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HOUSE PROUD

**ECONOMY CLASS** Caroline Upcher wanted a simple house in the Hamptons. For \$190 a square foot, her architects devised a two-story cube clad in tinted fiberboard and rough plywood. No need for a garage: Ms. Upcher prefers to bike.

## Build Me A Bargain

The \$228,000 challenge: building a house in the Hamptons on an almost impossible budget.

By RAUL A. BARRENECHE

AMAGANSETT, N.Y.

CAROLINE UPCHER'S house was finished in December, and almost immediately the reviews came in from neighbors and acquaintances. "Cool house," the Federal Express delivery man said, admiring the two-story box covered in inexpensive green fiberboard standing alone in a clearing of oak and cypress trees. Neighborhood children also took to it immediately, she noticed. It's easy to see why: with its offbeat box shape and catwalks, the house has the inviting quality of a giant playhouse.

In the Hamptons, where homes seem to grow ever grander, Ms. Upcher's Amagansett house, built for \$228,000, stands out for its self-conscious economy. Some visitors have asked her when it will be finished, or when she will get around to covering the exposed steel columns with interior walls. "Some people have asked me point-blank, 'How can you live like this?'" she said.

But Ms. Upcher, 59, a British-born novelist, says the two-bedroom, 1,200-square-foot house provides a grace and ease of living she could not otherwise afford, and its simplicity suits her life as a single woman of decidedly unfussy tastes. She does not own a car, choosing instead to get around on a ma- roon bicycle, even in winter. She rarely entertains, and, by her own account,

does so "atrociously."

"If you ever receive an invitation to a party at my house," she said, "you should refuse it."

The house matches a style of living stripped to essentials. Now working on her 11th novel, "How to Marry a Ghost," (written under the pen name Hope McIntyre, it is to be published by Warner Books in October, 2006) about a murder in the Hamptons, she spends long hours surrounded by books in the second-floor study overlooking the open dining area.

Ms. Upcher never intended to build a house. "I thought it would be far too much work," she said. Besides, she was content in the two-story cedar-sided

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**DRESSED DOWN** The house is a tidy package with a lofty central living-dining area surrounded by catwalks, left. Walls are made of sheets of oak-ume plywood and cedar floorboards split down the middle and upended. The floors are made of the same fiber-board used for outdoor signs.



Top, Paul Masi; above and left, photographs by Laurie Lambrecht for The New York Times



# Building a Bargain: \$228,000 in the Hamptons

**HEAT** A bluestone mantel hangs over a prefab fireplace on the same brackets used for the bookshelves. The floor is fiberboard, the kind typically used for outdoor signs.

**LIGHTS** Inexpensive industrial fixtures were hung from hollow steel columns and brackets with wiring hidden inside.

**COOKING** In the kitchen, a butcher block countertop and aluminum frame cabinets with particleboard shelves, also used in the guest bedroom, helped keep a lid on costs.



Paul Masi

**SIDING** The exterior is clad in plywood and cement fiberboard panels stained green to blend with the surrounding foliage. The deck is untreated cedar.



**CATWALK** A home for 2,000 books — a handful written by Ms. Upcher — was constructed with industrial steel brackets and construction-grade cedar planks.



Photographs by Laurie Lambrecht for The New York Times

**BUDGET TEAM** The owner, Caroline Upcher, with the architects Paul Masi (on left) and Harry Bates.



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home in the hilly neighborhood of Barnes Landing where she had lived full time since 1996. She bought the house for \$200,000, and spent another \$40,000 on a new roof and other repairs.

But she had yet to replace a weathered deck and renovate the kitchen and bathrooms, which had gone unimproved since the house was built in 1968. "It was in pretty bad shape," said Ms. Upcher. "But I didn't have the money to do more work on it."

To raise funds, Ms. Upcher planned to sell off a portion of her land, which amounted to a little more than an acre. When her friends Jonathan Burnham, a senior vice president of HarperCollins and Joe Dolce, editor in chief of Star magazine, who rented the house during her occasional trips to London, heard of her plan, they offered a proposal: they would buy her existing house and she would build a new one on the adjacent land. She readily agreed. "I thought, 'I don't know who I'm going to have living next to me,'" she said, "and I'd love to have Joe and Jonathan as neighbors. So why not?"

Ms. Upcher sold them the house for \$500,000, and hired a neighbor, Paul Masi, to design the new one. A veteran of Richard Meier's office and an avid surfer, Mr. Masi, 33, seemed an unlikely pairing with a British writer who favors old-fashioned romance and mystery. "It's like Miss Marple calling Philip Johnson to do her house," Ms. Upcher said.

But Ms. Upcher had admired the clean-lined modern structures Mr. Masi had designed, and Harry Bates, Mr. Masi's partner in the firm Bates Masi Architects, based in Sag Harbor, N.Y., had designed her original house. "I knew houses they had done," she said, "and there was also a sentimental attachment to Harry Bates — the fact that he designed my old house, which I loved."

Ms. Upcher asked the architects if they could build her a house for \$150,000, knowing the figure would inevitably go up. Their answer was a resounding no; the only home they could build on that budget, they said, was a ranch house with vinyl siding — not at all what Ms. Upcher wanted. For Ms. Upcher, there was no cushion if her house went

over budget. She had used part of the income from the sale of her original house to pay off her mortgage. She wanted to build an inexpensive house and pay cash for it, she said, rather than take out another loan. "I said, 'This is the amount of money I have. If we can't do it for that, we can't do it,'" she said. They eventually agreed on a budget of \$200,000, or \$166 a square foot. (The final figure was \$228,000, or \$190 a square foot).

By comparison, a 1,500 square foot home nearby is listed for \$750,000.

With the budget settled, Ms. Upcher turned to the question of what her house should look like, a task she found surprisingly difficult. Though she was capable of conjuring detailed fictional worlds, like the English country home where a young cou-

ple's love is tested ("The Visitors' Book") and a Hamptons version of Mary Poppins ("Down by the Water"), she found that imagining her own home was like staring at an empty page. She overcame her block in her usual way: putting pen to paper. On her periwinkle blue stationery she produced pages of thoughts on how she lives ("I cook a lot and am messy"; "I manage to accumulate more clutter than anyone I know and I hate it") and specific requests (high ceilings, a lofty living-dining room downstairs and a library upstairs with room for 2,000 books).

The architects turned Ms. Upcher's notes into a no-nonsense modernist house with a charming, unpolished simplicity. Fittingly, the books had a disproportionate influence

## Specs: A Boxful of Savings

**T**O keep construction costs at \$228,000, or \$190 a square foot, Bates Masi Architects of Sag Harbor, N.Y., shunned status appliances and cabinetry in favor of brands like General Electric and Ikea. The contractor, Seacoast Construction, 46 Bellhaven Road, Bellport, N.Y., (631) 827-7850, built the house with industrial shelving and lights.

The prefab guts of the living room fireplace were \$1,800 from Home Crafts, 760 Railroad Avenue, West Babylon, N.Y., (631) 669-0141. The mantel, hearth and surround are honed bluestone; \$1,800 from Barrasso & Sons, 160 Floral Park Street, Islip Terrace, N.Y., (631) 581-0360.

Light fixtures were \$34 each at Bay Shore Lighting and Home, 143 West Main Street, Bay Shore, N.Y., (631) 665-5510.

The six hanging cabinets in the kitchen, about \$1,000 each, have glass fronts, aluminum frames and particleboard shelves. They are from the Avsikt line at Ikea, (877) 345-4532. Lower cabinets, found not only in the kitchen but also in the guest bedroom, bathroom and office space, are made of particleboard with a stainless steel finish. They are from Ikea's Nume-

rar line and were about \$330 each.

The bill for rock maple butcher block counters — used in the kitchen and for two desks — came to \$1,760 at Riverhead Building Supply, 21 Railroad Avenue, East Hampton, N.Y., (631) 324-0300. The house is clad partly in stained Hardie cement-board, \$34 for a 4-foot-by-8-foot sheet at Riverhead Building Supply.

To support bookshelves, cabinets, light fixtures, a catwalk (left) and the fireplace mantel, the contractor used industrial brackets and columns; all told they were about \$7,000 at Steel King Industries, 2700 Chamber Street, Stevens Point, Wis., (715) 341-3120 or steelking.com.

Ten aluminum-frame doors and 24 windows cost \$12,000 at Crystal Window and Door Systems, 31-10 Whitestone Expressway, Flushing, Queens, (718) 961-7300.

The flooring throughout is a type of fiberboard called Medex, normally used for signs. It was stained but not waxed or coated. A 4-foot-by-8-foot sheet costs \$40 at Atlantic Plywood, 58-25 52nd Avenue, Woodside, Queens, (800) 818-0434.

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Laurie Lambrecht for The New York Times