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THE MODERN FARMSTEAD

High on a Connecticut ridge sits a rambling new version of big house, little house, backhouse, barn

WRITTEN BY WILLIAM MORGAN PHOTOGRAPHED BY WARREN JAGGER



THE SECOND-STORY roof terrace off the master bedroom provides a vantage point for distant views to Long Island Sound, Block Island, and Montauk Point. Outdoor seating is by Janus et Cie.

STRETCHED ACROSS THE RIDGE, the house is linked to the garage (LEFT) and the free-standing office (RIGHT) by covered walkways. An old granite foundation forms a wall around a small pool that recalls a classic farm pond. COR-TEN steel forms the risers on the grassy steps that span the lawn.



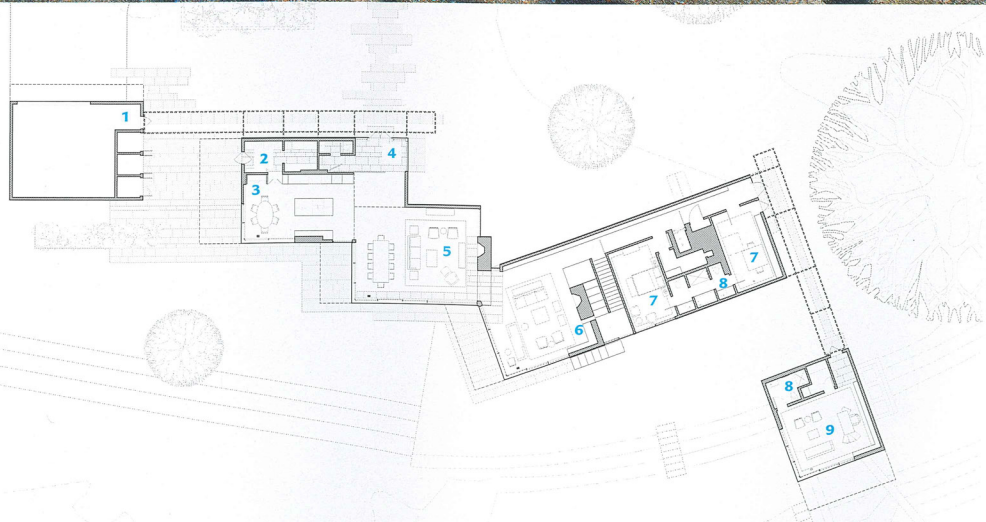
Stonington, Connecticut, is all about the sea — sailboats, beaches, and a working harbor surrounded

by a rich townscape of handsome 18th- and 19th-century wooden houses. Yet one couple whose roots in this coastal community go back to the 17th century sited their steadfastly modern house along one of the town’s highest points, Manatuck Ridge. The ocean is but a distant view as a New England agrarian landscape of orchards, stone walls, and pastures dominates.

The site is part of a 200-acre farm now in a land trust the owners helped create a few years ago in order to prevent this vestige of a farming life from being developed. Today, the farm is home to 30 head of cattle.

Though the couple live elsewhere, they had always summered in Stonington and were ready to build a new vacation home they hoped to use in all seasons. To ensure a sensitive approach to the site, they first sought out

ARCHITECTURE **MARYANN THOMPSON ARCHITECTS** | LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE **REED HILDERBRAND**



First Floor

- 1 GARAGE
- 2 MUDROOM
- 3 KITCHEN
- 4 ENTRY
- 5 LIVING/DINING
- 6 LIBRARY
- 7 BEDROOM
- 8 BATH
- 9 OFFICE



ETCHED GLASS PANELS can be pulled closed to isolate the kitchen (FACING PAGE). Clerestory windows (RIGHT) allow natural light into the living room and draw the eye to the wood ceiling.

landscape architect Douglas Reed, principal of Reed Hilderbrand in Watertown, Massachusetts. Reed, in turn, introduced his clients to Maryann Thompson Architects in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a firm he was sure would design a house that was deferential to the land. “This was one of our most satisfying projects,” says Reed. “We were part of an evolving landscape. We had great connection—perfect synchronicity—with the clients.”

Together, Reed and architect Maryann Thompson grasped the genius of the site. They wanted “the structures to not dominate the landscape,” says Thompson, who is principal of her eponymous firm, “but to actively participate in the site’s multiple readings.” Anchoring the design to two grand and ancient beech trees, they ran the house along the ridge, following the topography of the gentle hillside and subtly canting the building toward the distant water views as it ambles along. Existing stone walls, remnants of an old barn, were incorporated into the grounds. Complementing the vintage forms, rows of COR-TEN steel, a naturally rusting metal, frame grassy steps for a modern edge.

Thompson’s three-pronged plan of simple rectangular units—entrance area, living spaces, office retreat—creates an organic progression, which she says reinforces the ridge’s declared levels of privacy that open to the spacious landscape and endless views.

A two-story wing that pivots off the living room fireplace at a precise 72-degree angle holds bedrooms and a library/study. Outside, a pergola leads to the free-standing office, forming a contemporary interpretation of a garden pavilion. Shifts in angles between the units are barely noticeable, but they create what the architect calls an “undulating footprint, which addresses unique views from or through the house to the pastures, horizon, and sky.”

The facade reveals itself like a blossoming flower with various planes of flat roofs elegantly breaking out from the box form. From the front, the house, with its white-stained horizontal boards, gives no hint that the boundaries between indoors and out almost dissolve once inside. A series of glass walls slides open to the summer day. Steps, curtains, varied ceiling heights, and





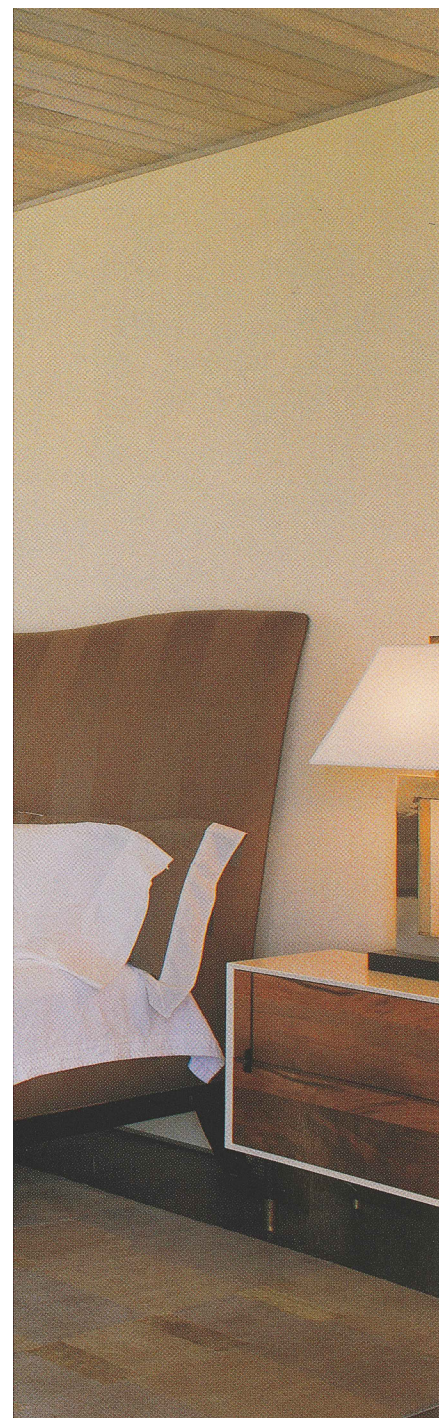
etched glass screens define the living spaces without interrupting the impression of fluidity. The minimalist palette of natural wood, stone, and soft cream tones, says Thompson, “allows the interior space, the site, and the light to be the primary medium of the scheme.” Understated materials are elegantly wrought. Stained oak floors with bluestone accents integrate the spaces. Venetian plaster walls, more tactile than drywall, have a leather-like texture. Substantial chimneys are finished with a ceramic tile whose rich patina reads like stone or steel.

The roof terrace off the master bedroom has a fireplace, making the outdoor space an extension of the owners’ private lair. Here, looking out over the pastoral landscape to Long Island

Sound, one grasps the philosophy that infuses this uncompromisingly modern composition. Nautical motifs are reminiscent of 1920s European modernism, yet the house transcends any sources in its complex manipulation of volumes. The white clapboard walls recall how the International Style shed its European-ness and took firm root in New England soil in the noble tradition of houses by such luminaries as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Richard Neutra, and Paul Rudolph.

The clients credit the success of the house to “working with talented, intelligent, collaborative designers,” a process that “resulted in a house and landscape which we love.” ■

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THE MASTER BEDROOM'S large windows frame an ever-changing landscape (ABOVE) while the interior remains calm and neutral. The whole house is unified through the use of lightly stained wood ceilings. Vertical marble slabs separate the his-and-her vanities at each end of the master bath (ABOVE RIGHT) from the central shower.



DESIGN DECISION

How a Mostly Summer House Hibernates in Winter

In such a carefully designed house, it is not surprising that, beyond siting, provisions have been made for the sometimes harsh climate of coastal Connecticut. As the clients spend more time in their new house, year-round comfort was an important consideration in the design.

The entrance hall leads into a major crossing point between the kitchen and dining room, where, in summer, the view is straight through walls of glass that literally disappear when slid open. In winter, however, a walnut panel extends across the hall to form a protected entry that blocks the house from chilling winds.

The roof of the kitchen and dining wings, visible from the master bedroom roof terrace, is covered with small round beach stones that resemble those found in a Zen garden. More pleasant to contemplate than asphalt, the stones act as a simple but effective means to prevent snow from building up.

Cleverest of all are the Kevlar hurricane curtains that can be installed over the walls of glass in case of a storm. Unlike the usual sheets of plywood thrown up in emergencies, these shields are attached to rows of attractive metal snaps along the entablatures.



LIKE THE TYPICAL New England connected farmhouse—big house, little house, backhouse, barn—this new structure is spread out but also linked together. A covered walkway across a terrace connects the garage and the kitchen (LEFT), where window walls slide into pockets to open the room to the outdoors.