

# Room WITH A View

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The Amesbury home of the Grossi family has a front row seat on the Merrimack River, with nearly 1,000 square-feet of deck stretching out over the water.

## LIFE AT HOME ON THE MERRIMACK

By Gillian Roberta Swart

“One of the key elements of any water house is to vary the exposures to capture different lights and different views,” says Newburyport architect Andrew Sidford. “This is a very, very critical aspect of a house on the water.”

Thus, when he designed a home on the Merrimack River in Amesbury for John and Jo-Ann Grossi, he incorporated a Great Room that extends from the rest of the house towards the water—a room with three walls of nearly solid window—and windows in the master bedroom and bath with slightly different angles.

“The house really was laid out to take advantage of all the views of the river and the angles of the sun,” Sidford notes. “It’s important that

each room offers its own unique experience of the view.”

Living on the Merrimack River—or in this case, practically in the Merrimack River, since the house was built on pilings—is a luxury enjoyed by a lucky few, including the Grossis. The couple’s modestly sized house sits on Main Street in Amesbury, tucked neatly between the street and the river—and it is the envy of passersby.

At least, that distinction can be made of the plant room, which is

one of the few first-floor rooms that can be viewed from the street. The small window-heavy room and the Great Room are Jo-Ann’s favorites.

With the master bedroom suite, the Great Room, the kitchen and the plant room comprising the majority of the first floor, she does not lack for any amenity there. “I basically live on this floor,” she says. The upstairs bedrooms are used mostly for visits from children and grandchildren, and the small mahogany-paneled office is rarely used since

John is busy with his many business ventures. Situated over the garage, which opens out to the street, is a media room with a 60-inch plasma television and theater-style seating.

All of these upstairs rooms were made possible through the use of multiple dormers—a classic Sidford design element.

### Great living

What is John Grossi's favorite space? "I actually like the big family room with all the up-lighting and cathedral ceiling," he says.

A series of spaces that work and flow off each other lead to the prize that is the Great Room, a room not so evident to people driving by.

"You know you've arrived when you hit the Great Room," Sidford says.

Featuring three walls of virtually solid glass and a towering, free-standing stone fireplace, the Great Room and indeed the entire home is an example of living well and in comfort within a modestly sized footprint.

"We didn't want to go crazy," John says. "We kept it around 4,000 square feet."

None of the bedrooms, including the master bedroom, are massive, nor is the Great Room enormous—but the house is big on stunning river views and sun-filled rooms.

Note Sidford's philosophy that one facet of being green is making the most of the space available and not overdoing it. You can make the house feel bigger, he says, by creating a level of what he calls "depth and intrigue" in the home. "There's a sense of something around the corner."

Or even if you just look up: Jo-Ann is also especially fond of the cathedral ceiling in the Great Room. The spoke trusses that builder Jay McPartland added in the ceiling for a unique touch evokes, for Jo-Ann, the image of a ship turned upside down. McPartland agrees that it does lend a somewhat nautical feel to the room.

"I feel like in this whole house, the proportions are right," he adds.

In the Great Room, a small grouping of furniture faces the fireplace, and two easy chairs sit back-to-back with the sofa. This is where John and Jo-Ann can "hang" and enjoy their view, if they're not out on some portion



The Grossi's Great Room features unique architectural details such as spoke trusses and uniquely angled windows.



of the nearly 1,000 square-foot deck—or if John is not at work running one of his many enterprises, including four locations of his Latitude Sports Clubs.

Jo-Ann confesses that she has never drawn the remote-controlled blinds in the Great Room. The house, which sits on a bend in the river, has a view of a rolling hill to the east. Buildings to the west are hardly noticeable from the room. All one sees (although there are houses in the view) is the river from the I-95 Whittier Bridge to Hatter's Point, and Newburyport's Maudslay State Park across the water. And the frequent eagle or seal, depending on the season.

"Every day here is different," Jo-Ann says. "Sometimes it's dead calm and other days there are whitecaps." And that's not to mention the sunsets over the river. "We get a little of everything here—the bridge, the church, the little New England cove. This is exactly what we pictured it as being."

*"You know you've arrived when you hit the Great Room."*

—ANDREW SIDFORD

John says they wanted a modern seaport living home—but "not too modern"—with a dash of country, which accounts for some small changes that were made to Sidford's original design featuring angled, plain windows.

"We [also] liked the idea of a lot of big, wide crown moldings and higher paneling in the bedrooms," John says.

Sidford calls his first interview with the homeowner an interrogation. He asks for and gets a general room-by-room breakdown of what they want from the home. He then narrows his line of questioning down to each individual room.

"You're standing at your kitchen sink – what do you want to see?"

It all starts with internal logic, he says, which ends up as a hierarchy that comes from the client.

McPartland picked up the trail of intuitive design as construction went forward and details came into play.

"We most of all wanted it to be tasteful," John notes. "I think we achieved that."

### Living masterfully

Walking in the front door, one does not especially notice that the master suite is off the

entryway to the left. His and hers walk-in closets and a bright master bath, which allows for views of the river from the Jacuzzi, precede the modest master bedroom. There is a small deck off the bedroom, which at the time of this writing was home to a hot tub that Jo-Ann planned to move.

The master bath is light and airy with pale tile floor. All of the room's cabinets were built by carpenters who work for McPartland, and the shower stall is triangular to fit the angle of the space.

The rest of the floors in the home are Brazilian cherry, and the kitchen cabinets

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The kitchen table is surrounded by river views, providing a relaxing setting for a family meal.

were custom built by Haverhill craftsman Walter Lane.

Although the home seems to be designed to perfection by a professional in the field, McPartland says that there was no such person involved in the process. He narrowed the

hundreds of possible interior designers down to a select few before presenting them to the Grossis, who made the final decision.

“We build a lot of homes so we see a lot of things,” McPartland adds.

In the kitchen, dark granite countertops

complement the dark floors. But Jo-Ann’s choice of bright accent colors, as well as the light green of the adjacent plant room, makes it a bright and cheerful space. The light green also plays through into the Great Room where the couch is a similar hue. Amenities such as a water spigot over the stove, a combination convection/microwave oven and an island make maximum and efficient use of the economical kitchen area.

Jo-Ann explains that the main deck, where the Grossis have a table set up for dining in the summer, is really an extension of her kitchen. The deck flows down out over the water where there later will be access to the floating docks in the river.

“The deck was a whole design element in itself,” Sidford notes. “It’s not just about the Fourth of July experience and the rest of the time it’s in the way—the same thing with the house.”

Upstairs, one bedroom and John’s office are separated from the other bedroom, the full bath and the entertainment room by a catwalk, which is also the landing for the stairs.

The mahogany-paneled office is dark green above the wainscoting; a small interior window serves to bring in light from the sunny hall. In the full upstairs bath, the tub was shafted into the dormer, another space-



(Left) A spacious Jacuzzi allows for leisurely views of the Merrimack River from the master bath. (Right) The Grossi home does not lack for natural light, with many walls of nearly solid windows filling the house with sun.

saving device.

Even the garage is a design element, though not as obvious as the others. It serves to deaden the noise of traffic from the busy street.

John and Jo-Ann rented an apartment on Windward Drive in Newburyport for a year while their waterside home was being built. Their children grew up primarily in Newburyport’s West End (Turkey Hill), although their roots as a family are a little south of the Merrimack River, in Wakefield.

John does not use his home office as much as he may want to, and that’s because he has his office in the Salisbury Latitudes club. Right now he is busy planning a sixth location: a 130,000 square foot, \$20-million facility in Peabody. Latitudes Sports Clubs are currently in Andover, Bradford, Methuen and Salisbury.

But one day, he knows he will be spending more time in the house—a water house, in fact. The home is built entirely on pilings, two of which are in the flood plain of the river. Since moving there in the fall of 2006, they have twice had the river flood under the house, raising a lot of debris with it. It’s a minor inconvenience, John says.

“There’s so much to take advantage of in any house,” says Sidford. “The river just happened to be one more asset of that site. It’s about the water but not all about the water.... The view doesn’t make the house; the house complements the view.”

Jo-Ann gets the last word: “I really love it here, I really do.” **MVM**

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