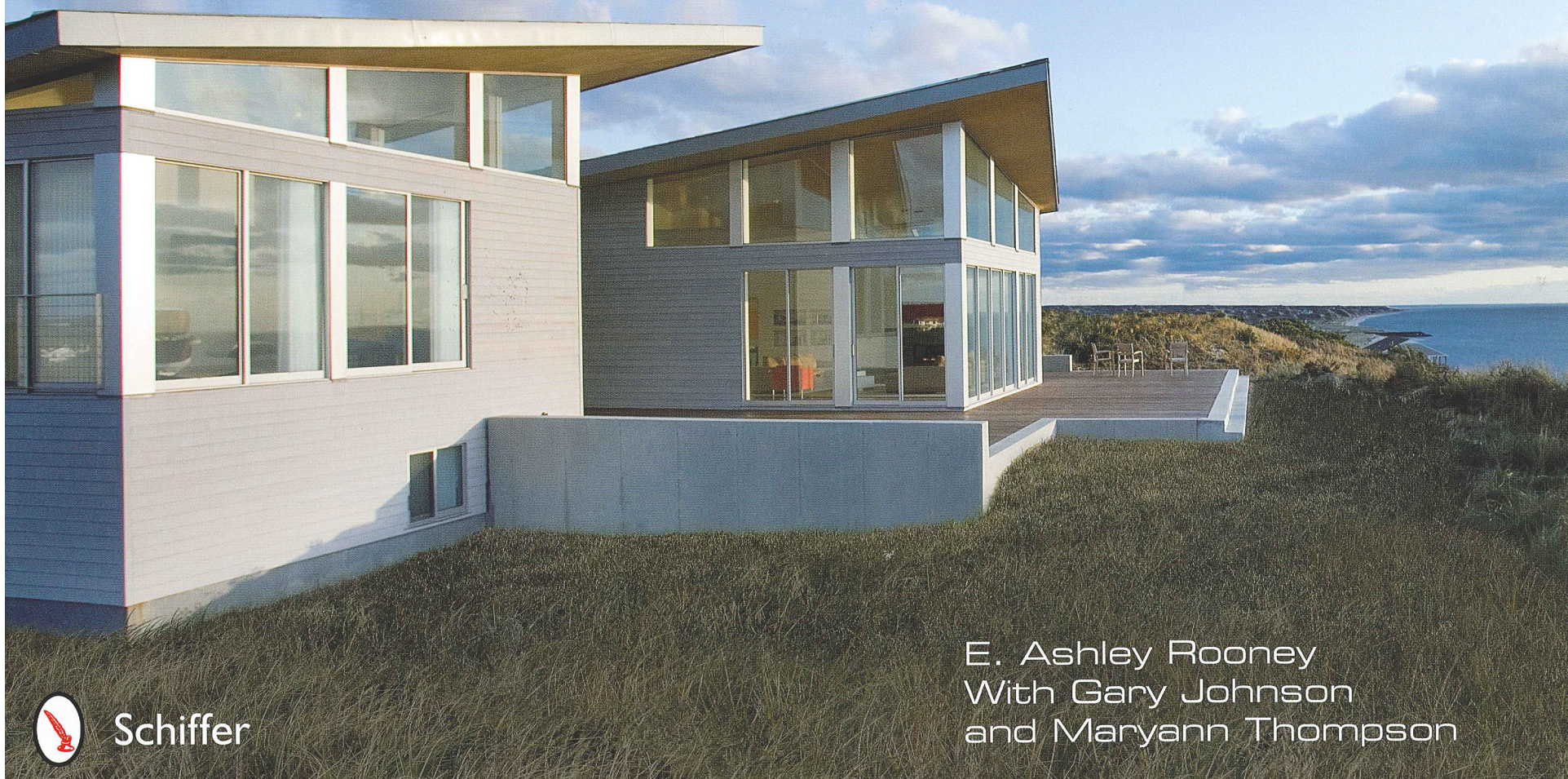


# contemporary **BOSTON** architects



Schiffer

E. Ashley Rooney  
With Gary Johnson  
and Maryann Thompson







# Acknowledgments

The creative act never ceases to amaze me; each new book is a novel experience, an adventure, and a challenge. There is a reason why I selected the particular architects for this book to be the leading-edge architects of Greater Boston. They do classy work, look to the future, and watch their deadlines. They came highly recommended with Maryann Thompson, Marcus Gleysteen, and Debra LaPorte (Debra LaPorte Communications) suggesting several architects.

Gary Johnson, a principal at Cambridge Seven Associates, adds some phenomenal talent to this book. As can be seen in the “Foreword,” he certainly knows Boston’s architectural history and how to explain it to the layman. Maryann Thompson’s work is frequently featured in the national media. She has some fascinating insights in the “Introduction” about our homes and their links to our lives and the work of today’s New England architects.

This book is about Boston and its environs, so I asked several excellent local photographers to provide me with some of their images: Fran Gardino, Walter Harrington, D. Peter Lund, and Harry Taplin.



## INTRODUCTION

# The House in Transformation

Maryann Thompson, Principal,  
Maryann Thompson Architects

**S**ome of the most important works of modern architecture were houses: Corb's Villa Savoye, Villa Stein de Monzie, and La Maison de Jules; Mies' Farnsworth and Tugendhat houses; Loos' Moller and Muller houses, to name a few.

These houses were essays on modern life, as their creators argued that the older models were no longer suitable. In truth, the house is architecture's closest encounter with life. It is basic. This is how we eat, how we sleep, where we sit.

The idea that the house must be tailored to life generates new architectural scenarios. Early modern architecture was as much about new life as it was new technology.

Similarly, today's lifestyles are profoundly different from those that the early houses in New England and the early modern houses originally accommodated. We desire different kinds of spaces. Our kitchens, home work spaces, relationships to natural light and landscape, our relationships to technology and energy use, even our closets and the way they are manifested say something about the culture in which we live and the values we support. Because the house is so intimately tied to life, its manifestation becomes a mirror of who we are. As we change, the architectural forms and spaces in which we live innovate.

For instance, the relationship of the kitchen area to living spaces has radically transformed in the last twenty years as kitchens become the new living rooms of our day. A decrease in domestic servants (and servant quarters, with the resultant separation required) plus the new ideal that family life takes place around the kitchen has led to the typology of the "great room": the merged kitchen, living room, and dining room,

which often opens to the adjacent landscape or yard for outdoor eating. This paradigm is a radical shift away from past models and reflects both the multitasking that modern families do (e.g., make food and set the table while relating to each other and to nature and, at the same time, doing homework) as well as concerns about nutrition and its role in the wellbeing of the family system. We are seeing a trend in residential construction to eliminate the living room altogether in favor of this large spanned multipurpose room.

The advent of the "great room" in residential architecture has been supported by our ability to handle larger spans than in the past. The use of steel in residential construction, with its capacity for large spans, has also allowed for a more open plan where space is continuous rather than discrete. Technology has allowed for bigger panes of glass to be created, replacing the small paned mullioned windows of the past and increasing the levels of natural light in our living spaces.

All conspire to allow for smaller homes to be comfortable. Large expanses of glass not only allow the interior to be filled with light, but also facilitate the depth of the "borrowed" landscape outside to create a sense of deep space. Large spans allow for the feeling of generous space inside, even if it is just in one main room. These advances in structure and technology, along with the cultural acceptance of the combined kitchen, dining, and living room, have supported a whole new movement of small or "tiny" homes. Smaller homes will probably be the wave of the future, and they should be. They promote intimacy both within the family and within their context, as they rely on external spaces to complete their program. Family intimacy has, and

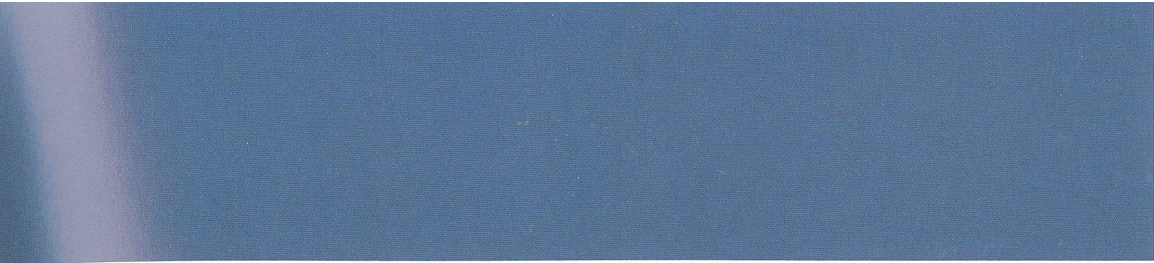
will, become more and more important as the social relationships are exported beyond the physical space of the room via the Internet. Smaller homes are also inherently more "green" since they not only use fewer resources in their construction, but they also often use less energy in their functioning.

The advances in structure, glass, and envelope technology over the past century have also inspired a range of formal and material investigations into the perceptual dissolution of the boundary between interior and exterior. This investigation has facilitated a strong connection to nature within the architectural expressions of the past century. The dissolved boundary between interior and exterior was one of the central tenants of modern architecture and is still appealing today. Many of the early modern houses, however, failed to create comfortable interior environments. This is largely because the large expanses of glass were often not operable and were not shaded from the southern- and western-facing sun. The connection to nature was purely visual, facilitated by a thermally sealed envelope, which often overheated and created too much glare.

Bringing the subject into a closer relationship with nature remains a valid ambition; however, it must be considered in broader terms. In addition, sustainability is often considered too narrowly. It is primarily considered in technological and ethical terms. We need to think of sustainability in experiential terms. It has the possibility of critically extending the modernist discourse of interior and exterior beyond visual criteria.

Today's thoughtful New England architects have learned to create overhangs at their large expanses





of glass to shield the summer sun and to let in the winter sun and to use many operable windows to facilitate cross ventilation. The connection to nature goes beyond just the visual to allow for the actual workings of nature to shape architectural form in search of efficient climate control and the creation of thermally comfortable interior spaces. Similarly, passive solar siting strategies, if available on a site, can further this agenda; the house becomes more deeply rooted in its environment by responding to its climate. Passive heating and cooling methods help connect a building to a site through a more thermally reciprocal relationship. We anticipate a variable interior climate through engagement with natural elements such as light and airflow — creating a richer experience. All these strategies conspire to have a powerful impact on our perception of the seasons and attune us to changes in nature via changes in our environment, creating a strong sense of “place identity” in an increasingly placeless world.

House design is one of the oldest and richest idioms, adapting constantly to cultural transitions and becoming a lens into the deepest values of the lifestyles they support. As houses outnumber every other type of building, they are the most widely considered architectural problem. Shifts in the conception of the home can and have had large-scale societal impact. Forward-thinking architects, working with visionary clients, can employ the medium of the home to envision new ways of living in the world. Thoughtful design will continue to create a shift, not just in what our homes look like, but also a shift in the values embedded in how we live.

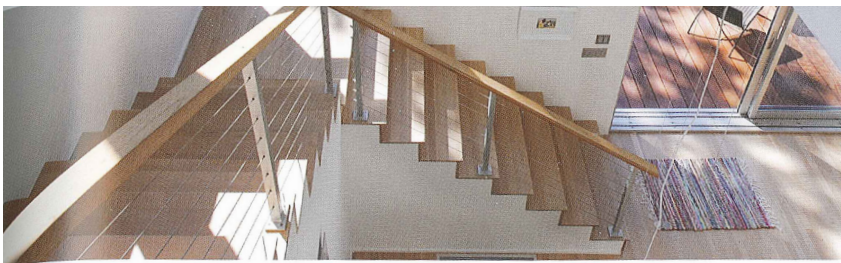
The designs featured in the following pages reflect a diverse array of work currently being done in New England as well as highlight many of the transitions we are experiencing today.

*Maryann Thompson has been practicing architecture in the Boston area for twenty years. Her practice is based in Cambridge, where she is also on the faculty of Harvard's Graduate School of Design.*









# Maryann Thompson Architects

Cambridge, Massachusetts

**I**ntegration builds successful design: during the process, in the finished product, and for the life of the home and its surrounding ecology. At Maryann Thompson Architects, we form a team among the owners, builders, consultants, and our own staff. Our design process is grounded in an ongoing dialogue and relationship with the site, our clients, and our team. Working with natural phenomena — shifting patterns of light and breezes, expansive views and sheltered nooks, delicate ecosystems and powerful landforms — our buildings find a solid foundation,

energy stream, and inspiration for beauty. The end result is a house that grows out of the landscape, or cityscape, celebrating a series of moments from the connection with the surroundings to the private spaces sheltered within.

Our goal is to continue this integrative process throughout the life of the home. We invite light from above and cross-ventilation through each room. Weaving the languages of landscape and architecture, we dematerialize the boundary between interior and exterior. Our houses — indeed, all of our buildings —

exist as an unfolding sequence of spatial experiences, each moment designed from the human perspective. Shifting effortlessly from the scale of the landscape to the detailed craft of building, our projects situate each resident and visitor dynamically within the materialized dreams of our clients. We love this process of weaving place and building, old and new, common sense and unique thoughts, for each home is a true expression of our client and another piece of who we are at Maryann Thompson Architects.

## BLUFF HOUSE

Occupying the crest of a windblown bluff overlooking the Atlantic and nearby saltwater ponds, the house designed by Maryann Thompson Associates situates the occupant between an earthen stone plinth and light trapezoidal roof forms. Shifting and skewed roof planes simultaneously provide a sense of shelter and openness. The space between the planes allows for clerestory windows, which let in diffused light from above. Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates was the landscape architect on the project. *Courtesy of Steve Turner.*







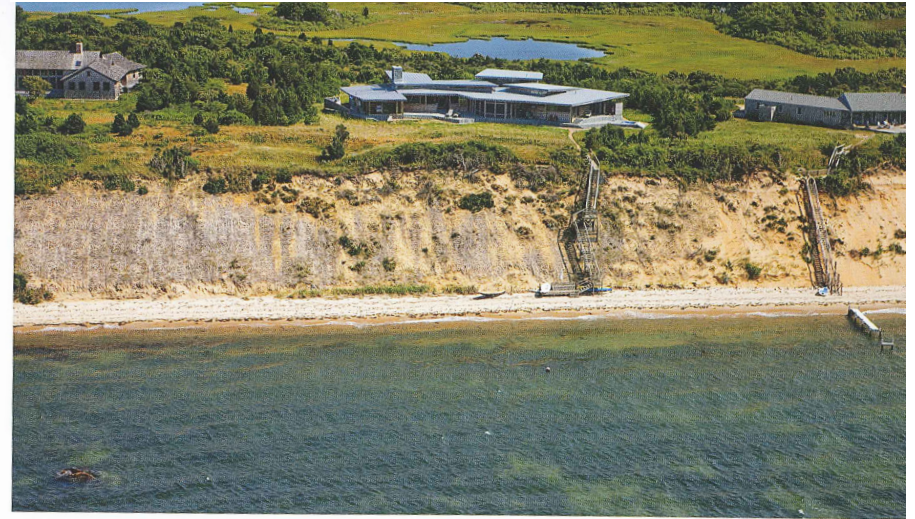
Bluff House is a light-filled yet sun-sheltered four-bedroom home. The design for this summer home, with its wide overhangs and wooden interiors, is peaceful and shady, harkening back to earlier summer camps. The interior of the home shifts and turns to take advantage of light and views from differing positions on the site. Light from above, brought in through clerestory windows, gives the interior both a luminous and diffused shade quality, which is a welcome relief from the hot summer sun. The fireplace is clad in Vermont structural slate. It forms a central element in the house, addressing the sitting area, kitchen (on the left), and dining area (in the foreground). *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



The house both shelters the inhabitant from the summer sun yet remains visually open to enjoy a panorama of water views. This view from the dining area through the kitchen, with its window seat and beyond to the screened porch and distant landscape, shows the layered spatial quality of the house. The kitchen has a door that opens to the screened porch, allowing for easy transfer of food from the kitchen to the outdoor dining area on the porch. The screened porch is oversized, creating an indoor/outdoor room with an ocean view. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



The natural forms of the bluff generate the structure's complex form. The house visually becomes an extension of the landscape as the roof planes respond to the landscape and the cresting waves of the Atlantic below. *Courtesy of Steve Turner.*



A window seat nook near the fireplace addresses the distant pond view and is shielded from direct sun by a large overhang. Operable windows let in the ocean breezes. The cedar cladding of the roof underside creates a plane of continuity from inside to outside. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*

The angled floor plan allows for a sense of privacy within the neighborhood, blocking out the neighbors from view and creating a covered exterior sitting area facing the ocean. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*





## ENIGMA HOUSE

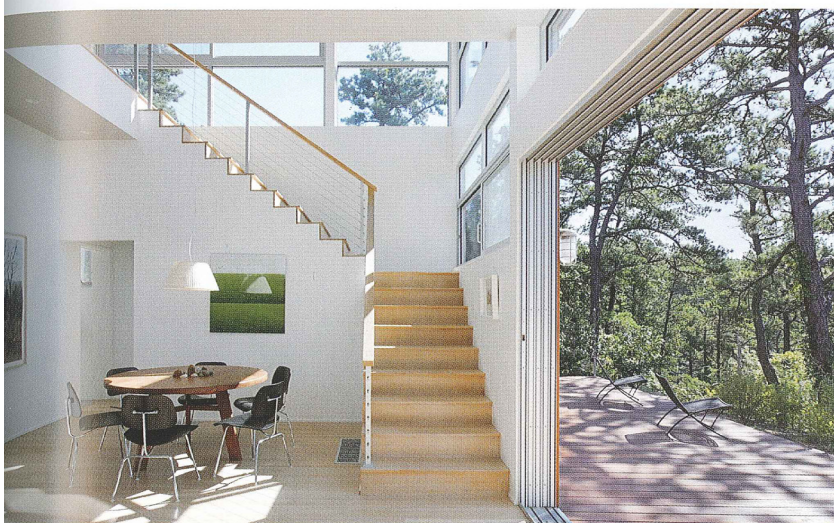


Designed by Maryann Thompson Architects, this small vacation home rests upon an inland hilltop glade surrounded by conifers and native shrub grasses. The plan is divided between two volumes: the larger one contains the primary living spaces, bedrooms, and a study; the smaller one is designated as a guesthouse. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



A screened "dogtrot" — an outdoor passageway between the two structures that provides shade and ventilation — simultaneously "joins" and "separates" the two spaces and opens the living areas to the outdoors. A pivot at the dogtrot folds the house at its entry. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*





The kitchen opens to the screened porch, extending the transitional space of the large screened porch and creating ambiguity between the inside and outside. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*







This view looks back from the screened porch through the kitchen and living/dining area. The dappled light entering the house through the trees of the wooded site gives a magical quality to the house's interior. The abundance of glazing in the house and its openness to light create a dialogue with the deep woods of the site. Its white interior becomes a canvas upon which the dappled light can play. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



The tall ceiling heights downstairs hoist the bedrooms and study into the sky. Views from the second floor stair landing, master suite, study, and roof deck, which spans the dogtrot, disengage the occupant from the ground plane. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



## RIDGE HOUSE



The site of this house is just off Long Island Sound, where it is strongly defined by the granite ridge that runs alongside it. Three distinct volumes reinforce the ridge line and nestle between existing mature copper beech trees. The house sets up a sequence of layers that contain and then release the occupant to the landscape. On approach, the west-facing public edge suggests an insular presence forming an entry court that veils the expansive view beyond. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



Once inside, the building skin, which contained the occupant on the west, folds in on itself, transforming and opening up to the landscape and sun through broad expanses of glass and large sliding doors toward the east and south. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*





Existing stone retaining walls and foundations give form to the immediate landscape, dynamically etching the long history of this working farm. At times the middle ground is lost, hidden below the edge of the retaining wall, though linked directly with the far-off treetops of forest and the sound on the distant horizon. At other moments, clouds and fog isolate the site to its perch between the layered walls and the ridge. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



Maryann Thompson Architects' undulating footprint defines a series of outdoor rooms that are spatially continuous with the interior. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



Openings address unique views from or through the house to the property, creating a continual dialogue between the interior spaces and the pastures, nearby outbuildings, and the horizon. Here, the materiality of the stair walls, plaster mixed with marble dust, captures the reflection of the land, pulling it inside. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*





Fireplaces clad in dark ceramic tile anchor the distinct volumes. At the same time, they create defined layers of interior space that flows around and project the view past to the next space and out to the landscape. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



The house unfolds in layers, culminating in unobstructed views of the farm and the ocean in the distance from a private balcony off the master bedroom. *Courtesy of Chuck Choi.*



