

# haven

A magazine exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina







meet the neighbors



# House of Harmony

By Jason Frye  
Photography by Harry Taylor

*Morning Light* sits proudly but unobtrusively on three shady lots among the live oaks in Bald Head Island's maritime forest. Here, Harper and Plunkett Peterson have built what will soon be their year-round home. Large enough to hold their five children when they visit but intimate enough for just the two of them, *Morning Light* is a tribute to the interweaving of design and desire, art and aesthetic. The Petersons, along with Wilmington, N.C., architect Michael Moorefield and builder Gary Hewett, were careful to plan and build a home so well integrated with its environment, it could have grown out of the earth alongside the trees that encircle it.

*Morning Light* rests in a clearing not much bigger than its footprint. Landscaping is minimal: the once thick underbrush has been thinned to make room for lush native species like sabal palm and wax myrtle, and a simple gravel driveway leads to the crofter and garage. It is easy to lose the house through the trees as the grey paint and blue trim take on the hue of the sky, but the remnants of a massive oak scavenged from the forest marks the driveway and lets you know you've arrived.



"It was important to us to leave the land as untouched as we could," Harper says of the planning that went into the welcoming yet unassuming home. "We wanted to celebrate the trees and the forest, be able to invite them in or go out and mingle with them."

The forest is celebrated everywhere in *Morning Light*, thanks to Harper's craftsmanship and Plunkett's eye for design. Throughout the home they built fixtures as well as furniture from salvaged wood, and worked to repurpose other found items as art, building materials and inspiration. A bench Harper made from a slab of old-growth pine and two pine logs waits at the top of the flagstone stairs he laid. On the front porch a hollowed-out cypress stump hangs from the ceiling and houses a light. Harper even hand carved the *Morning Light* nameplate for Plunkett years ago when they were first dreaming of this house.

The home is designed around the first-floor common area that includes the kitchen, dining room and living room. This area gives the sense of being on the forest floor under the trees—the deep brown hardwood underfoot is the fertile earth of the forest floor. Beside the entry, the glassless frame of a 15-light window laced with bamboo has been repurposed as a shoji screen, suggesting the idea of undergrowth. A wall of windows floods the room with dappled light as it filters through the leaves and twining branches of the live oak that is almost close enough to touch. The oak's branches stretch out of sight, but the exposed rafters and ridge beam carry their essence through the room.

Within the large common room, the Petersons created several intimate spaces through the placement of furniture. The shoji screen defines a foyer. A butter-yellow couch paired with a bench Harper built cluster around a wood stove in a cozy conversational arrangement. A matching love seat faces the forested property out the floor-to-ceiling windows, creating a perfect perch to watch birds come and go. Another intimate nook off the kitchen houses bookshelves and a window seat that has become the favorite napping spot of Luna, the family dog. A table and chandelier of Harper's design define the dining area.

The chandelier is one of the first things you notice when entering the room. Harper fashioned the large piece from a beam salvaged from an old bar in Wilmington, N.C., and it was outfitted with bare bulbs

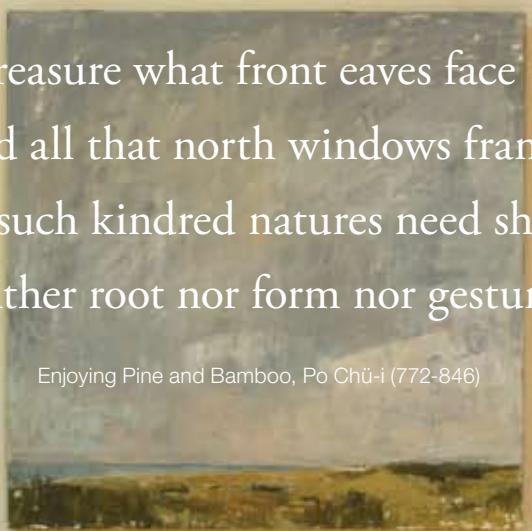
This page, top left: Harper's Mozart-inspired chandelier. Top right: The Petersons tucked birds' nests into nooks and corners throughout *Morning Light*. Bottom: Bamboo reeds woven into the window frame shoji screen can be changed to reflect the season. Opposite page: The colors found on and around Bald Head Island inspired the palette in *Morning Light*.





I treasure what front eaves face  
and all that north windows frame...  
...such kindred natures need share  
neither root nor form nor gesture.

Enjoying Pine and Bamboo, Po Chü-i (772-846)



hung at different heights by Plunkett. Harper jokes that the bulbs are the opening notes of a favorite Mozart symphony, but they look like bright, low-hanging fruit, fat and ripe and ready to be picked.

The dining room table, built on-site by Harper and his builder, anchors the room. Made from a solid plank of Brazilian mahogany, the table is 13 feet long, three feet wide and four inches thick. It sits on a thick trestle of old-growth pine from the same era. The color coaxed out of the contrasting woods looks like sand and forest soil, a perfect representation of the land on Bald Head Island.

Harper's style of furniture making is an extension of the design of the house itself: American primitive meets classical Asian. The symmetry, simplicity and proportion of every element is celebrated. In his many tables and benches, Harper made no effort to disguise cracks and cheeks in the wood—part of the wood's beauty lies in its flaws, the rest in the near-perfect proportion of his design. The same is true with the structural elements of *Morning Light*. Throughout, exposed rafters and ridge beams glorify the construction rather than hide it. Outside, the rafter tails and ridge beams extend beyond the confines of roof and wall and announce themselves to the outside world much like they would in China or Japan.

A true testament to Harper and Plunkett's teamwork and design forethought, *Morning Light* is a perfect reflection of their personalities. Plunkett's personality is big—wide open like the rooms in the home. Her welcoming, never-met-a-stranger manner pulls you into her orbit where the conversation never stops, never drops a thread, and never dulls. Her laugh rings through the rooms and rises to the rafters. Her smile is afternoon light through the windows. Harper is the small space, the cozy nook off the kitchen, the loveseat by the window. Harper's orbit is smaller. The conversation is for the two of you, not secret, but intimate. He draws you in with his low voice, and when he speaks, he looks you in the eye. His laugh is soft, only heard a seat away. His smile is the subtlety and complexity of the bird's nest in the rafters.

Harper and Plunkett drew on many sources of inspiration for *Morning Light* to convey the elements of harmony and tranquility they love about the island throughout their home.

**Left:** Naturally finished wood throughout the house emphasizes the Petersons' love of the forest. **Above, right:** Luna naps in a sunny nook off the kitchen. **Below, right:** Light floods Harper and Plunkett's office.





"There's a certain flow and continuity to classical Chinese and Japanese architecture that appealed to us," Harper says. "We wanted to keep each space in harmony with the next."

"We love the relationship between wood and stone, large and small, inside and out, and we tried to maintain it throughout," Plunkett adds.

One of the ways they maintained that balance is through the use of found and salvaged material. Throughout *Morning Light* the Petersons have used driftwood, birds' nests, antlers and other items—many of them found on the island—as art and building material. A bowl of shells found on South Beach. A single antler on a newel post on the deck. A bird's nest tucked into the rafters by the stairs, one in the branches of a driftwood tree on the screened porch, another in the corner of a window. A piece of driftwood hangs between the dining room and living room, making a transom of sorts and providing an interesting visual separation between the spaces. Pieces from an antique Thai opium bed appear throughout the house as transoms, wall hangings and part of the outdoor shower.

This use of found materials speaks to Plunkett's decorating scheme. "We wanted to emphasize the forest outside," she says. "We wanted you to feel like you're outside when you're inside. The connection with nature and place is very important to us and our house needed to reflect that."

The palette Plunkett used for *Morning Light* could have been taken from outside as well. The living room walls are the soft green of the underside of sun-filtered leaves. The butter-yellow couch is the morning sun. In the kitchen and dining room, the walls are fair-weather cumulus clouds, linen-white and peaceful. The light-blue kitchen island is the sky at noon. The dark-blue walls in the guest rooms are the sky before sunset.

As with most homes, the emotional heart of *Morning Light* is the kitchen. Distinctively modern—stylish and European, but with Shaker sensibilities in the design and use of materials—the kitchen is spacious and easy to work in. The cabinets, with flat drawer fronts and

This page, top left: Plunkett's impeccable style accentuates every room. Top right: A wooden vessel sink and driftwood towel hooks create a refined primitive look. Bottom: The master bath feels like an oasis. Opposite page: Harper's creations in the guest bedroom include the bed and tables.





simple wooden pulls, are made from leftover flooring and wood trim and are simply finished to let the wood grain be the focal point. The countertops are concrete—a thousand-year-old material now coming into vogue as a component of modern design. A sleek glass cook-top built into the concrete counter provides a no-profile cooking space, and groups of steel ball bearings embedded in the concrete create a built-in trivet for hot pots and pans.

"The countertops are art to me," Plunkett says. "To take a material like concrete and make it beautiful and functional is the definition of art. The ball bearing trivets were the idea of the countertop artist, as was the integrated drain tray by the sink."

If the emotional heart of *Morning Light* is the kitchen, then the architectural heart is the common area from which the rest of the house radiates. Off the kitchen are the pantry and a powder room, both with the requisite driftwood accents. An office and guest suite adjacent to the common room are comfortable and well-appointed. Near the front door are stairs leading to a second guest room and the master suite, both of which have windows overlooking the common room. A screened porch off the kitchen and dining room grants access to the crofters and to stairs leading to the deck off the master suite, as well as the sleeping porch on the second floor.

In the upstairs guest room, a simple set of Z-braced shutters, not unlike those you would find on a 150-year-old home, open to the common room below. The master suite features a 15-light window (the mate to the window-cum-shoji-screen below) that stretches nearly floor to ceiling, and a bank of square windows, all without shutters, shades or curtains, overlooking the common room. The effect is airy and open, and the positioning of the windows helps maintain privacy in the bedroom while allowing light from the bedroom skylights to filter down into the main part of the house.

In nearly every room the Petersons have brought the outdoors inside, but in others they brought the inside outdoors. On the main floor, a large screened porch filled with Harper's furniture creations and Plunkett's quirky found art provides the perfect spot to entertain,

Opposite page: The sleeping porch is an ideal spot to read or dream the afternoon away. Above, right: Sitting high in the trees, the sleeping porch provides a bird's-eye view of the forest. Below, right: Harper's pine table is the centerpiece of the screened porch.





## THE PETERSONS

Like the roots of the live oaks that surround their forest home, the Peterson family's roots on Bald Head Island run deep. Harper and Plunkett's relationship to the island dates back to 1984 and continues to grow as they plan to spend more time here in their new home.

Harper's dad, affectionately known to everyone as "Pops," was a fixture on the island for many years. Ask any Bald Head Island old-timer about Pops and they inevitably have a colorful tale to tell. "Everyone knows Pops," Harper says. "In the early days, my dad was the first person you'd see when you got off the ferry. He'd have his chair and umbrella set up, and he'd rent golf carts, bikes and canoes to visitors."

The Petersons parlayed that early business venture into the store now known as Riverside Adventure Company, and eventually opened the sister stores Canopy Outfitters and Maritime Passage in Crew's Quarters. They recently expanded their island businesses to include The Kayak Shack.

Harper and Plunkett's influence also runs deep in the island's history. They're credited with co-founding the now famous July Fourth Golf Cart Parade—an iconic island experience—and were one of the first couples to be married in the chapel.

Their children—Addie and Alex Corrigan, and Lily, Kit and Will Peterson—spent a large part of their childhood on Bald Head Island. "I have so many great memories here," says Lily, 31. "I'm glad we have this house to come home to now to relive those memories and make more."

enjoy an aperitif in the evening light or savor breakfast al fresco.

The most prominent feature on the porch is another table built by Harper. Long and narrow, the table's top is a single slab of pine harvested in the early 1900s. The table has knotholes and a live edge where the bark has been removed but the board's edge retains the natural contours of the tree. The legs of the table are debarked cedar logs, making it appear as if the deck was built around them. Benches, side-tables and tall display columns Harper refers to as plinths, all built from old-growth pine from the same sawmill as the table, mix nicely with the outdoor dining chairs placed around the table.

Upstairs, off the master-suite deck, sits another screened porch that Plunkett refers to as "the sleeping porch." Here the centerpiece is the antique opium bed from Thailand. Once colorfully painted but now faded with time, the posts and headboard still show hints of color: hazy blue the color of opium smoke, copper the color of the clouds at sunset, and red faded to the pink of cherry blossoms. The sleeping porch puts you in the middle of the trees, and, from the bed, a 270-degree view of the canopy of the maritime forest makes you feel like you're in a bird's nest waiting to take flight for the first time.

Above the bed, a piece of Peruvian art, constructed from tightly rolled coils of newspaper and magazine pages, forms a billowy, child-like cloud. The dreamy quality of the piece is the perfect complement to the room.

In many ways, the bed is a metaphor for the work Harper and Plunkett put into the house: ideas enriched by desire; things reused, repurposed, reinterpreted and recurring. The Peruvian art is the home itself: a dream where inside and outside intertwine, a place of high ceilings and subtle echo.

"Harper worked on the house for two-and-a-half years, acting as designer, contractor, carpenter and furniture maker along the way," Plunkett says. "But we've been talking about the house for 25 years."

"It's a long time to have a project on your mind," Harper says, "and I think we got it right." ☈

*Jason Frye is a freelance writer living in Wilmington, N.C., with his wife Lauren. He holds his MFA in creative writing and longs to live in the maritime forest and write poems in the Chinese shan-shui tradition.*

