

on NEUTRAL ground

TEXT CHRISTY WRIGHT | PHOTOGRAPHY ROBIN STUBBERT
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Designer Natalie Chong transforms a new-build cottage into a comfy family retreat that revels in whiter shades of pale.

In the living room, rope-based table lamps, a driftwood coffee table and a pendant light salvaged from a ship establish a beach house vernacular. "I used nautical elements but in a subtle way," says designer Natalie Chong. On the fireplace, rough-faced cedar panels hide the TV.

DESIGN, Nest Design Studio, nestdesign-studio.ca; ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN, Michael Kelly Architectural Design; CONTRACTING, Pat Clark Contracting; CLOUD WHITE OC-130 WALL PAINT (throughout), Benjamin Moore; CUSTOM SOFAS & SIDE-CHAIRS, Grand Dukes Design Upholstery; CUSTOM DRAPERY (throughout), Your Sweet Home; COFFEE TABLE, Crate and Barrel; CONSOLE, Muskoka Living Interiors; RUG, THROW, TRAY, faux coral SCULPTURE, Elte; vintage PENDANT LIGHT, Phil's 20th Century Design.

“WHEN MY HUSBAND AND I WALKED INTO THE ORIGINAL COTTAGE, I MOUTHED TO HIM BEHIND THE REAL ESTATE AGENT’S BACK, ‘NOT IN A MILLION YEARS!’”

recalls the homeowner of this now transformed getaway. It was 1992 and the Toronto-based couple was on the hunt for a cottage to share with their two daughters and son, then all under the age of six. “We saw an estate-sale ad for a cottage in Muskoka, Ont., and thought, Why not have a look?”

She describes the 1,000-square-foot cedar structure they went to view as “a total dive with plywood floors and no kitchen cupboards,” but noted the real estate agent was smart to show them the interior first, as the cottage was quickly redeemed by the rest of the property’s offerings, namely 20 acres of land and 1,000 feet of private waterfront.

They bought it and quickly celebrated ownership with a personal touch: the addition of three whimsical tiles above the bathroom sink, each with a bear on it representing one of their children. “With mementoes and minor renovations, we made it livable,” says the homeowner. “But even when the kids were little, it was still quite cramped.”

“This kitchen is simple but grand, so I opted for pared-down yet playful accessories that wouldn’t distract from the design,” says Natalie. She chose clear-glass pendant lights as a reference to sea glass and vintage letters for a touch of whimsy.

STOOLS, Urban Barn; **RUNNER**, grey **BOWL**, Elte; **PENDANT LIGHTS**, Phil’s 20th Century Design; blue **JARS**, Pottery Barn; **LETTERS**, The Queen West Antique Centre.



LEFT The bar area’s weathered cabinet sets it apart from the rest of the kitchen. The built-in wine rack and beverage fridge are convenient features.

Glass **CLOCHE**, faux **POTTED PLANTS**, Elte; white **GLASSES**, IKEA.

BELOW “Everything in the living room was based on comfort first, and then style,” says Natalie. “The family enjoys reading, watching movies and having singalongs together, so I made sure there was plenty of seating.”

BOTTOM LEFT Handcrafted from reclaimed northern Ontario wood, the base of the dining room table channels its Georgian Bay setting. Natalie chose woven chairs for the sides of the table because “the tropical material exudes a beachy feel.” Sphere-shaped pendant lights provide intriguing pattern and a soft counterpoint to the dining area’s straight lines and angles.

DINING TABLE, Kimberley Jackson; woven **DINING CHAIRS**, Pier 1 Imports; slipcovered **DINING CHAIRS**, Restoration Hardware; **SIDEBOARD**, Phil’s 20th Century Design; **RUG**, **ARTWORK**, **HURRICANES**, Elte; **PENDANT LIGHTS**, EQ3; **TABLE LAMPS**, Crate and Barrel.



RIGHT, BOTTOM The bear tiles from the old cottage were integrated into the new upstairs bath for a sentimental touch.

FAR RIGHT Designed for future grandkids and fondly known as “the bunk bed room,” the cottage’s fifth bedroom features two twin-over-double bunk beds so it can accommodate six comfortably. Inventively positioned sconces provide lighting to each bunk.

RUGS, Target; **SCONCES**, Visual Comfort & Co.; floral **TOSS CUSHIONS**, Tonic Living; whale **TOSS CUSHION**, Thomaspaul; striped **BLANKET**, Feather Factory.

BOTTOM RIGHT In one of the bedrooms, a beautifully dressed bed elevates humble wood-panelled walls. “With a cottage, it’s important to mix in refined pieces,” says Natalie.

HEADBOARD, NIGHTSTAND, RUG, West Elm; **BEDDING, TOSS CUSHIONS**, Feather Factory; **LIGHT FIXTURE**, Sescolite; **TABLE LAMPS, PADDLE**, HomeSense.

BELOW Designer Natalie Chong of Nest Design Studio.



Now that the children are all grown up and starting families of their own (the first grandchild arrived in March), the couple decided it was time to tear down the old and rebuild.

They enlisted architectural designer Michael Kelly to expand the footprint (it’s now 4,400 square feet) and contractor Pat Clark to finish the space with natural materials, including aged hemlock for the floors.

With the ideal structure in place, the focus turned to the interior. “I needed help decorating,” says the homeowner, “so when the owners of a bedding store I’ve frequented for more than 20 years highly recommended a designer, I didn’t hesitate.” That designer, Natalie Chong of Nest Design Studio, expanded upon the cottage’s existing airy white-on-white aesthetic.

“When I first met my clients, the wife showed me her inspirational tears from decor magazines,” says Natalie. “I went through all of them and said to her, ‘You don’t want a Muskoka cottage, you want a beach house.’ She agreed entirely.”

To achieve the look, Natalie judiciously chose furnishings that would complement the main floor’s paint colour (Benjamin Moore’s Cloud White) and create a welcoming feel. “When using white, it’s important to fend off any starkness by incorporating warm shades, soft textures and accents that aren’t too rigid,” she says, referencing the cottage’s tone-on-tone furniture and rounded shapes on display.

Of the pale look she brought to the space, Natalie says, “It’s like a seaside escape and totally different from the cottage they previously had.” The couple couldn’t agree more, although there’s one thing they didn’t outgrow. “My father-in-law painstakingly chiselled the bear tiles from the old place so they could be installed in the new upstairs bathroom,” says the homeowner. “I like that continuity.”

FOR SOURCES, SEE OUR WORKBOOK

“I love that the master ensuite is so sophisticated and doesn’t look like a cottage bathroom at all,” says Natalie. She chose a soft shade of grey paint to create a cocooning effect and played up the elegance with finishing touches that could work in any room, such as tailored drapery, glass pendant lights and a ceramic stool.

Wickham Gray HC-171 **WALL PAINT**, Benjamin Moore; **STOOL**, West Elm; **RUG**, Elte; **PENDANT LIGHTS**, Schoolhouse Electric & Supply Co.; **TOWELS**, Ginger’s.

