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Abiding *by the* Tide

Continuing the tradition of Modernist architecture on the Outer Cape

ON LIEUTENANT ISLAND in South Wellfleet, large tracts of conservation land peacefully coexist with a small, quiet community. For residents, the island is accessible only by a narrow road that winds through the marsh and over a wooden, one-lane bridge. The road becomes impassable at very high tides, a minor inconvenience in comparison to the island's spectacular proliferation of shorebirds, unabashed views, and abundance of some of the region's best oysters.

(left) Access to Lieutenant Island is gained only by passing through a tidal marsh and over this wooden bridge. (above) The home's view-facing side is appropriately exposed to the elements. Outdoor living spaces include the master bedroom's private balcony, a screened-in porch, and a wraparound outdoor patio.

Unconcerned with the island's travel restriction and enamored of its peaceful setting, a professional couple decided to purchase a lot for their future summer home. Situated on a gentle bluff, their chosen site offered stunning views of Indian Neck to the right and, in the distance to the left, the long bow of Great Island.

When Cambridge-based architect Mark Hammer of Hammer Architects was contracted to design the three-bedroom summer home, he responded with an emphatic and skilled nod to the Outer Cape's tradition of Modernist architecture. In the post-WWII years, recently arrived architects from Europe such as Marcel Breuer and Serge Chermayeff, among others, designed modest homes on the Outer Cape's then readily available pockets of land. Their architectural style was functional, unpretentious, and integrated into the landscape in compatible and unobtrusive ways.

BY ANDRé VAN DER WENDE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY POMMETT

The living room is separated from the dining area and kitchen by an L-shaped built-in seat, which opens for extra storage. Above is the loft-style master bedroom. To the left, this walled-in corridor separates two bedrooms from the main living area.

PHOTO BY LANCE KEIMIG

Available views of Wellfleet Bay called for this impressive wall of windows in the living room. Motorized awning windows at the top allow sea breezes inside. To the right is the first-floor office space, which also offers water views.

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"There are people who think that Modern homes are oddities," says Hammer. "But I disagree. The Outer Cape became a vacation spot much later than the rest of the Cape, and the first wave of vacationers happened to be largely architects, artists, writers, and educators. I believe that the work of these architects is an appropriate prototype for building on the Outer Cape. Their Modern designs," Hammer continues, "exemplify the way people want to live in the summer, and are mainly about connecting with nature."

According to Hammer, this home's design was influenced not just by his personal interest in Modernist architecture but also by the site and the surrounding landscape. Although the lot offered a perfectly placed knoll upon which to place the home, zoning restrictions stipulated a 30-foot buffer from an old, unused road. To compensate for this slight setback and still capture as much of the view as possible, Hammer and the homeowners decided upon an open floor plan. As a result, the home's interior is not so much a collection of boxes as a subtle progression of planes that slowly elevates, moving ever closer towards the view.

"The overall idea was to have the house be open to the view, be easy to live in, and have a lot of outdoor spaces," says Hammer. "The context of the house is nature, woods, sky, and rolling terrain. In this setting, we were not forced to relate to any particular style of architecture. As the design evolved, interior walls started to disappear and everything became more open and much more glassy."

Hammer, who recently helped Truro's Castle Hill Center for the Arts plan a Modern house tour on the Outer Cape, was not alone in imagining the possibilities of a Modern house. The owners, both of whom are writers well acquainted with the arts and architecture, were open to Hammer's Modernist preferences.

Outside, the modest stature of this 2,000-square-foot island retreat reveals a conscious respect for the surrounding natural landscape. The reddish-brown tone of the cedar clapboards softens the home's geometric exterior and blends seamlessly with the scrub pine surroundings. "That's the idea," says Hammer: "That it just grows up out of the landscape."

Since building codes regulate the insulation value of a building and thereby its allotment of windows, Hammer

The master bedroom's private study is, like the bedroom itself, open to the living areas below. Hammer worked with the homeowners to choose lighting fixtures, like this low-voltage cable system by Bruck Lighting, that would complement the home's minimalist tone.

was forced to place windows selectively. By limiting the number on one side of the home, he was able to include more in areas with the most scenic vistas. Window density culminates in the expansive, two-story living room. Initially, the owners worried that the large quantities of glass would leave them feeling exposed, but living there has assuaged any concerns: "The proportions are so good, or so right, that it feels quite cozy even though it's a very open space," they explain.

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By opening the living room upward and outward, the wall of windows not only takes advantage of available sunlight and the view, it's also an integral part of the home's ventilation system. Since the home would not be outfitted with air conditioning, Hammer decided to take advantage of prevailing southwesterly winds. His design called for a series of motorized awning windows on top of the wall—protected from the elements by the roof's overhang—that open to provide fresh breezes all summer long.

The living room's overall design provides enough intimacy for two and yet the capacity for many. To a great extent, the room's spacious feel is a product of not only its nearly 20-foot-high ceiling, but also its openness to the dining area, kitchen, and, surprisingly, the master bedroom on the second floor.

Initially, the master bedroom was intended to act as a more closed environment than its eventual loft-style layout. "First we planned on a wall between the bedroom and living room, then a large interior window, and eventually we settled upon a simple railing," remembers Hammer. Viewed from the first floor, the bedroom is visually private from all angles, and a canvas curtain can be brought down to soften the light and dampen the noise if necessary.

Though small and understated, the master bedroom area has a suite-like feel with its library/study off to one side, a bathroom, and a private balcony.

PHOTOS BY MARK HAMMER

Topped off with a Cape-style pergola, the ample balcony easily accommodates two people for reading or relaxing. Accented by a lazy cluster of vines slowly creeping up from the screened-in porch below, the upper deck provides superb views of the island locale.

Beneath the bedroom, an understated, economical kitchen is reflective of the fact that much of the cooking is done outside on the grill. Everything is practical and easy to reach, from the cherry cabinets to the center island that serves the dual roles of working space and breakfast counter.

Completing the first floor are two guest bedrooms, sequestered from the rest of the house by a dividing wall. Both possess exterior doorways that open out onto a common patio complete with an outdoor shower.

Leading to the master bedroom, the stairway is a combination of mahogany and stainless steel cable railings. "It meets code requirements while providing an open feeling at the same time," notes Hammer.

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Since both of the owners are writers, it makes sense that the first floor's office space enjoys the same primary view as the living room. Its wall of windows is at a slightly different angle from the living room's in order to frame an alternate view, notes Hammer. Despite the surprising fact that there is no door with which to close the office off, the space still manages to feel private and secluded.

For Hammer—always mindful of the owners' summer-home frame of mind—creating welcoming outdoor spaces was just as important as designing a relaxed interior. The living room's glass sliding doors open to a bluestone patio and garden, all of which were installed by Crossroads, an Orleans-based landscape design company. The patio offers open-air relaxation amidst modest yet colorful groupings of roses, lilies, lavender, coneflowers, and grasses, not to mention adjoining plots for herbs and vegetables. Off the kitchen is a particularly favorite space of the owners: the screened-in porch, outfitted with a swinging chair made of canvas.

"The adventure of living here," say the owners, "is that when there are seriously high tides, we can't go on or off. It's rarely been a problem. A couple of summer evenings we've come back and the tide's been higher than expected, but then we get to walk through this lovely phosphorous water under a starry sky. It's not a bad penalty!"

FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE MARKETPLACE ON PAGE 113.

Artist and freelance writer André van der Wende is a New Zealand native who has been living on the Cape since 1988. He is currently working as a catering chef.