

The New York Times

Where Bigger Was Better, Small Wonders

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Published: September 6, 2001



EAST HAMPTON, N.Y.— The landscape of eastern Long Island is long and low, with the brown expanse of potato fields and dunes sweeping down to the sea. New houses stand out for all to admire, straining as high as zoning laws permit, competing for water views. Over the last 10 years, 30,000-square-foot mansions have been going up like Levitt prefabs in varying styles of shingle and pop Palladian and, recently, Miami stronghold style with white stucco walls.

But, as the summer of 2001 winds down -- and margin calls from brokers filter in -- there is evidence of a mood shift here: three houses finished in the last few months suggest a new spirit of restraint. They are part of a gathering anti-McMansion movement, antidotes to the architectural Viagra of recent years. All three are under 2,000 square feet, relatively affordable (from \$150,000 to about \$400,000), and require a minimum of maintenance. Each cuts against the grain of Hamptons excess to offer a lighter, slightly whimsical take on summer living.

They may be small, but they're not austere. "At first we called it a throwaway house," said Ken Kuchin, who built a sculptural white metal shed on a prominent stretch of sand dune, one of the last open oceanfront lots in East Hampton. He spent \$150,000 on the house -- less than some Hamptonites spend on imported patio tiles -- but it grew into something more: a little sonnet to the sun and sea.

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"We wanted it to be very casual -- a place you could just walk into in a wet bathing suit, with sand on your feet," Mr. Kuchin said.

But what will the neighbors say of a 1,000-square-foot, stripped-to-the-bone home with an outdoor shower beside the entrance, for all to see? Instead of sharing cups of sugar, residents here have a habit of taking one another to court. There is something about the light and landscape (and the proximity to New York City) that brings out proprietary instincts. "The house is very visible and very raw," Mr. Kuchin said. "It sticks up off the ground." A few neighbors complained to the Village Board about the metal siding. Realtors who were shown the property reacted as if it were a minor act of subversion.

In a true beach house, the focus is always on nature. And here, views are everything, with floor-to-ceiling windows framing the rolling dunes.

The return to a simple summer style is also taking root far from the expensive dunefront lots. In the Northwest Woods of East Hampton, Stuart and Susan Silverman devised their own weekend paradise.

"We told our architects that we weren't looking for a huge house but a jewel, something small but beautiful," Mrs. Silverman said. "The rooms didn't need to be big or fancy with marble and all that. We just wanted a room for family living and a great room outside."

For Helene Winer, owner of Metro Pictures Gallery, building small was a defense mechanism.

She bought a 700-square-foot bungalow overlooking Mecox Bay in Bridgehampton in 1993. She was happy with its spartan simplicity until she found herself crowded in by looming neighbors who built high to gain prime views. The house to the east -- "a kind of shingle erection" according to Ms. Winer -- rises high. "They could see right into my living room," she said. The neighbors to the west also built prominently, in what Mrs. Winer described as "a Soprano style."

Frederick Stelle in Stelle Architects, a Bridgehampton firm, heard Mrs. Winer's plea. "She called our office and said, 'Help, I'm being invaded by ugly McMansions.' She wanted to create a peaceful world while blocking out the aggressive new neighbors." Stelle added 1,200 square feet of living space while retaining the pared-down aesthetic of the original bungalow. The new section is oriented to the north and looks onto Mecox Bay while blocking out the looming new intruders. "We thought of it like a horse

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with blinders," Mr. Stelle said. "You have absolutely no sense of the neighbors when you're inside the house."

The Winer house is a lesson in self-restraint. It's a little Bauhaus beach house perched on cedar stilts with an all-glass wall facing north, toward the bay, and a screened-in porch for dining. Ms. Winer grew up on the West Coast, and she wanted something simple, like the Santa Monica surfer shacks she remembered from her youth. "We didn't pump it up any higher than it needed to be," she said. "It felt natural. You just walk in and out on the ground level." She kept the landscape as simple as possible, with dune grass and a narrow footpath cutting through the bayberry and marsh grass to the edge of bay.

Mr. Stelle said, "Helene knows who she is, and that's what the house is about."

The Hamptons is probably not about to convert entirely to simple modern homes. Traditional styles, however ersatz, will no doubt continue as the preferred expression of social arrival. "Traditional architecture is still very 'in,'" Mr. Turino said. "It looks like old establishment, and that's what most people with money want."

But Rick Shumway, a contractor who worked on the Winer house, said he had been hired to build a half-dozen modest modern homes in the past few months, a number that surprised him.

In keeping with a less bullish market and diminished expectations, the recent resurgence of the modern beach house, however limited, may signal the beginning of an actual trend -- one that offers a leaner alternative to having it all.

Alastair Gordon is the author of "Weekend Utopia: Modern Living in the Hamptons" (Princeton Architectural Press).