

# The Southampton Press

EASTERN EDITION

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THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 2013

ONE DOLLAR



A modern twist on the classic shingle style in East Hampton by Martin Architects.

PATRICK BERNARD

## Shingles Are Synonymous With The East End ... *But Why?*

### Architects explain the predominance of cedar shake

BY MICHELLE TRAURING

For architect Nick Martin, it is not uncommon for him to pluck his next generation of talent from England or Eastern Europe, he said.

But when the architects and draftsmen arrive at his Sagaponack-based firm, Martin Architects, and take a good look at the East End, they often come back to him puzzled.

"They'll say, 'Why is this? Is there a law that requires shingles?'" Mr. Martin chuckled during a recent telephone interview. "They don't quite understand it."

And there is no reason they should. The key element of the shingle-style house—now practically synonymous with the East End—is cedar, a tree species found primarily in Canada and the coastal Northwest that is not indigenous to the Hamptons. Yet, cedar shingles are permanently woven into the architectural fabric here.

A nostalgic building material with deep roots, the shingle is not going anywhere, Mr. Martin said. If anything, it is evolving, but still with a nod toward its history.

The earliest semblance of the shingle-style homes known today date back to Colonial America—such as the 1680 Mulford House in East Hampton—when there was white cedar and some red cedar available in the region, Mr. Martin reported.

"The Dutch and the British and the Scandinavian cultures that came over, they did what they knew with the available products," he said. "They just did very simple, colonial, one-third-to-weather shingle patterns. After that, we go to what we now know as the shingle style. That's really from 1880 to almost 1900. And that was the Americanization of the Queen Anne style."

By the turn of the 19th century, shingle style was in full swing, predominantly along the Eastern Seaboard, Mr. Martin said. Even architect Frank Lloyd Wright used shingle during the early part of his career, he said.

The East End soon began blossoming with the cedar shingle-style mansions it is known for today. Among them are the Seven Sisters houses in Montauk, built in the early 1880s for the real estate developer Arthur Benson, who once owned most of the hamlet. The seven separate homes were designed by renowned architects Charles McKim, William Mead and Stanford White, according to Erica Bröberg Smith, principal of Erica Bröberg Smith Architects in East Hampton.

"If you track the shingle style, the height is the Seven Sisters. They really are spectacular houses," she said during a recent telephone interview. "They carefully used the detail on the exterior, but then the interiors are spectacular. They look like 'Downton Abbey.' The surprise was on the inside."

As the economy boomed in the 1980s and the East End flourished even more as a summer destination, the McKim, Mead and White approach to the shingle-style home was rendered obsolete. Instead of staying modest on the outside, the new goal was to impress with the façade and its overly curved roofs, inappropriate windows and excessive adornments, Ms. Bröberg Smith said.

"The style got overused and over-interpreted. It was like somebody with bad plastic surgery," she said. "It's gone too far and it's warped. It's bastardized, basically. People wanted to inform other people to how much money they have. Everything that was available to buy was added. How about gates? How about fish-scale shingles? How about oval windows? How about a pagoda? That's why you see really tarted up, ugly houses that are marketed by real estate agencies as shingle style."

Today, the country's currently constricted economy has forced tightened spending, Ms. Bröberg Smith reported. As a result, smaller building budgets are producing simpler homes. The architect said she hopes it's a movement.

"I think we have a shot at recapturing the shingle style now, the true shingle style, which involves restraint," she said. "Design restraint. You have to edit what you're doing."

In 2008, Ms. Bröberg Smith was hired by



A home in North Haven by Martin Architects.

CATERINA VERDE

Amagansett residents Melissa and Graham Barnett for an extensive renovation and addition to their modest, shingle-style Cape Cod-style house. They wanted a beautiful summer home for their twin 6-year-old daughters to enjoy, the architect recalled.

That's what Ms. Bröberg Smith delivered, she said, and dropped off the plans to Mr. Barnett on a Sunday afternoon. She never heard back.

He had died, tragically and unexpectedly, just days later.

Ms. Barnett closed up the house and moved back to Manhattan. But almost one year later, on the anniversary of her husband's death, she called Ms. Bröberg Smith.

She was ready to get to work. But this time with just \$200,000.

"The house was falling down. There were holes in the roof. Raccoons got in the house. There was mold. It was a disaster," the architect said. "She needed a right and tight, little beach box that required no maintenance and still looked cool. She wanted it to be a happy and fun house for her girls. It was the most simple project I've ever done, which was a challenge."

Taking a lesson from McKim, Mead and White, she left the exterior as basic as possible—new windows, new roof and new shingle siding fitted with a grey door selected by

Ms. Barnett. Most of the budget was allocated for the interior. Ms. Bröberg Smith gutted the house, made simple architectural improvements and furnished with Ikea, she said.

"It was interesting to completely switch gears for the same family. It just shows you things happen and you have to be able to move forward," Ms. Bröberg Smith said. "And you may not be able to move forward in the same fashion. You've got to adapt. She adapted. We adapted the architecture, she adapted her life. It was an interesting project in that way. It's a life lesson."

Shingle-style cottages, such as the Barnett family's, will continue to thrive on the East End as long as wood is a sustainable product, Mr. Martin said, though the wave of the future is leaning toward hybrid buildings: mixing the old with the new, which include shingles made from steel, copper, slate and fibrous materials that patina, or change color as they weather, as wood does.

"There are ways we can get the same effect with materials that are much longer lasting," Mr. Martin said. "The idea is using the warmth and the versatility and the flexibility. As a modern architect, if you can blend some of this warm flavor into a modern, clean line, it's an adaptation of what we consider a historical style. We're trying to pay respect to some of the local tradition here."