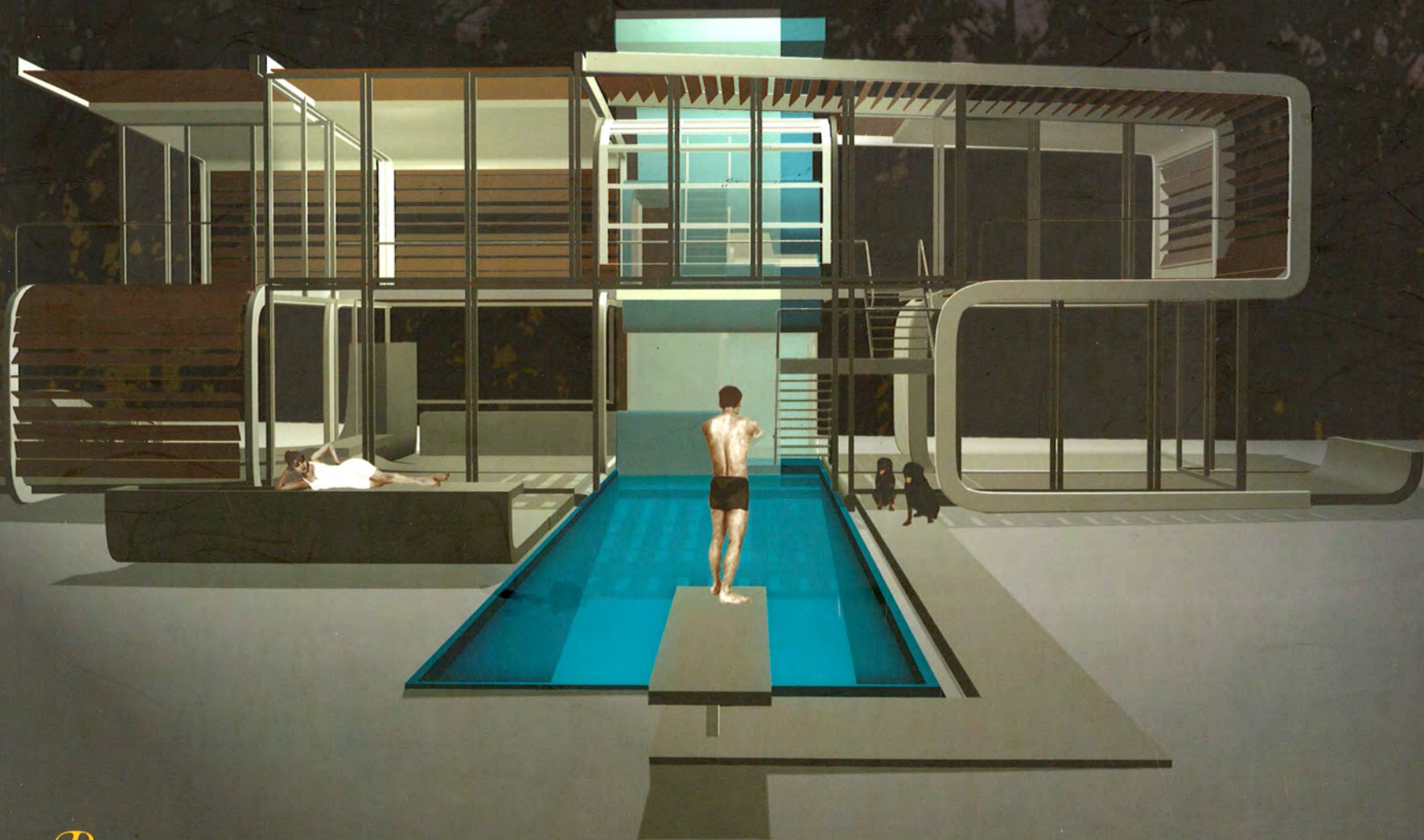


AMERICAN DREAM THE HOUSES AT SAGAPONAC

Modern Living in the Hamptons

Coco Brown Essays by Richard Meier and Alastair Gordon





LEFT and BELOW site location
OPPOSITE existing woodlands at Sagaponac site



Introduction by Coco Brown

The idea of inviting a group of the finest architects to each build a home in one community first occurred to me twenty-five years ago in California where I had luckily and inexpensively acquired a rare 188 acre site in the low mountains that crest Beverly Hills. Here, on one of the crests, I imagined building thirty-one houses, each designed by a great modern architect, each on its own descending terrace. Early support for the idea came from my friend Richard Rogers who was then the visiting dean of architecture at UCLA; however even for this proposal of modest density the zoning process became so irrational and arduous that after some years I gave up the idea of combining art and business. At the end, we were granted 118 lots which became the successful but artless Mulholland Estates.

In the early 1990s, on the other coast's Hamptons, I was able to buy an entire "busted" subdivision, a large, attractive piece of land with all the zoning rights and improvements in place. Still harboring the idea of a community of architects, I managed to keep the lots off the market for some years. Then, one evening, I told my idea to Richard Meier, who embraced it and, after visiting the site, generously and selflessly offered to invite with me some thirty-five architects to design houses for the project. It is a measure of Richard's stature that all those invited, a mix of old masters and some of the most talented of a younger generation, accepted. The project was immediately welcomed by the architecture community and press, which enabled us to widen our perspective and invite such major stars as the great Samuel Mockbee (an inspiration whose death left us bereft) and Philip Johnson (who joined at his own request and whose house we think will survive as one of his best). We also added international participants like Shigeru Ban of Japan, Zaha Hadid of London, Winy Maas of MVRVD in the Netherlands, the Italian Antonio Citterio, France's Jean-Michel Wilmotte, and Lindy Roy, a young designer from South Africa. We now have more architects than sites, but these things, like most dinner parties, have a way of working out.

The site is located just north of the Montauk Highway in the village of Sagaponack equidistant between Southampton and East Hampton and a short drive from the ocean. The site is set apart by natural boundaries, to the south by the railroad and to the east and north by large swaths of county-owned nature reserves. Wide country lanes already exist, and the woods they run through are home to tall, mature trees, so that each house would be framed discreetly from its neighbor. The site includes a thirteen-acre reserve, which will belong to the homeowners' association, with walking paths, individual vegetable gardens, a tree farm, and a center for the community of homeowners. This development

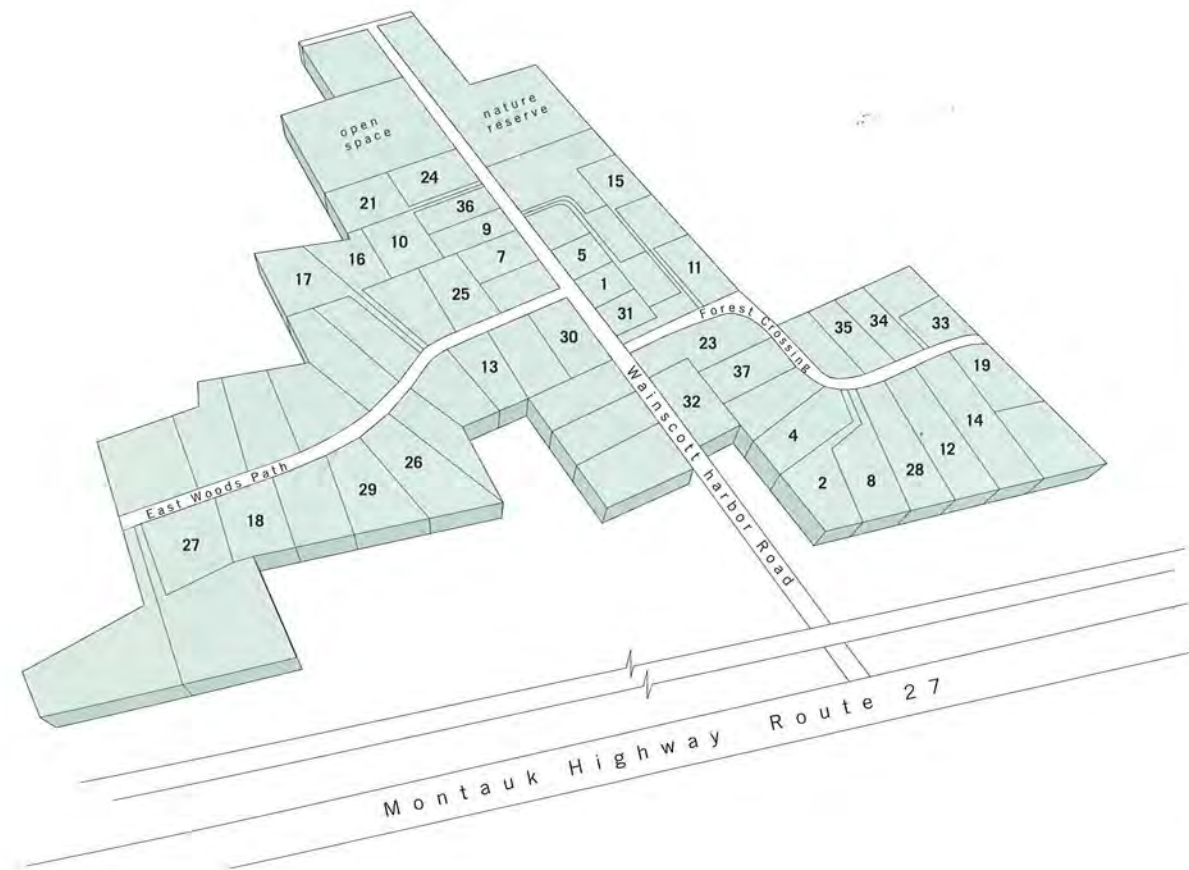
is an anti-subdivision, the opposite of the usual, shoddy conformist repetition that has made the very word subdivision a pejorative. Our intent with the Houses at Sagaponac is to allow a diverse community to evolve, where the houses express the individual voices of each architect and homeowner.

After the acceptances we sent out an "owner's brief" to each architect in which we requested "restraint of gesture" (avoiding the tendencies of one kind of modernism which overlooks basic elements like closets and physical spaces where human bodies must interact and reside), "modesty of size" (a criterion intended as an antidote to the oversize houses then flooding the market), a sense of introspection, respect for the country setting, and an unpretentious, even fun, sensibility.

Over the last thirty months we have been reviewing, editing, and engineering all the designs, together with the architects. As might be expected, the designs are all at different stages. Some designs will not be built. Others are only in draft form, while still others have been carried all the way through final construction documents to building department approval, and will start construction this spring. The project keeps evolving, a work in progress, visible on the website, www.housesatsagaponac.com.

Still the task has been more daunting than I had imagined. Even with the help of our team: **our builder Ronan O'Dwyer**, our engineers Robert Silman Associates, and especially our team of in-house architects, Paula Willson, Sunitha Ramachandran, Jayda Uras and Peggy Hsu, I have often felt overcommitted. I have had occasion to ask myself: Why do this? Why (and how) can I field and edit the projects of thirty-five stars in a field in which I have never even taken a class? I have been devoted to the arts—but other arts: theater, film and literature. Still, I felt unqualified for the job, an interloper, assigned for reasons I did not understand to the role of benign catalyst; a Prufrock, deferential, glad to be of use. I think the results of the interaction have been positive, creative, and rewarding—most work improves under the influence of a client or an editor. My friend Jacquelin Robertson says, "Good architecture is made by good clients. Without them, it is like pushing against cotton." My training in literary criticism has also proven useful—I try to identify the basic idea, drive, or metaphor of each house, and encourage its development; and at the same time to make the house buildable, affordable, and practical ("Where is the laundry room?").

Houses at Sagaponac



- 1 Stan Allen
- 2 Marwan Al-Sayed
- 3 Anthony Ames
- 4 Shigeru Ban & Dean Maltz
- 5 Deborah Berke
- 6 Antonio Citterio with Patricia Viel
- 7 Henry N. Cobb
- 8 Francois de Menil
- 9 James Ingo Freed
- 10 Richard Gluckman
- 11 Michael Graves
- 12 Zaha Hadid
- 13 Thomas Hanrahan & Victoria Meyers
- 14 Gisue Hariri & Mojgan Hariri
- 15 Steven Harris
- 16 Craig Hodgetts & Hsin-ming Fung
- 17 Steven Holl
- 18 Carlos Jimenez
- 19 Philip Johnson & Alan Ritchie
- 20 Robert Kahn
- 21 Stephen H. Kanner
- 22 John Keenen & Terence Riley
- 23 Richard Meier
- 24 Samuel Mockbee
- 25 Eric Owen Moss
- 26 Winy Maas, Jacob van Rijs & Nathalie de Vries
- 27 Thomas Phifer
- 28 Jesse Reiser & Nanako Umemoto
- 29 Jaquelin Robertson
- 30 Richard Rogers
- 31 Michael Rotondi & Clark Philipp Stevens
- 32 Daniel Rowen
- 33 Lindy Roy
- 34 Annabelle Selldorf
- 35 Henry Smith-Miller & Laurie Hawkinson
- 36 Calvin Tsao & Zach McKown
- 37 Jean-Michel Wilmotte

OPPOSITE (top) plan of nature reserve
 OPPOSITE (bottom) architects' lot assignment
 RIGHT existing woodlands at Sagaponac site



I imagine living in the different houses, as a conservative thinker, a “swinging” bachelor, a father of four, or an empty nester, envisioning an environment particular to each role I assume, which brings me to the answer of why I have undertaken this. It is a form of personal existential greed that pulled me into real estate in the first place. I never visit anyplace without looking at houses or land to buy, even if I do not want to live there, because in the process I get to imagine living in all these places, and thus I can—like an actor—multiply my one, little existence into many different lives. There is another illusory motive and that is the ambition, long harbored, to create and leave something of lasting importance, even if it isn’t one’s own creation. Finally, this project gratifies my old love of rebellion. You cannot imagine a place of more self-conscious conformity than Southampton, where men still dress for dinner in blue blazers and velvet slippers, and where the houses (even as they are primarily drawn from the culturally diverse population of contemporary New York) are mostly ersatz imitations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mansions, times whose mores and building styles are defunct. These houses, once hidden behind high hedges in hypocritical decorum, like bejeweled dowagers, are now displaying themselves in the same style, but built larger than ever on postage-stamp-size lots. Our community of well-designed, modestly sized modern houses may be upsetting to the status quo, just as we see some members of the local architecture-review board spoiling to reject these designs, despite the designers’ preeminent qualifications and despite the discreet, wooded location of the project.

Now with the design process well under way, we have begun construction. Already the Hariri and Hariri house is rising, framed on its great plinth like a stage elevated among the tall pines. Neighboring it on one side will be Zaha Hadid’s house, and Philip Johnson’s on the other side. I imagine walking down this wide country lane, passing the Hadid, Al-Sayed, and Johnson houses on one side, and the Roy, Selldorf, Smith-Miller/Hawkinson, and Graves houses on the other, and I think, no one will have seen anything quite like this.

Will they be as beautiful and strong as we imagine? Will people buy them? Will the homeowners be happy there? Will the result be as much a new paradigm as we hope? Ultimately, the proof of this dream—call it Utopian Idealism—will be in the pudding, or in the “building,” and “dwelling” to use Heidegger’s words. “Will these houses actually get built?” ask skeptics. The answer to that question is a resounding yes.