



Sounds of Silence

A contemporary compound is—literally and figuratively—a quiet presence on its coastal Maine site.

BY NATHANIEL READE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRENT BELL



A lot is surprising about the house that JT Bullitt built in Steuben, Maine. Bullitt eats strawberries, huckleberries, and blueberries that grow on his roof. He installed a seismometer on the bedrock under his meditation room. Most surprising of all, though, may be that he built his house with a primary focus on sound.

Bullitt is a 59-year-old deep-thinker and artist who once worked in geophysics and seismology, studying earthquakes and the structure of the earth's interior. This, he says, left him fascinated with the

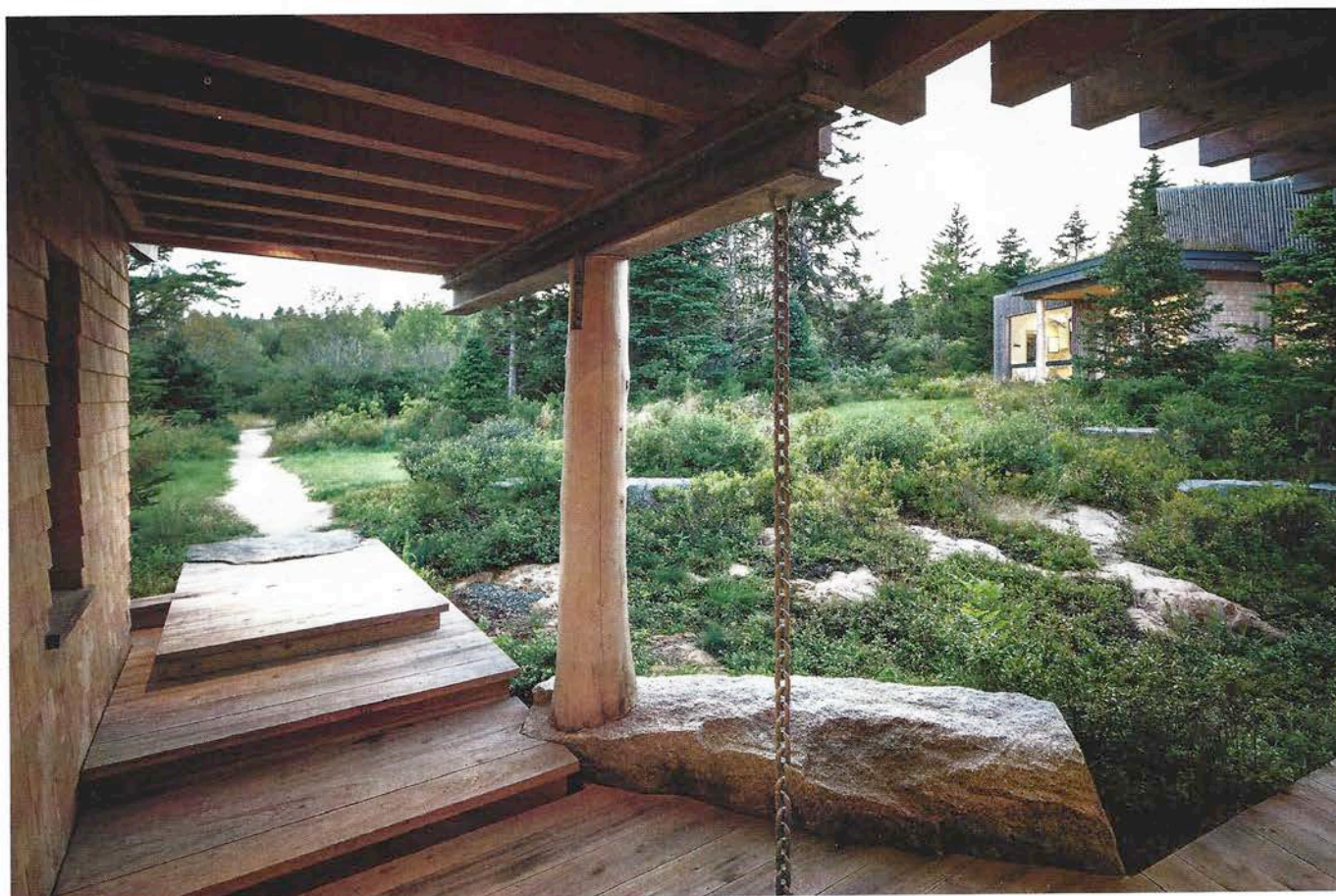
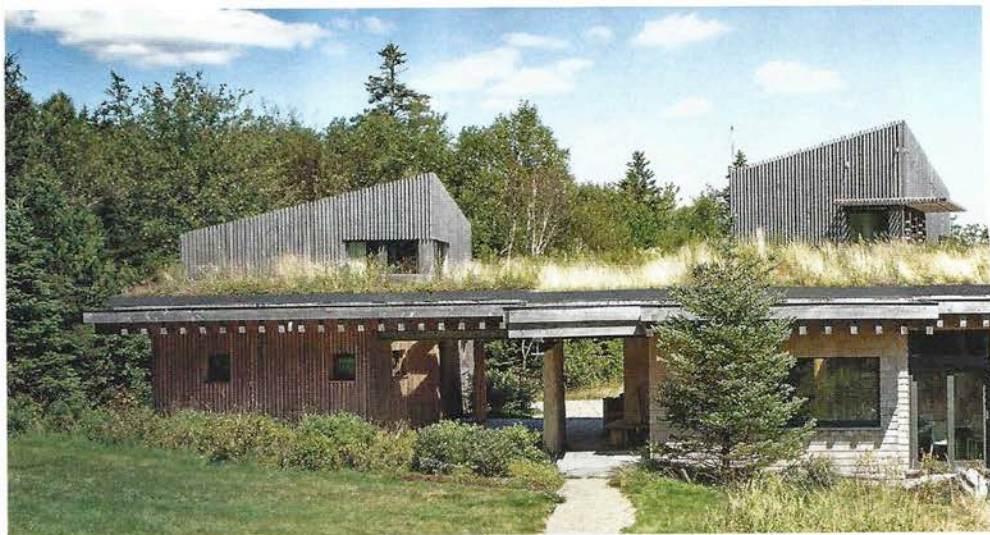
deep vibrations the earth generates, often at a frequency too low for the human ear to detect. He uses his "sound art" to record and make audible these vibrations as a way to increase awareness of our planet's natural music.

When you're listening for the natural sounds of the planet, it helps to

ABOVE: Landscape architect Todd Richardson, who was involved in the project from conception, placed local granite and plantings to appear as if they occurred naturally. Architect Will Winkelman designed the house to meld with the land. LEFT: Vertical siding of locally sourced hemlock is meant to mimic the acoustical slats of a concert hall, a nod to the importance of sound to the homeowner.

GOOD BONES

be somewhere that's low on the sounds of humans. One summer while renting a cottage in Steuben, which is so far up the coast of Maine you can see Canada, he strolled around a property for sale. An old farmhouse stood on seventeen acres that sloped from a low hill down to the beach. The granite outcroppings, twelve-foot tidal drops, and black, star-speckled sky made him feel connected to the bedrock of the earth and the constant rhythms of the oceans and the planets. And aside





from the wind, the birds, and the eternal breaking of the waves, it was deliciously, invitingly quiet. He knew this was the place, he says, when in a small cemetery on the property he saw a gravestone with this quote: "The earth has music for those who listen." Someone before him had heard it, too.

Bullitt's concern for the natural world meant that he wanted to reuse the old farmhouse, but it was too far gone. So he cast around for an architect who could "honor the site." After many meetings with architects, and many rejected plans, he spotted an image of a backyard tree-house that Portland, Maine-based

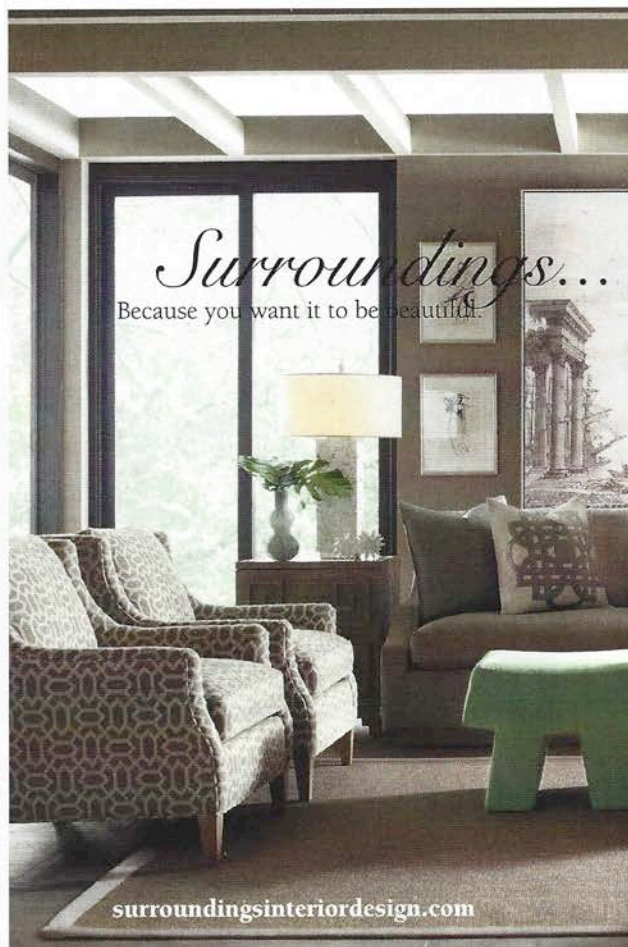
"So many of our projects are on land that's gorgeous, and we want to meld the house into the landscape, not just build it and then shrub it up," says Winkelman.

architect Will Winkelman had built for his kids. It was, Bullitt says, "simple, unusual, imaginative, and connected with the space."

Winkelman suggested bringing in Todd Richardson, a landscape architect, to ensure that the house would be built with the land, and not just on it. "We do this on most of our projects," Winkelman says. "So many of them are on land that's gorgeous, and we want to meld the house into the landscape, not just build it and then shrub it up."

The three of them and two assistants

TOP: The roof is planted with native grasses and plants, providing insulation, edible berries, and a sense that the house is below a "lifted field." CENTER AND BOTTOM: Rather than one house, client and architect settled on a compound of buildings—living quarters, a sound studio, and a separate structure to house utilities—around a central courtyard.



Surroundings...
Because you want it to be beautiful.

surroundingsinteriordesign.com



Best Furniture on the North Shore

Best interior design store in Marblehead

Outstanding customer service award

96 Washington St.
Marblehead, MA
781-639-0676



Well-considered, finely crafted interiors for coastal and historic homes.

taste
Artful Interiors
& Design

jamestown, ri 401.423.3639 tastedesigninc.com

GOOD BONES

spent two days walking the land, discussing sitting options, and drawing sketches. They went out in a boat to view the land from the water. The design process, Bullitt says, “was so much fun, it was like play.”

Bullitt dislikes the typical noises of a house—furnace kicking on, pipes draining—so the team designed an assembly of three buildings around a central courtyard, one of which holds all the utilities, another Bullitt’s living quarters, and the third his sound studio, the walls of which slope outward for better acoustics. Together these buildings mimic the way



TOP: Locally sourced materials, like the white-cedar shingles, were used whenever possible. ABOVE: The builder enjoyed the challenges presented by the design’s complex angles. ABOVE RIGHT: Thick walls and triple-pane windows contribute to net-zero energy use.



the land pours down from the hills to the shore; there’s a sense of motion. And the turf roof, which Richardson planted with native grasses, blueberries, huckleberries, and strawberries, lies over it like a blanket of “lifted field.”

The result, Bullitt says, is “intangible. It’s the perfect place to go inward, which is fitting, because I’m going into the earth to listen. Living there feels like falling in love.”

“JT wanted architecture,” Winkelman says, “but he also wanted performance.” So the house is net-zero, its geothermal heat-pumps, radiant-floor heat, and LED lights powered by a ground-mounted

PV array, the windows triple-paned and sited to maximize solar gain and the miraculous views. The triple-pane glass and superinsulated walls make the inside spaces very quiet.

For most people in most places, that interior quiet would be an advantage. Bullitt, however, missed the natural sounds he moved there to hear. So he is currently devising a way to place microphones outside, collect the sounds of nature, and bring them in. Just like the gravestone said, this land has a music, and JT Bullitt is listening to it. •

EDITOR’S NOTE: For more information about this project, see page 180.