



The Rossi family enjoys gathering on the front porch of Dan and Jane's new home. — *Jeanna Shepard*

## 800-Square-Foot Homes Prove How Livable Small Can Be

By Susie Middleton Thursday, July 27, 2017 - 2:15pm

On the Vineyard, builders and design/build teams are working to perfect efficient and attractive small house designs. Much of their work comes in response to homeowners looking for a secondary dwelling that can house aging parents or newly married children with young families, or that can function as an affordable rental for a year-round Islander.

With changes in zoning regulations in West Tisbury and Chilmark in recent years, detached, secondary dwellings built specifically to house family members or caregivers, or to function as affordable year-round rentals, are permissible if they meet town criteria and gain the required permits.

We took a look at three new houses that show how livable 800 square feet can be, thanks to some imagination, good design work, and quality materials. At costs ranging from around \$270,000 to \$320,000, these small houses are certainly not inexpensive, but for landowners who are willing and able to utilize their property to increase the stock of year-round housing, they offer real potential.

### **A Squash Meadow Modular Design for Chief Dan Rossi**

Matt Gongola, a project manager for Squash Meadow Construction, was overseeing a project in a West Tisbury neighborhood when a tall stranger walked into the yard. “He introduced himself, and then said he was the chief of Police,” Gongola remembers with a laugh. “I wasn’t sure what he was there for!”



Squash Meadow Project Manager Matt Gongola — *Jeanna Shepard*

Turns out Dan Rossi was admiring the house his next door neighbors were building, and wanted to ask Gongola more about Squash Meadow.



Squash Meadow delivered and finished the Rossis' modular design in under

Chief Rossi and his wife Jane Rossi had recently made a big decision. Their son Ryan, who is in the Coast Guard, now at Station Menemsha, and his wife Ellen and toddler Sloane, needed year-round housing on the Island. Both Ryan and Ellen grew up on the Island and wanted to call it home. Chief Rossi and Jane came up with a plan to offer Ryan and Ellen their

three months. — *Jeanna Shepard*

house, thinking they would build a small secondary dwelling on their two-acre property and live there. (In West Tisbury, there is no minimum acreage for building a secondary dwelling, as long as setbacks are met and permits achieved. Maximum building size is 800 square feet.)

At first Ryan was skeptical. “He said, Mom, isn’t that going to be like ‘Everyone Loves Raymond?’” Jane remembers. They backed off the idea for a while until Ryan and Ellen came back to them and brought the idea up again.

By the time Chief Rossi met Matt Gongola, he had a design for a small house in mind and had talked to a friend about building it. But the timeline was uncertain and the Rossis wanted to get started.

Gongola wasn’t sure Squash Meadow would actually have a window in their busy schedule either, but he steered the Rossis to Bill Potter, head of Squash Meadow Construction. Squash Meadow is a full-service design-build company in Vineyard Haven that does both traditional stick-built (framed) construction as well as modular construction, partnering with Westchester Modular Homes of New York.

“I had never seen what could be done with upgraded modular construction, and I was impressed,” Dan Rossi said after an initial visit to the office.

Bill Potter showed the Rossis how the design process works. “We do all the work on state-of-the-art software called Chief Architect,” Bill explained. “We call it an integrated team approach where the client is an integral part of the team and participates in the design work. So we’re looking at a computer screen and we can see everything in 3D.”



The Rossis worked closely with Squash Meadow on the design of their 800-square-footer. — *Plan courtesy Squash Meadow Construction*

“We sat down with Dan and Jane in July,” Bill said.

“We set the house on September 21, and they were in December 2,” Matt added.

Because of the smaller size of this house (it arrived in two parts on a barge from New Bedford), the usual estimate of a three-month building time for modular construction turned out to be even shorter. The 800-square-foot, one-bedroom house came with the kitchen cabinets installed, but counters were finished on-site. Two porches, as well as an outdoor shower and housing to cover the basement entrance were also built onsite. Squash Meadow finished the exterior of the little house in a manner complementary to the main house.



The kitchen cabinets were pre-installed; the cherry countertops were added on site. — *Jeanna Shepard*

Dan and Jane Rossi, who met in Menemsha when they were 16 years old, couldn’t be happier with their new home. It’s light and airy and has a very spacious kitchen with beautiful cherry countertops. In addition to a full bath (and two nice-sized closets) off the bedroom, there is a half-bath (and stacked laundry) off the entryway, too. And they spend a lot of time on that screened porch.

“We had to downsize a lot, in terms of stuff,” Jane says. “But now that we’re in, we find we need nothing more.”

Judging by the way Dan Rossi twirls his granddaughter around in the front yard, and by the way Ellen casually wanders over with Sloane in the afternoon to sit on the steps with Jane, dogs romping everywhere, it appears that the happy conclusion to this story is nothing like “Everybody Loves Raymond.”

“We’re here to stay,” Jane says. “It’s our home.”

## **A Two-Bedroom Design with Renting in Mind**

Wife and husband design/build team Joan and Phil Hughes of Hughes Construction in Oak Bluffs have, to date, completed three 800-square-foot projects in Chilmark for three very different clients. The first one was strictly a guesthouse for a homeowner's grown son and his family, and it has gracefully housed four tall people (including two growing children) for many summers now. The second house was a fancier version of the first (but still 800 square feet), built for two doctors who spend 6 to 8 months of the year on the Vineyard.



Builder Phil Hughes and designer Joan Hughes. — Jeanna Shepard



Ariana Binney and her two children Zelda, 4, and Audrey, 2, are new year-round-renters. — Jeanna Shepard

But the third—the one the Hughes just finished in July—will be year-round housing for a young family of three and is the happy result of a confluence of circumstances. Chilmark homeowners Jim and Joan Malkin happened to see the first of the Hughes' 800-square-footers around the time they were considering constructing a small house on their own property, specifically with the goal of making it an affordable year-round rental for an Islander. Having watched young people struggle with housing on the Island, they felt their 3-acre property could accommodate something like this, and they were willing to build it with the idea of renting it at a rate commensurate with federal guidelines for affordable housing, and to find an income-qualified tenant through Dukes County Regional Housing Authority.

Simultaneously, Ariana Binney and her two small children, Zelda, 4, and Audrey, 2, were living with Ariana's parents, having done the Island shuffle nine times in four years. Ariana and her sister Kayla Allen-Posin run At Home in The Woods, a nature-based home-school cooperative in West Tisbury modeled on the Forest School. Despairing of ever finding an affordable year-round home for her young family, Ariana completed the paperwork to qualify for affordable housing through DCRHA and found herself on a short list for the Malkins' rental house.



The back deck provides a nice transition to the roomy yard. — Jeanna Shepard

The housing authority noted that she had moved frequently and therefore wanted solid references.



A gorgeous stainless steel sink helps to make the kitchen feel special. — Jeanna Shepard

"I went out and got just a ton of references, including from the parents involved with our school, and the community was just so supportive," Ariana said. "When I found out I got the rental, my mother cried!"

In addition to singing her new landlords' praises, Ariana says that she feels the house is perfect for the three of them. "I like living small, because I don't want my children to have an excess of material stuff. We have everything we need here,

and the house is just gorgeous."

Joan Hughes is very pleased with the little details she was able to introduce in this design to make the minimalist two-bedroom house feel lighter and live larger.

"I drive my husband crazy, but I'm big on windows. You need light for a house to feel airy," Joan says. "And I added window seats in both the living room and the master bedroom. They don't add to the square footage but they make the rooms feel bigger."

Pocket doors save space, and Joan tucked the laundry into the bathroom, rather than putting it in the basement, which is accessed from the outside. She raised the ceilings (also driving Phil crazy!) to make the living area feel especially roomy.



The design includes two bedrooms and still feels roomy. — Plan courtesy Joan Hughes



Plenty of light and a sleek wood-look vinyl floor make the living area bright and modern. — *Jeanna Shepard*

Joan wanted the kitchen to feel special, too. “I didn’t want it to feel like you were living on a boat.” To that end she found a particularly handsome (and large) stainless steel sink online and ordered it as a bit of a “splurge.”

One last decision—the vinyl flooring that looks like wood—really suits the handsome little house.

The house is so handsome, in fact, that Phil says, “All the trades want one.” Apparently every subcontractor who worked on the house asked Phil if he could build one for them.

“You don’t know how many people tell us they want one of these!” Joan says.

### Taking the M-Line with South Mountain

In 2009, a lovely woman named Madeline Blakely died on the Vineyard. Not long after, John Abrams, president of South Mountain Company, got a copy of Blakely’s will in the mail with a letter stating that she had left two modest sums (almost her entire savings) to South Mountain, who had built her a beloved little earth berm passive-solar house many years before. Her will stipulated that she wanted the money used to further affordable housing solutions and to do something for renewable energy.



This design is one of South Mountain’s prototype “M-Line” plans for small homes. — *Plan courtesy South Mountain Company*

“We were thinking about what we could do that would have maximum impact from those small amounts of money,” Abrams said. “And we hit on the idea of designing a prototype affordable, high-performance, able-to-be net zero, house with variations that we could make available to Islanders, for free.”

Architect Matt Coffey took on the design project, and the M-Line plans, named for Madeline, were born.

“When we started this, we didn’t necessarily know how far it was going to go,” Coffey said. “We thought we’d shoot for a one-bedroom version, a two-bedroom version, and maybe a three-bedroom option. But now we have 5 prototypes, and have completed 6 houses using these plans.



Architect Matt Coffey describes the specifics of net zero design in this house — *Jeanna Shepard*

The latest—and the smallest at 800 square feet—belongs to electrician Jarret Brisette, who asked South Mountain to build him both a new shop and a small house on his West Tisbury property. Brisette and his girlfriend Nancy Villarreal liked the idea of living in a small house since it is just the two of them, and Brisette felt it might be smart to build an 800 square-footer in case he ever wanted to build a bigger house or subdivide his property. The smaller house could then potentially become a rental for another Islander.



Electrician Jarret Brisette and his girlfriend Nancy Villarreal love the size of their new home. — *Jeanna Shepard*

Through his business, Brisette had worked on projects with South Mountain and was impressed by their quality and aesthetic.

“Working with South Mountain is pretty special,” Brisette said, looking around his new one-bedroom home. “The quality of the finishes—from the reclaimed wood (sinker cypress) to the custom-made screen doors to the granite kitchen countertops—are so beautiful.”

Brisette loves all the energy-efficient features, too.

“Our goal with this house was net zero design, so everything in the house is powered by electricity—no fossil fuels,” Coffey explained. Net zero design basically means that the solar electric system generates enough power to completely offset the home’s total utility usage.

South Mountain also specified triple-glazed windows and an extra layer of rigid foam insulation in addition to the insulation in the 2x6 framing. There is a fresh air recovery system that keeps fresh air constantly circulating through the house. And the house is designed to “age” well along with the owners, with doors wide enough for wheelchair access and other age-friendly features.

Brissette requested just a few changes to the basic M-Line plan—namely a deeper entry porch (for a few chairs) and a larger covered deck (for grilling and entertaining) on the side of the house. He also opted for an L-shaped kitchen that would open up a bit more space for the living/dining area. Brissette’s house has a large basement accessed from inside the house. Thanks to a large window, it is a light-filled space and great for storing gear. But without a second egress option, it is not considered living space, and therefore not part of the overall square footage of the house.



The roomy side porch is great for entertaining. A large window lets light into the basement. — *Jeanna Shepard*

Of all the wonderful features in his house, Brissette says that the outdoor shower just may be his favorite.

Not surprisingly, all three of the 800-square-footers have outdoor showers, which provide extra washing area for a small house. And well, you just have to have one on the Vineyard.

It’s clear that while 800-square-foot secondary dwellings can help families transition through life changes, they can also offer another benefit that’s appealing to many—a simpler lifestyle, less to care for, and a home with potentially less impact on the environment.



The L-shaped kitchen doubles as an eating area. — *Jeanna Shepard*