door handles are levers rather than knobs, for easier gripping by hands that might become arthritic. Ms. Heilbron has a dicey back, and all of the furniture and appliances have been selected with a view to comfort and minimal



The couple named their house “Eureka.”

of teak rather than metal. “There’s no reason why grab bars have to look like the hospital,” notes Ms. Heilbron.

There is a great deal of wood in the house — in the post-and-beam timbers, the floors, the trim, the built-in shelving and furniture. All of it — except for two beams in the living room — is recycled. The owners have a map of all the wood in every room in the house, telling the provenance of each piece. The Douglas fir posts and beams came from torn-down factories in Minnesota. The floors are hard pine, also reclaimed from factories.

The trim is cypress from sunken logs. The wainscoting is redwood from vats used to age juices in California. The two rogue beams are made of new birch — a necessary extravagance: These are taiko beams, a Japanese construction technique that calls for lighter wood.

In terms of energy efficiency, the house has 12 inches of insulation all around it, it passes blower tests (for air tightness) with flying colors, and in cold weather, the windows are as warm as the walls. Forty-five percent of the house’s electricity is provided by solar panels on top of the garage. Unlike many hot water heaters, the

one in this house is not on full-time, keeping water perpetually hot; with this one, you have to wait two minutes when you turn on the hot water for the water to heat up. “We’re retired,” says Ms. Heilbron. “Where am I going that I can’t wait two minutes?”

One thing the house doesn’t have is a fireplace. “I’ve had fireplaces before,” says Mr. Goldman, “and I didn’t think it was fun. Plus, all your heat goes up the chimney.” But aren’t fireplaces romantic, one might ask? Ms. Heilbron responds: “We have lots of romance already.” TL

bending over. The two Gaggenau oven doors, for example, open sideways rather than top to bottom. (“So much easier to get at what’s inside!” says Ms. Heilbron.) The Fisher & Paykel dishwasher, rather than being one unit with top and bottom shelves, is two side-by-side drawers at thigh level. In the living room, all the seating is made by Ekornes, and it is all adjustable for maximum lumbar support — even the sofa. And everything (appliances as well as the furniture) is attractive — simple, clean-lined, contemporary. Even the grab bars in the shower are handsome, made

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