

# DECOR MAINE

| ARCHITECTURE ART DESIGN EXPERIENCE FOOD SUSTAINABILITY |

SEPTEMBER 2020



## GOOD BONES, GREAT RENOVATIONS

TALL HOUSE, SMALL TOWN:  
A REIMAGINED COLONIAL  
*in Cape Porpoise*

*Day Trip:*  
5 LIGHTHOUSES, 1 STOP  
FOR BLUEBERRY PIE  
+  
AN ESSAY BY  
JENNIFER FINNEY  
BOYLAN



# ARTIST,

# ARTISAN,

Words:  
**HEATHER CHAPMAN**

Photos:  
**LAURYN HOTTINGER**

With a personal manifesto anchored  
in artisanal integrity, Mat O'Brien  
builds to last

# ARCHITECT



Mat O'Brien, owner of O'Brien Wood & Iron, approaches all projects with enthusiasm, an artful eye, and meticulous attention to detail.

This custom staircase partition was crafted from western red cedar. The slats echo throughout the home as room dividers.

**TO HAPPEN UPON AN** illustrator-turned-painter-turned-builder—*nearly* turned architect—is akin to plucking a needle from a haystack. To happen upon an entire *team* of talented builders, architects, carpenters, and managers, all with past lives in the arts—from literature to painting to juggling to theater—well, some might call that a coincidence. Mat O'Brien, however, owner of O'Brien Wood & Iron in Portland and proud employer of this multitalented crew, calls it a deliberate calculation. "Who you surround yourself with is everything," says Mat. "Everyone is here because they believe in and exemplify the level of artistry, craftsmanship, and kindness that I want O'Brien Wood & Iron to represent. Creative people tend to be incredibly detail oriented and possess a high level of care for the work that they do."

Indeed, this team is special and moreover dedicated, having happily left behind successful careers to join Mat in the world of building and architecture. With a straight-shooting mission, "Better building by people who care," it becomes clear what cultivated their interest in—and subsequent love for—the work.





◀ O'Brien Wood & Iron worked closely with architect Jocelyn O. Dickson on her new home in Cape Elizabeth.

▼ Lead Carpenter Will Wheeler, who is well-schooled in historic preservation, prepares his measuring tape.



photo: Chris Battaglia



In 2002, as a recent graduate of MassArt, Mat began painting and restoring homes from the 1700s and 1800s. It went well enough for him to open O'Brien Wood & Iron in 2008. Nearly twenty years since his start in restoration, his operation is a full-service design, build, and remodeling company, providing millwork, design, the sale of domestic and exotic hardwood, and custom residential and commercial builds. True to his beginnings, Mat enjoys projects steeped in history, taking the associated challenges in stride alongside his team. "Old buildings are notoriously challenging," Mat explains. "Our primary focus in restoration-based projects is 'getting it right' for years to come—using long-lasting materials, implementing modern energy codes, and trying to work within the building envelope all while ensuring historic accuracy."

One project captures the rigors and rewards of Mat's restoration work. An early 1900s-era building on Sherman Street in Portland was badly damaged by fire.

A year after the accident, O'Brien Wood & Iron—along with subcontractor Rideout & Turner—was tasked with removing the entire third-floor living space and roof to build a structural ridge that would support the original cross-gabled dormers. "When I showed up at Sherman, it was condemned from the fire," Mat says. "All of the previous tenants' belongings were still in the building, exactly as they had left them when they fled from the fire. It was as I would imagine a residential war zone to look." With little in the way of choice, the crew gutted the entire building, leaving only the structural center wall on each floor. For the restoration, Mat and his team used a 1924 Portland tax map photo and the existing front gable to ensure that they were remaining true to the original architectural lines and embellishments. Various elements were rebuilt, including some of the original corbels, the central load-bearing wall, and all the burnt areas on the second floor. New Marvin windows were installed, and the exterior

▲ In the entryway and living space, Mat and his team built custom wooden slats from western red cedar that serve as Zen room dividers.



▲ A first-floor bathroom in architect Jocelyn O. Dickson's Cape Elizabeth home is graced by a custom vanity made by O'Brien Wood & Iron. Patterned floor tiles by Clé Tile and wall tiles by Ann Sacks.

◀ A Scandinavian-inspired kitchen features exposed shelving, decorative pottery, and a minimalistic row of healthy potted plants.





photo (and below): Chris Battaglia



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An original 1889 fireplace inside 22 Spring Street in Portland is painted in Benjamin Moore Shadow.

was extensively rehabilitated—vinyl siding removed, clapboards and cedar shingles repaired. “We ultimately didn’t win the interior finish work due to expense,” Mat says, “but I’m proud that we saved that old building rather than seeing it get ripped down.”

Although Mat and his team have ample experience and expertise in restoration and historic preservation, O’Brien Wood & Iron’s capabilities don’t end there. “We’ve had some really fun and rewarding projects,” Mat says. From a custom sauna built inside a refurbished horse trailer to remodeling a space on Spring Street into a dual gallery and kitchen to building a modern home for an architect in Cape Elizabeth, O’Brien Wood & Iron undertakes every project with an honest and artful approach. “When we set foot onto a project site, we always promise to do two things,” Mat explains. “We will make it both aesthetically beautiful and high performing, and we will also make it right.

Sometimes that means slowing down and redoing something to provide the highest level of attention and respect for our clients.”

And clients notice. With words like “meticulous,” “prompt,” “detail oriented,” and “old school” used to describe Mat and his team, it’s a wonder that this artisan retains his humble aura. “I think what gives me the highest level of satisfaction is the realization that people want us around. Most people are weary of contractors being in their homes, but we aren’t just contractors trudging around a job site—we are artists, mothers, fathers, and professionals, dedicated individuals on a mission to bring integrity to the field,” Mat says. “We build to last—not only in regards to the building itself but also to the people we meet along the way. We feel successful when our clients are happy. Reputation and relationships pay dividends.” ■

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“I take great pride in knowing that people are comfortable and happy having my team in their home,” says Mat.

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One unique project involved renovating a horse trailer into a sauna-on-wheels.



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