

Maine Home

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A vintage bus restored,
French villa beauty in Bar Harbor,
+ the coming of age of Jill McGowan

New Life Down an Old Road



A 1959 Chevrolet Viking short bus is tenderly restored from the chassis up



We recently sat down with Will Winkelman of Winkelman Architecture to talk about his team's thoroughgoing refurbishment of a 1959 Chevrolet Viking short bus—a design project that is traveling the state and turning heads wherever it goes.

Q: HOW DID THIS UNUSUAL PROJECT FIRST CROSS YOUR PATH?

A: The first mention of the bus was as an "Oh, by the way..." from a client at the end of a project meeting. He said he'd seen this "cool old bus in a field," and thought it had potential to become something special. I have worked with this client for years on a wide variety of projects—buildings as well as the occasional odd thing, like the bus, for example. We work together well and have a very collaborative relationship.

Q: HOW DID THE OWNERS PLAN TO USE THE BUS?

A: Their ideal goal was to maximize flexibility—to be an extra guest room for the family's camp when stationary, to be a camper when the family went on road trips, and to be transportation for multiple guests when the camp is busy entertaining, to make group outings easy.

Q: WHAT STATE WAS THE BUS IN WHEN YOU FIRST SAW IT?

A: The bus was sitting in a distant corner of an overgrown rural field. It wasn't on blocks, but may as well have been. It was apparent that it had not been used for quite some time. It had long ago been transformed into a camper—though with some rough edges to be sure. Our visit was to evaluate if it was within the realm of reason to consider a restoration. And, while it seemed crazy, we looked past the tired heap and saw its vintage appeal and unique potential.

Q: TELL US ABOUT THE WORK DONE TO REVAMP THE BUS.

A: The exterior was a pure restoration back to its vintage bones. But the interior was a different matter. The client envisioned a funky, hippy, Moroccan vibe. In the end, it's like we inserted an alternate life into the bus—a road not yet traveled. We took it back to the sixties and rooted it there with beads, dangles, and paisleys.

An early design thought was to plant the bus in the landscape on blocks. Offering up only the "guest room" option would have been the path of least resistance—it would have avoided the expense of a full-blown mechanical rebuild. But the allure of using it for transportation was too tempting, and multitasking the vehicle's use proved to be the key to moving the project forward. Yes, it's a camper, but it also has the ability to transport 13 people with seat belts—perfect for when the camp is loaded with guests and an outing is planned. Getting there becomes part of the fun.

Q: WHO WORKED ON THIS PROJECT WITH YOU?

A: I asked Vince Moulton of Vincent Moulton Interiors to work with me. We've enjoyed working together in the past, and we work together seamlessly. Vince was part of the design process from the start: space planning, detail resolution, finishes, salvage, fixture resourcing, and the texture and fabrics that brought the hippy-Moroccan vision to life. When in the bus, you can almost smell the sixties...

The mechanical aspect of the restoration was huge and led by a



Architect Will Winkelman and his wife, Kathy, borrowed the bus for an adventure of their own (opening spread) on a bluff overlooking the beach at Hermit Island Campground in Small Point.

One of the design challenges was how to transform the interior space from transportation to living room to bedroom and back. Planks that bridge the center aisle (opposite) for sleeping mode are concealed in slots under the seats, well secured to be rattle-free. The table lamps at the driver's seat and dinette (above), mounted on fixed threaded bases, can be unscrewed and stowed. In creating the design, there was a delicate balance between finding the right dimensions to efficiently accommodate multiple bodies for travel and also providing comfort as a guestroom for two relaxing adults.



The design team of Will Winkelman, Vince Moulton, and Tony Jose thrived on the details: the finishes of the woodwork, hardware, paint, and fabrics to bring to life the client's vision for a funky Moroccan feel.

A luggage rack above the driver's seat (above) provides valuable storage space and adds a classic look.

patient local mechanic who thoughtfully worried and nurtured the project through every step. He organized rebuilding the frame and mechanicals from the chassis up, tailoring the components to the bus's body and keeping the feel, function, and features consistent with a vintage vehicle. Hoyt's Auto Body did the exterior work. They lifted the body off and tenderly restored it to its original self—sometimes fabricating replacement parts, sometimes sourcing salvaged parts on the Web. They were all working on a budget, so there was much debate and searching for solutions that would fit the need without going over budget. I have to say that, for the mechanical and auto-body team this undertaking was such a unique pursuit that it seemed to be pure joy—a labor of fascination if not love.

To transform the vehicle into a camper we turned to the custom-boat-building trade: an obvious source for beautifully crafted, uniquely shaped, and highly fitted work that is accustomed to utilizing every inch of space. Tony Jose of Linekin Bay Woodworkers was chosen. He runs a small woodworking shop in Boothbay that creates beautiful cabinetry and furniture as well as boat interior fit-outs. He is accustomed to working with architects and was not flustered by the small space or the multiple compound curves the interior presented. Tony's experience contributed much to the design.

Q: THE MILLWORK ADDS SUCH A WARM RICHNESS TO THE INTERIOR...

A: When it came to the interior millwork, we translated the design vision into an Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Quarter-sawn white oak felt like the right fit—it's not exotic, not trying too hard, wants to be finely crafted, and is evocative of the era. The floor is salvaged hard pine to maximize durability, installed using the original surface of the re-sawn boards exposed to look like it has been there for half a century.

The lines inside the bus are soft, gentle curves. We felt that asking the interior millwork to do anything but follow that lead would have been an insult. On this Tony was great—for him, that request was a cakewalk. I recall hesitantly asking him if we could do a particular compound-curved component, and he quietly replied with a shrug. "Sure." He sculpts wood like it was putty.

Q: WHAT IS IT LIKE INSIDE THE BUS WHEN IT'S OUT ON THE ROAD?

A: During the design process we tried to keep movement in mind when making detail decisions. We were seeking to dampen rattles or fatigue. One endearing, but unintended, consequence is that the lamshade beads make a nice gentle whoosh when driving about.

When the bus is on the road, you feel it—that's for sure. But one must remember: it's a vintage experience we've created. Getting up to the speed limit is enough for me, and feels like it just might be enough for the bus too. I'm happy to let those in a hurry pass on by.

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