

Bungalow in a Box offers small houses – just not too small

Woolwich builder's kits can be shipped and reassembled
BY ROSANNA GARGIULO Times Record Staff



RAOUL HENNIN of Woolwich, co-founder of Montsweag Brook Corp., designed the timber and panel-framed, Bungalow in a Box kit. Hennin typically builds three or four small homes per year.

ROSANNA GARGIULO / THE TIMES RECORD

WOOLWICH

“I’ve been building all my life — my parents’ business is right around the corner here,” said Raoul Hennin, owner and operator of Montsweag Brook Corp. and designer of Bungalow in a Box, a small house kit.

In a workshop suffused with the scent of fresh-cut hemlock, Hennin pointed through a thick patch of Woolwich woods in the direction of The Shelter Institute, founded by Pat and Patsy Hennin in the mid-1970s. The institute made a name in the region for its iconic post and beam, passive solar designs.

To Hennin, who grew up with his brother and sister in a 600-square-foot house, a small home was just simply a home.



RAOUL HENNIN works with clients to develop custom bungalows, but also offers basic floorplans. This finished bungalow is typical of Montsweag Brook Corp.'s patented Bungalow in a Box.

MONTSWEAG BROOK CORP.

“Before that, we had an even smaller house,” Hennin said. “When I was in kindergarten, we lived in a 16-by-16-foot building — it was a shed structure with no plumbing.

“To me, I don’t really think in terms of small or not small — it’s sort of a sliding scale,” he said.

Splitting from the well-known institute where he’d worked alongside his parents for many years, Hennin co-founded the Montsweag Brook Corp. with his wife, Vicki Hennin, in 1998. He started building his own signature design — petite panel-framed bungalows that can be transported on a flatbed and raised in a matter of days.

Designing small homes isn’t simply a matter of subtracting rooms or drawing them smaller. According to Hennin, it’s a multi-faceted challenge that requires thoughtful planning, skill and compromise.

“The things that we take for granted that are small in a big house — like bathrooms, closets, storage — they are much bigger in proportion to the small house,” Hennin said.

“There are a lot of choices to make when you’re building. Stairs — stairs are a real problem because they take up so much space,” he said. “We solve this sometimes by using a ship’s ladder.”

Hennin said he has also seen clients use specially designed compact spiral staircases, but these unusual designs often don’t meet building codes, and codes vary from town to town.

Hennin, who builds homes across New England and ships select small structure kits from coast to coast, said his clients or their site managers are usually responsible for permitting.

“There is a lot of variation; not only in the codes the towns enforce, but also in how the towns enforce their codes,” Hennin said. “I think that’s one of the great things about the U.S. still — like Town Meetings, it’s one of the last bastions of democracy.

“From town to town you’ll find significant differences in how towns grow up and how they look,” he said. “If you don’t like the experience of living in one town you can find a very different experience in another town because they each have their own character.”

Leaving aside the intricacies of design and permitting, especially for nonstandard housing, Hennin said smaller structures are truer forms for natural materials.

“When you’re working with natural materials, you’re limited by what they can do,” Hennin said. “So wood: If you go much beyond a 16-foot span the wood starts to complain — I mean a beam that is 20 feet long will sag

over time. Wood naturally defines a small structure.”

Hennin built his own home more than 18 years ago, and — with a 1,100- square-foot footprint and three stories — it is not tiny. Hennin said he regards the tiny home movement with approbation — but also cautions that the model 200- square-foot home, may be an overdone ideal.

“I don’t think they have it quite right; I think they are too small,” Hennin said.

“The average-sized American home is like 2,500 square feet,” Hennin said. “In many ways the small house movement has been an overreaction to American consumption, to our feelings of guilt about our place in the world.

“Those things are all true — but when you build you have a responsibility; you are a steward of the future,” he said. “That structure is going to be standing hopefully long after you’re gone and to truly be conservationminded, it has to be useful.”

Hennin said rather than emphasize size, he uses a formula that balances three points of value: cost, design and usefulness. This formula, Hennin said, has put him in the ironic position of being a small home builder who often encourages clients to build bigger.

“This is what’s important, purpose-built structures. Now we have the largertan average homes and the tiny, tiny houses,” Hennin said. “But we have something else in Maine, something that’s in between, and that’s the summer camp, the cottage.

“Those, for me, are the model that I really enjoy doing,” he said.

Part of the reason for starting a little bigger is the long-term cost savings: Smaller is often more expensive per square foot. Another reason is that Hennin tries to consider the longterm plan for the home.

Hennin said in building his home, he started larger than necessary because he knew he wanted to live there indefinitely. Nestled in the woods with views of Montsweag Bay, it is easy to understand why.

“For the first 10 years it was just my wife and I, and the house was huge — it was overwhelming — and I thought, ‘Why did I do this?’” Hennin said.

“Today our kids are getting older and there are places where the house doesn’t quite work anymore and we’re talking about that — how to fix these things,” he said.

The costs may make some clients cringe, Hennin said. Though prices fluctuate with the market, he estimated that structures now cost approximately \$100 per square foot — or \$14,000 for a 12-by-12 foot structure. Some smaller structures he builds he estimated cost \$50 per square foot.

Hennin uses impressively thick posts in his structure, mostly from Maine or regional forests that have been processed by local sawyers. The quality of materials he said is high — as reflected in the cost — but contribute to the longevity of the structures.

“Small can be good, but it has to be done well,” Hennin said. “To build a small house well is often more expensive than to build a large house badly.”

Hennin said he has approached building his business much the way he has approached building his home — as an ongoing, organic process.

“It’s hard to design a small house and it’s equally hard to maintain a small business. Every few months I’m reminded how delicate a small business is,” Hennin said.