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# East Coast LIVING

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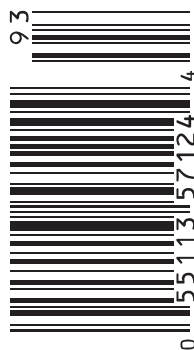
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## Seaside sanctuary

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The image shows a rustic interior space. A large, curved wooden beam, known as a taiko beam, arches over the area. Below it is a stone fireplace with a wooden mantel. In the foreground, there is a granite countertop with various kitchen items, including a potted plant, a lamp, and several bottles. The ceiling is made of wood, and a pendant light hangs from it. The overall atmosphere is warm and cozy.

# Their home is their *castle*

The attractive open-concept layout of Shelagh and Hugh O'Brien's home near Memramcook, New Brunswick provides for spacious dining, kitchen and living areas. In the middle of the space is a massive pine beam—a "taiko beam"—that is supported by two posts. *Taiko* is the Japanese word for a naturally curved timber.





*This unique beam house is an eclectic marriage of Eastern and Western design*

By Marilyn Smulders  
Photos by Mike Dembeck





THERE'S SOMETHING OF DROMOLAND Castle in the beautiful timber home that Hugh and Shelagh O'Brien designed and built overlooking the tidal flats of the Petitcodiac River, near the Acadian community of Memramcook, New Brunswick.

After the O'Briens married 14 years ago, the couple honeymooned at Dromoland Castle, a spectacular limestone castle surrounded by wild countryside in Ireland's Shannon region. The baronial castle is the ancestral home of the O'Briens, Barons of Inchiquin and one of the few native Gaelic families of royal blood.

Like a castle out of a storybook, Dromoland has turrets, courtyards, ramparts and a keep. During its construction, builders used massive oak timbers and grey limestone cut from nearby quarries. Though it dates to the 11th century,



East meets west. On top of the taiko beam is a king post and crown braces—common elements in timber frame buildings dating back to the medieval era in Britain. Extending to the ceiling, the beam divides the living room, where Shelagh relaxes with a book, from the dining and cooking areas (left and above). Her furnishings suit the scale of the house, including the dining room table and chairs by Shorewood Furniture in Greater Lakeburn.



**LEFT:** A large king size bed furnishes the master bedroom on the main floor. With help from her husband, Shelagh created its sway-backed, tufted headboard. She also made the drapes and pillows.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Shelagh picked up this tapestry of a castle hallway at the English Butler in Moncton and it now adorns the wall descending to the bottom floor of the house.

the castle has been rebuilt and added upon several times and is now a luxury hotel.

“Living in this house, I feel that we’re extending the honeymoon,” says Shelagh O’Brien.

Stepping inside her home, a large tapestry of a castle hallway and a big stone fireplace that extends to the ceiling reinforce the castle comparisons. As does the O’Brien family crest, adorning the wall behind the front door, that depicts a trio of half-gold and half-silver lions on a red shield.

The O’Brien house may be every bit as solid as the ancestral home back in the old country. From the outside, it’s deceptively modest. It resembles a tidy little bungalow, with a pretty central porch and a garage off to the side. But taking advantage of its sloping property, the house actually has two full floors of living space. At 3,200 square feet, it has plenty of room.

Just beyond the front entrance, the house opens up with an expansive arched ceiling of large wooden beams and joinery. In the middle of the room is a single, natural-form pine timber beam—one metre in circumference—



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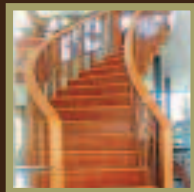
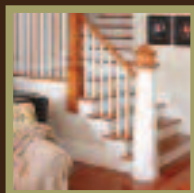
supported on two gently curved posts. Called a “taiko beam” in the Japanese tradition, the beam honours the trees from which the timbers came.

The O’Briens always wanted a timber-frame home and they chose TimberhArt Woodworks, a Port Williams, Nova Scotia-based company to build it. “We showed the owners, Daniel and Kimberley [Reagan], our design and asked them if they could do it in timber because basically we knew what we wanted,” says Shelagh.

Hugh and Shelagh liked the Reagans’ knowledge and enthusiasm to take on such a unique project. “Daniel said, ‘Sure I can put a timber frame to go in there,’” Shelagh recalls. “In fact, I have a tree outside that I think would be perfect for your home.’ Our response? ‘That’s amazing! Let’s go for it.’”

The 3-D design, rendered by Kimberley, is actually a hybrid timber frame. The walls are insulated concrete forms—a solid reinforced concrete core sandwiched between two layers of foam insulation—while the roof is timber framed, with interior posts resting on structural exterior walls. Inside, there are soaring timber frames in the front porch and in the screened porch at the back of the house.

“What I like about this house is that the exterior teases you—you get a hint that there’s something interesting inside,” Kimberley says.

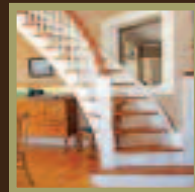


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The business she runs with her husband is a true team effort. Kimberley works with clients and draws conceptual designs while Daniel looks after the building side of things—picking out the wood, going on-site and supervising construction.

They cut and size all of the wood in their Port Williams facility and combine the pieces on-site. They assemble the walls on the ground and then stand them up. Then, they raise the house in sections using a crane. “It’s like a giant, 3-D jigsaw puzzle,” says Kimberley.

Daniel enjoys using Asian-inspired architecture in some of his designs, having apprenticed in Japan for one year and written a thesis comparing Japanese and American timber-framing techniques. In the O’Brien house, he brought together elements of both styles. At the centre of the massive taiko beam is a “king post” and crown braces that fan out in four directions. The post gives the house its wow factor, while dividing the living and dining spaces.

Shelagh took charge of the interior design herself: sewing draperies, refinishing family heirlooms and choosing new furniture pieces that complement the grand scale of the house. A dedicated do-it-yourselfer, she painted the cement floor of the screened porch to look like ceramic tiles and decorated an antique dresser with sweet blue-and-white stripes. “Just call me Martha!” she laughs.

The O’Briens love to entertain. As part of the big O’Brien clan (Hugh is one of 17 siblings who grew up in the 175-year-old house across the road), friends and family members are always dropping by. The couple also has five grandchildren, whom they love to spoil.

Shorewood Furniture in Greater Lakeburn, near Moncton built the sizable formal dining room set in the dining room. It complements the large space, consisting of a double pedestal table with ball and claw feet and eight upholstered chairs. With two leaves, the table can easily accommodate a dinner party of 12.

“It’s impressive looking but it’s comfortable,” says Shelagh, while sitting at the table. “You can sit here for hours and talk and eat good food.” She made the floral centrepiece that adorns the table and the butterscotch-brown silk drapes over the window.

In the adjoining living area, the furniture is also on the large side, with a low-back chesterfield with rolled arms, a generous armchair with ivory upholstery and an olive-coloured ottoman instead of a coffee table. It’s a cozy spot in chilly weather, with a fire roaring in the stone fireplace.





Shelagh sets the patio table for company in the screened porch at the south east corner of the house. It's the perfect place to watch the sunset on a warm evening. Dishware by HomeSense.

The kitchen is cheery and open. Three elegant pendant lights with milky alabaster shades separate the space from the dining room. The kitchen's other notable features include pink-and-grey granite countertops, stainless-steel appliances and a walk-in pantry. A rustic metal sculpture of a rooster—a lucky find at HomeSense—adds a touch of whimsy to the elegant room.

The prime consideration in the kitchen's design is that it would offer the cook a view of the river while he or she prepares dinner at the stove and chats with guests, who might be seated on bar stools or at the dining room table. Shelagh, originally from Montreal, says the sight of the river brings serenity to their lives and reinforces their love of nature.

She met Hugh in Ontario, where his business, O'Brien Installations, has a branch office. When they married, Hugh wanted to move



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back to his native New Brunswick and bought his family homestead, along with 263 hectares of meadow and forest along the meandering Petitcodiac. (The name derives from a Mi'kmaq word for "bends like a bow.")

Flowing through southeastern New Brunswick, the river has a wide flood plain and a tidal bore, flowing twice a day as the tides from the Bay of Fundy push upstream towards Moncton. The O'Briens can enjoy splendid river views from many parts of their house, including from the expansive windows in the upstairs living and dining areas, the downstairs bedrooms and the billiard room, which has garden doors that open onto the lawn at the back of the house.

The screened porch, on the southeast corner of the house, offers some of the best scenery, allowing the couple to enjoy the outdoors even when mosquitoes are about. Like the rest of the house, it's set up for entertaining, with a barbecue in one corner and a patio set in the other. Hugh, as handy as his wife, made the pillow-laden pine daybed that beckons for an afternoon nap.

A pair of binoculars is close at hand if there are eagles circling over the river or if a doe and her fawn amble by. "This is why we live here,"



says Shelagh, who speculates they may have the advantage over the ancestral castle for picturesque, rolling-green vistas. "Hugh just loves looking at the river. It's always changing. There's always something else to look at, no matter how familiar you are with its beauty." ■

The home's rather modest appearance belies the grandeur that awaits inside. Its board-and-batten siding was made from pine trees that were cut, milled and planed on the property. The home was a finalist in 2008 for the People's Choice Award by the Nova Scotia Home Designers' Association.



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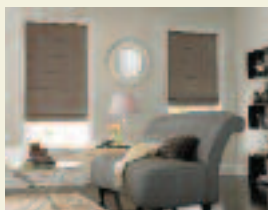
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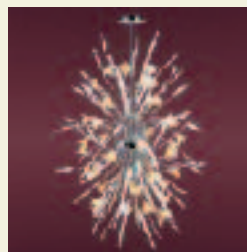
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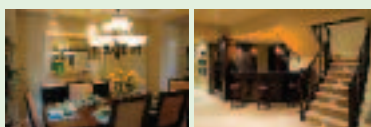
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