



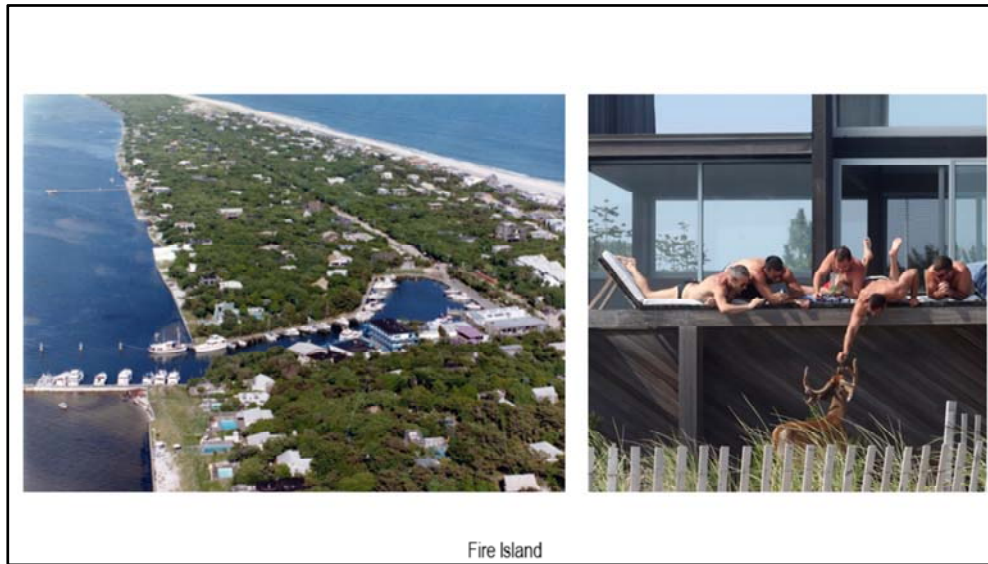
Good morning, and thank you very much, Michael, for your introduction and to the Ocean Beach Historical Society for hosting this event.

I have a clipboard going around for any of you that would like to receive VERY OCCASIONAL updates regarding, for example, house tours that I conduct on Fire Island.



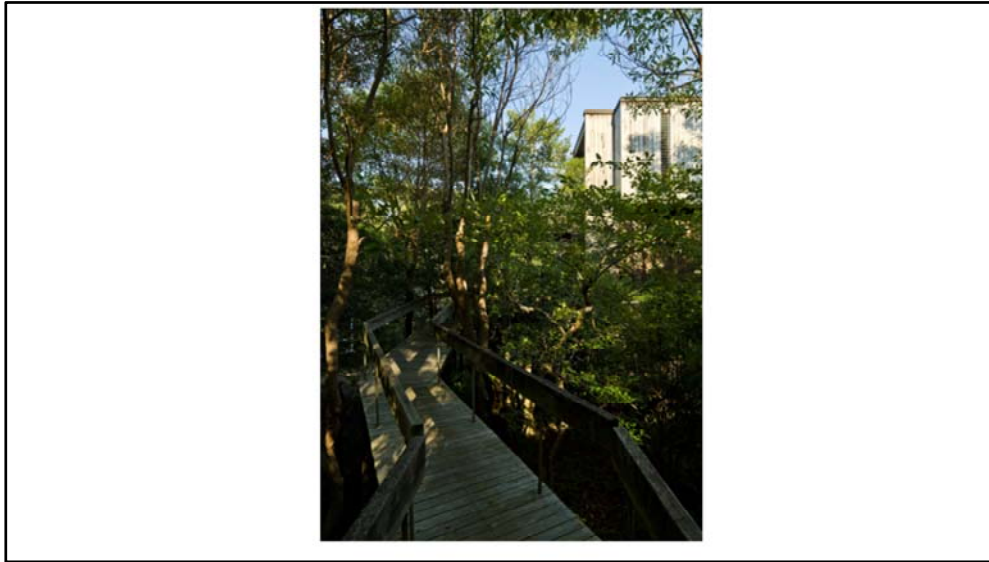
I've spent most of my career as a practicing architect, and the practice still occupies most of my time.

I have designed an array of residential and retail projects that engage me in very intense relationships with the people who commission them. As a result, an architect is a bit like an anthropologist or a naturalist. While we create buildings from wood and stone, architects are really students of human relationships and how those relationships are nurtured. I've always had an interest in how buildings shape a society, and how society in turn shapes them.



Fire Island

Now rather like Darwin exploring the Galapagos, an architect that ventures to an island tends to find very particular relational ecosystems. And I soon chanced upon a remarkable trove of mid-century architecture, that was hiding in plain sight.



This all started, because something kept drawing my eye through this particular tangle of holly trees. A meandering wooden bridge, suspended high above a hillside, threaded its way to a house, seemingly floating among the treetops.



Other odd and alluring homes invited exploration with the HOOK of a soaring roofline...



Or a breezeway cut right through the middle of a house...



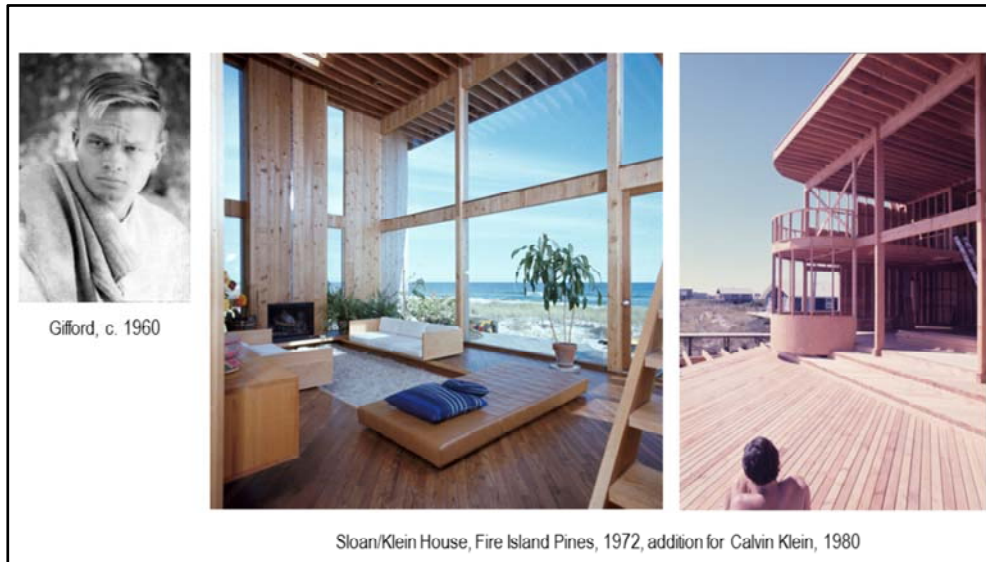
or a dance of platforms artfully dodging the trees. None looked alike but all seemed to be part of an extended architectural family.



I began knocking on doors, and was soon regaled with alternately poetic and salacious tales of the young, handsome, and talented architect who once had the run of this island: an eccentric and charismatic man whose business attire consisted of an attache case and a Speedo. [pause]



I was exploring Fire Island Pines, one of eighteen summer communities on a glorified sandbar which protects the south shore of Long Island from the Atlantic Ocean, forming the Great South Bay. Thirty-one miles long, and barely a quarter of a mile wide, Fire Island rewards the effort to reach it with car-free boardwalks and expanses of protected dunes.



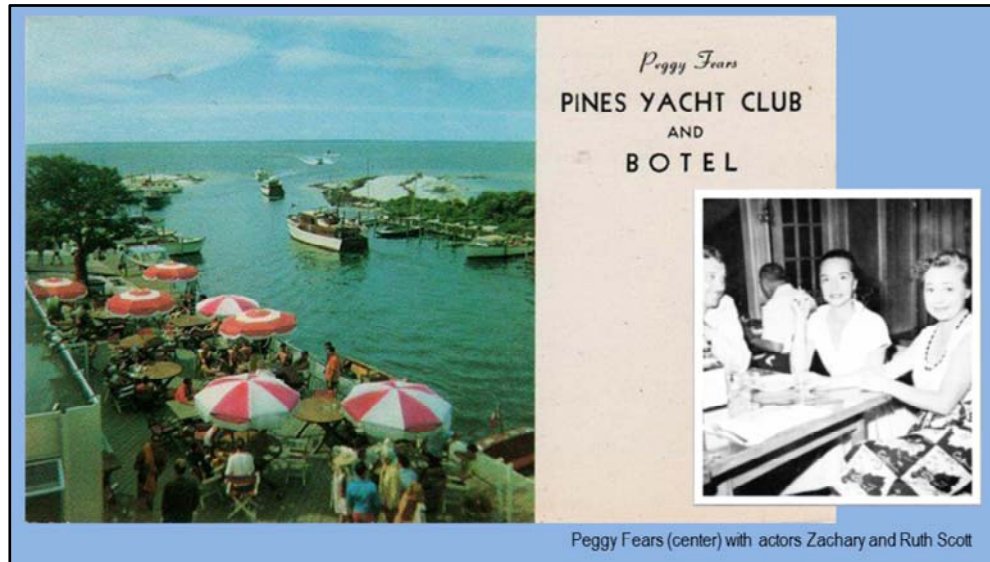
Between 1960 and 1980, 63 Gifford-designed homes led the transformation of Fire Island's TERRAIN. But in rediscovering his architecture, I also found a portal to a lost CULTURE, truncated by AIDS and winnowed by the passage of time, but still resonant with artistic and cultural significance.



I learned that Marilyn Monroe, Diahann Carroll, Natalie Wood, and Montgomery Clift once spurned Hollywood limos for the rustic charms of Fire Island's boardwalks. Truman Capote wrote *Breakfast at Tiffany's* here. Diane von Furstenberg showed off her latest wrap dresses for an audience that included Halston, Giorgio Sant'Angelo, Calvin Klein, and Geoffrey Beene. Jerry Herman and Tommy Tune composed their smash Broadway hits here. And composer Ned Rorem was inspired by the staccato rhythms of the new, modern beach houses QUOTE architected by Horace Gifford so that you live simultaneously indoors and out."



Today, an equivalent roster of talent generally hides away in gated compounds. But these celebrities lived in modestly-scaled homes alongside middle-class vacationers, all with equal access to Fire Island's natural beauty.

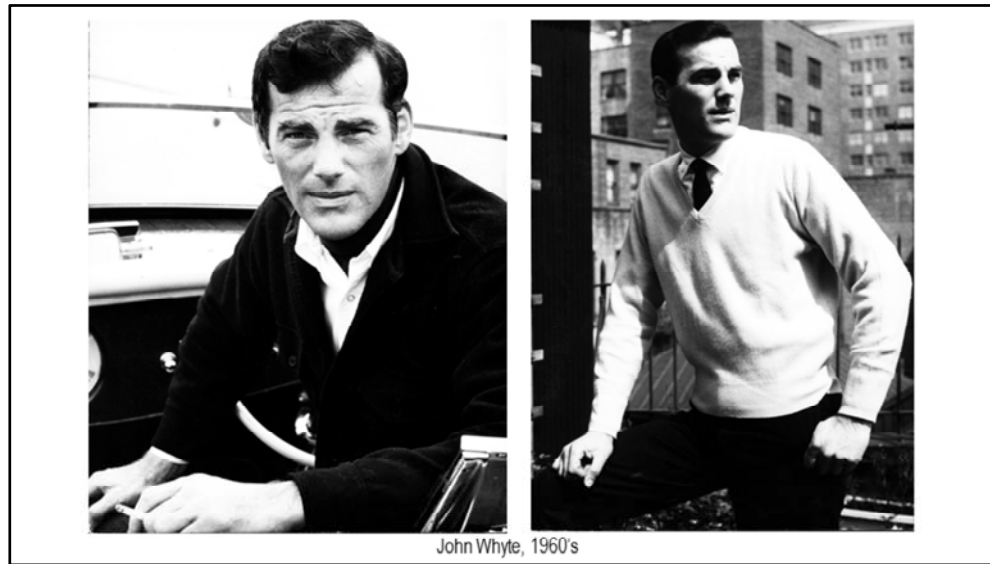


This alchemy of egalitarianism and star power owed much to the Pines' proximity to the gay and bohemian enclave of Cherry Grove. Peggy Fears, a Cherry Grove transplant, former Ziegfeld Follies showgirl, and Broadway producer, held court at her rustic Yacht Club. Fears introduced the theatrical show-business undercurrent to the Pines that persists to this day.

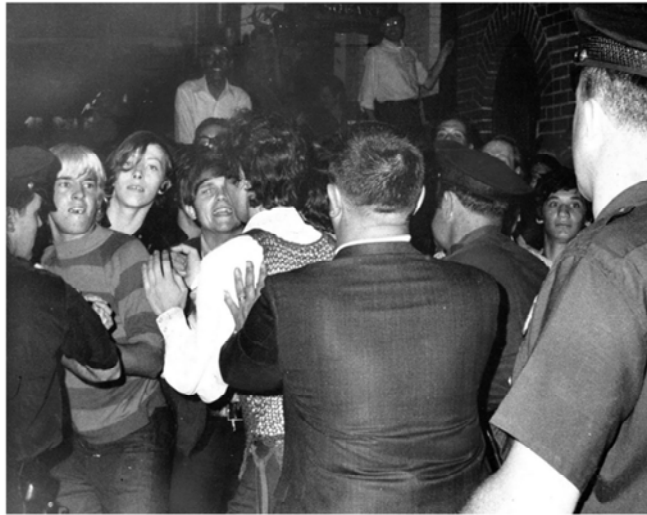


Fire Island Pines Property Owners Association sign, ca. 1960

Soon, the Pines Homeowners' Association tried to make the interlopers unwelcome, as it was well known that the appearance of gays signaled that real estate values were about to PLUMMET. [PAUSE]

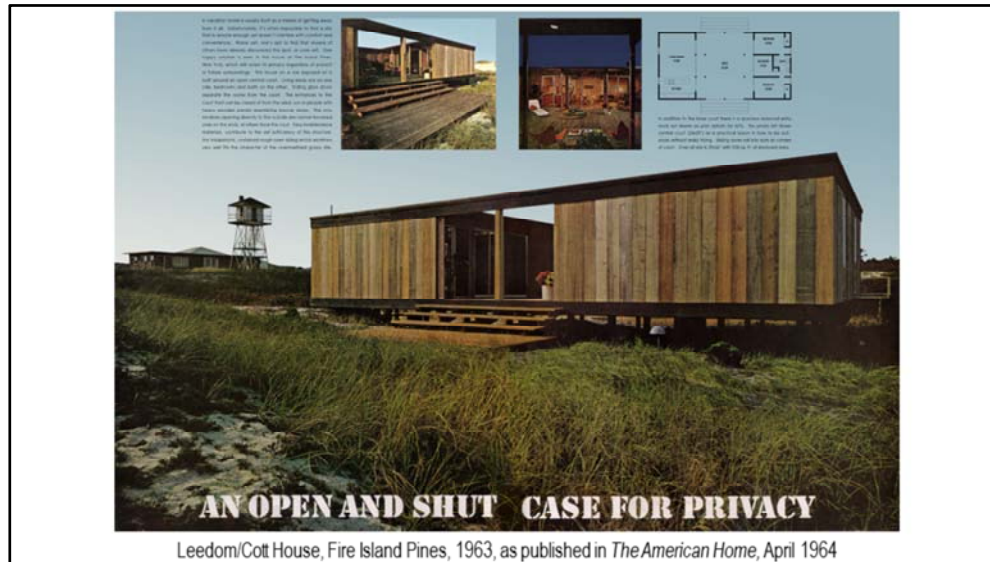


But they were no match for John Burlingame Whyte, a successful model who bought out Peggy Fears and amassed a commercial monopoly in the Pines. Whyte's entourage of fellow models and photographers injected glamour and gaiety into the sleepy outpost.



Stonewall Riots, New York City, June-July 1969

From the beginning, the majority of Gifford's clients were gay men. And his architecture traced the arc of gay liberation with uncanny precision.



From Early 60's pavilions that provided refuge from a hostile world...



Roeder House, Fire Island Pines, 1969

Travis/Wall House, Fire Island Pines, 1972-75

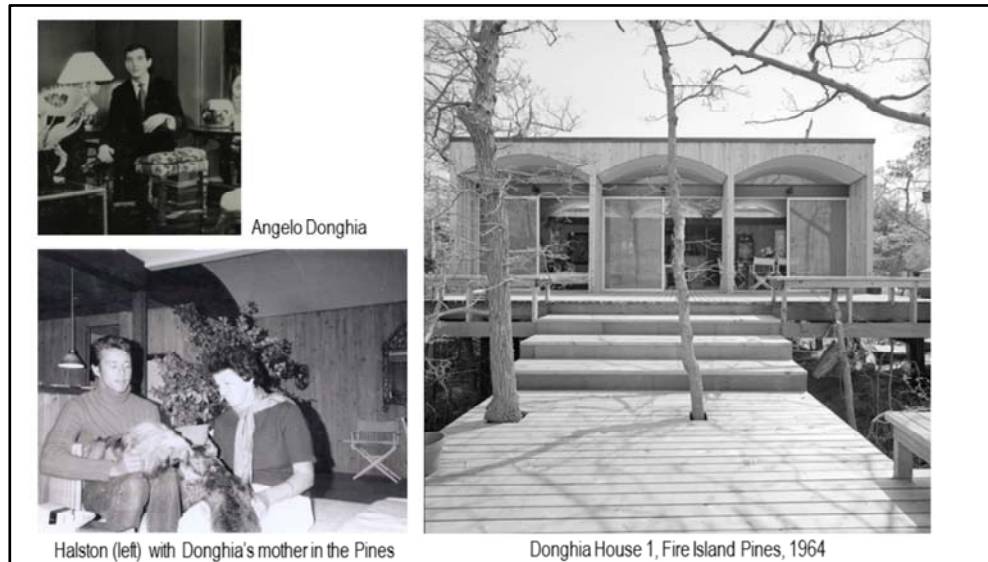
To exuberant post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS masterpieces that orchestrated bacchanals of liberation. But with all the flash and extravagance of the Gay Renaissance and Gifford's part in it, he could also be something of a recluse, who pursued the mysteries of light and shadow as a poet might, and he would continue to struggle with light and shadow, both practically and metaphorically—throughout his life.



A true child of the Sixties, Gifford landed his first Fire Island client by sleeping with him. [PAUSE]



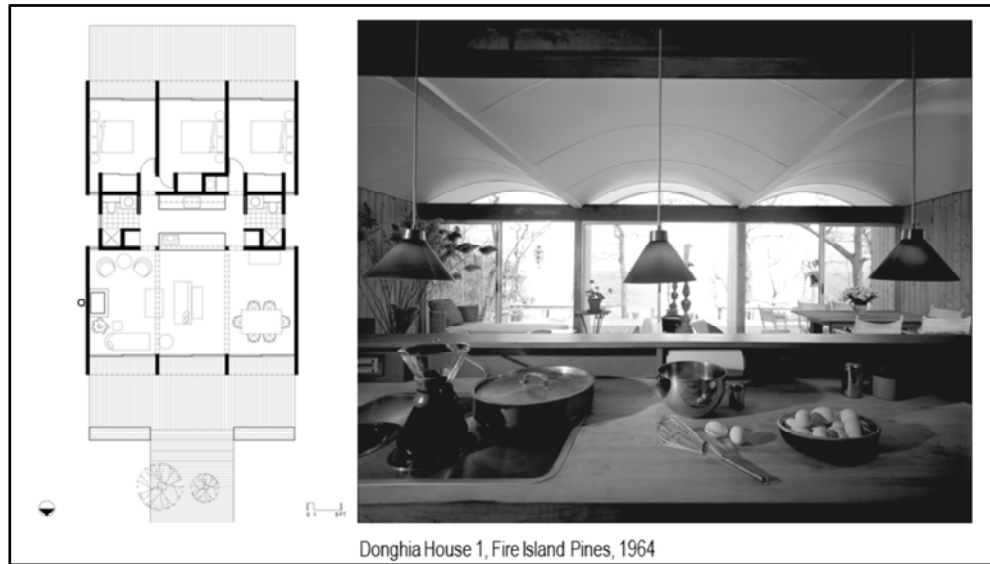
This architect-with-benefits arrangement resulted in a celebrated house, many referrals, and Gifford's first magazine cover.



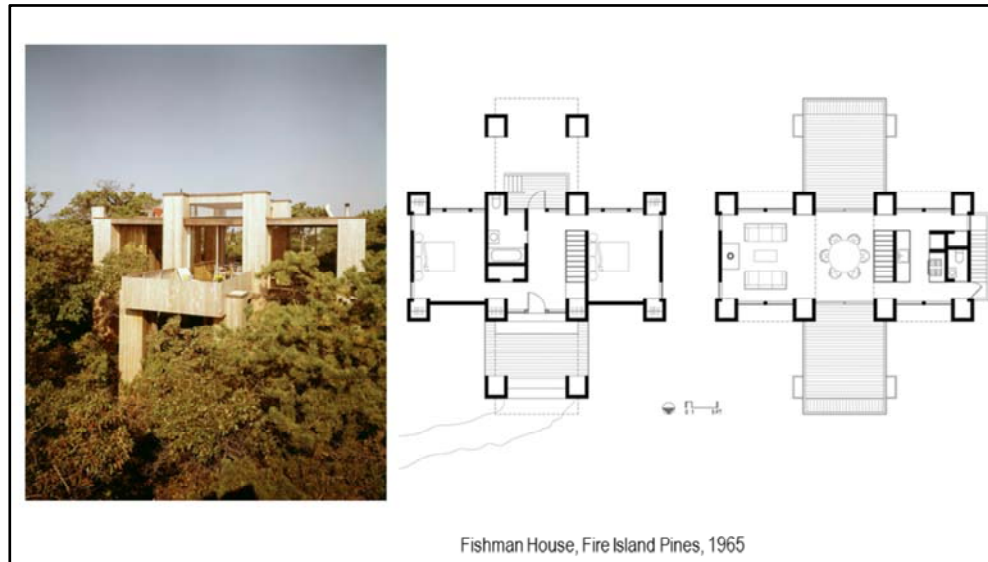
Another early home was conceived for Angelo Donghia, the soon-to-be-famous interior designer who shared his home with a young fashion designer named Halston. Donghia's classicizing influence could be felt in the broad axial walkway that approached three arched bays, though Gifford prevailed in saving the trees.



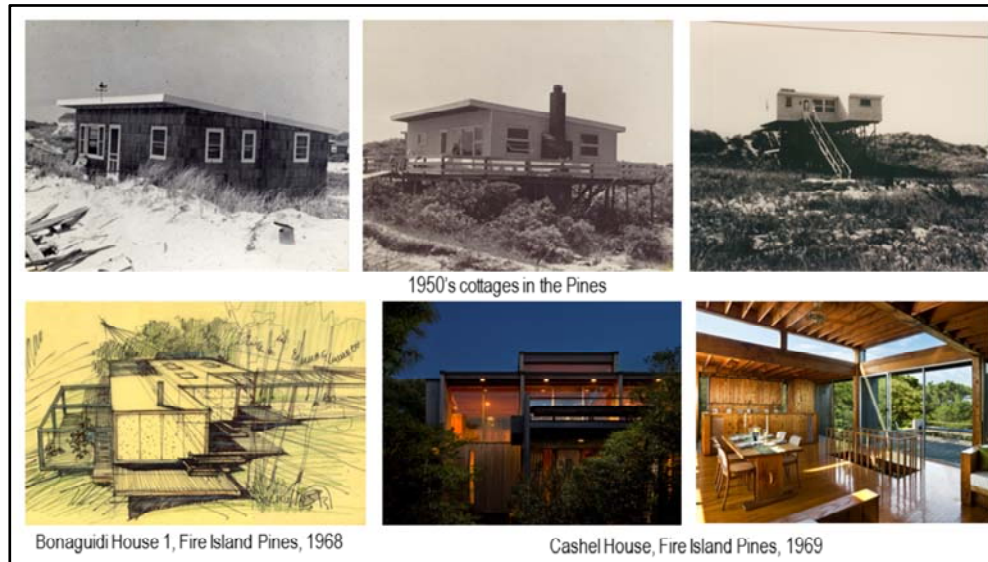
Paint and plaster make a rare appearance in this house, but aesthetics was not the only sensibility that separated architect and client. Donghia brandished a legendary hauteur, and maintained an aloof manner in all of his business dealings.



Gifford, a man with few boundaries, felt like a lover scorned. I found these drawings labeled with a huffy red scrawl, under the heading of “MISS DONGHIA.” [pause]



But most clients were charmed by the architect's plain-spoken manner and dry humor. Describing his concept for a home that was held aloft on slender towers that lifted it into the treetops, Gifford began his design presentation to Murray Fishman by declaring QUOTE "You will now have twenty closets to come out of." [PAUSE]



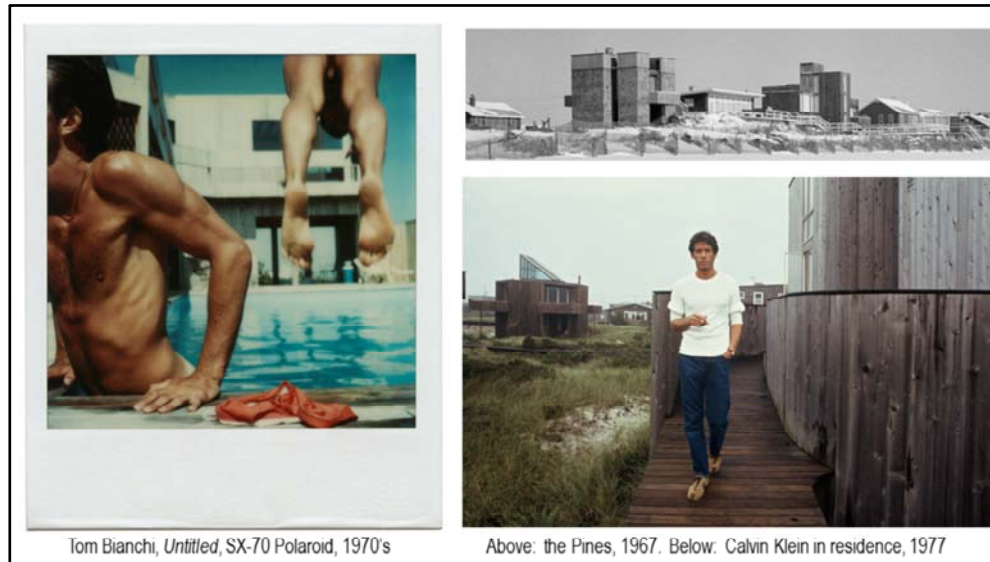
Behind the easy-going manner lay thoughtful strategies for building in this unique environment. Prior to Gifford's arrival in the Pines, most of the homes were mean, prefabricated cottages with tiny windows, delivered on barges and dragged across the fragile dunes. They came to an ignoble rest upon a scrum of skinny pilings. Gifford rejected prefabrication, so that materials could be carried by hand onto undisturbed sites. He composed and selectively clad the bases of his homes to be of a piece with the architecture. All surfaces were treated essentially like floors, with planks that flexed with the inevitable movements of a house on stilts.



[PAUSE] Modern architecture was not an obvious vehicle to house gay liberation. The older, adjacent gay community of Cherry Grove was inhabited by theatrical men in theatrical houses. Its signature architecture offered a delirium of urns, fountains, and painted curlicues that quickly flaked away in the sea air, like glue-gunned sequins on a homemade dress. It was architecture in drag. [PAUSE]



To a degree, the Pines' embrace of modernism--a popular aesthetic movement--can be seen as an act of assimilation compared to the outre fantasies of Cherry Grove. Horace Gifford's austere creations in cedar and glass housed a generation that traded muumuus for muscles, and mascara for moustaches. His architecture was butch. Yet many of the gay men who spent the 1970's clad in Levi's and flannel recognized the performative nature of this hyper-masculine drag.



Tom Bianchi, *Untitled*, SX-70 Polaroid, 1970's

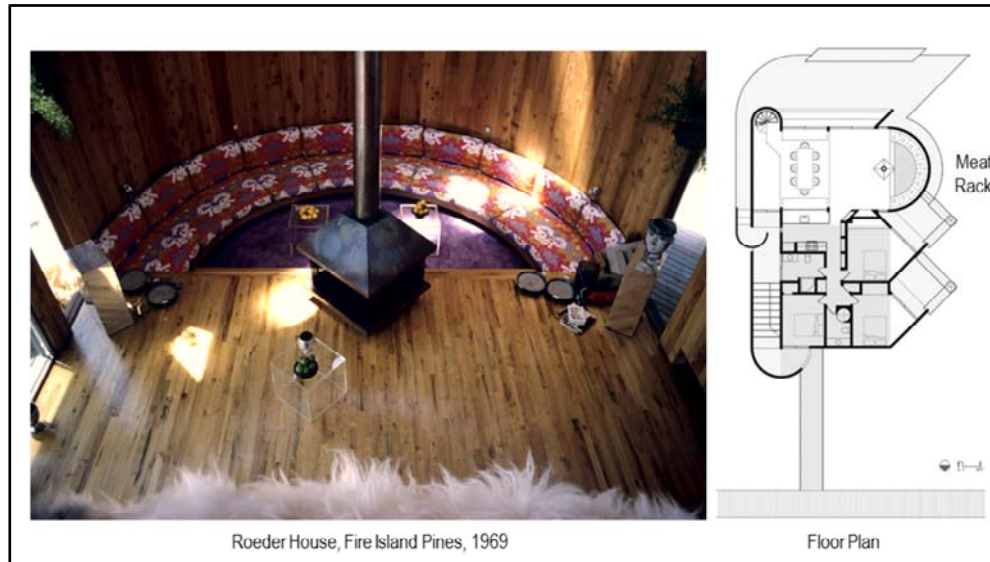
Above: the Pines, 1967. Below: Calvin Klein in residence, 1977

And the houses that they built were tailor-made for drama [PAUSE]



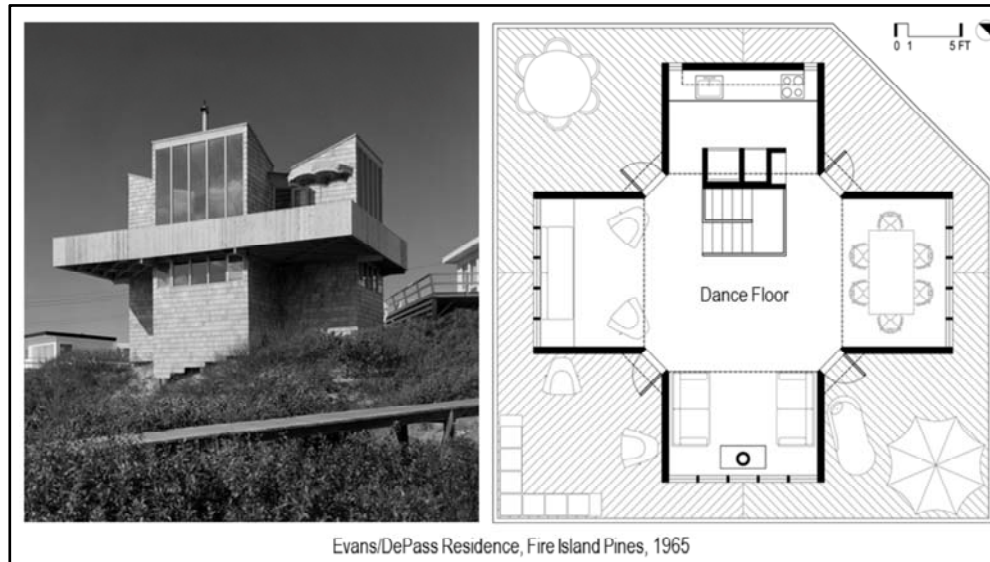
Perusing Gifford's blueprints, I came across rooms with names like the Divorce Room, which sulked under a veil of shadow. And then I discovered the Makeout Loft, a high perch for base desires. It was draped in sheepskin with reclined edges for bodies in repose. *House Beautiful* approached the Makeout Loft delicately. [INFLECT]. "A fur-lined loft?" They asked readers. "Sure, for this is a homeowner who's enormously GREGARIOUS." [PAUSE] Meanwhile, the true nature of this space was celebrated in Peter de Rome's arthouse porn films.

I had a very interesting conversation with my accountant about deductible expenses for this book [PAUSE]



The Makeout Loft surveyed the ocean and the psychedelic swirl of the of the conversation pit below. Sunlight passed through circular skylights onto a curved wall, creating a trippy light show of ovoid shapes.

Gifford sheathed what was once a dowdy 1950's cottage in a dynamic diagonal wrap that gyrated towards the Meat Rack, a notorious cruising area.



The open heart of the Evans-DePass House was reserved for dancing, while decks facing due south, east, and west chased the sun.

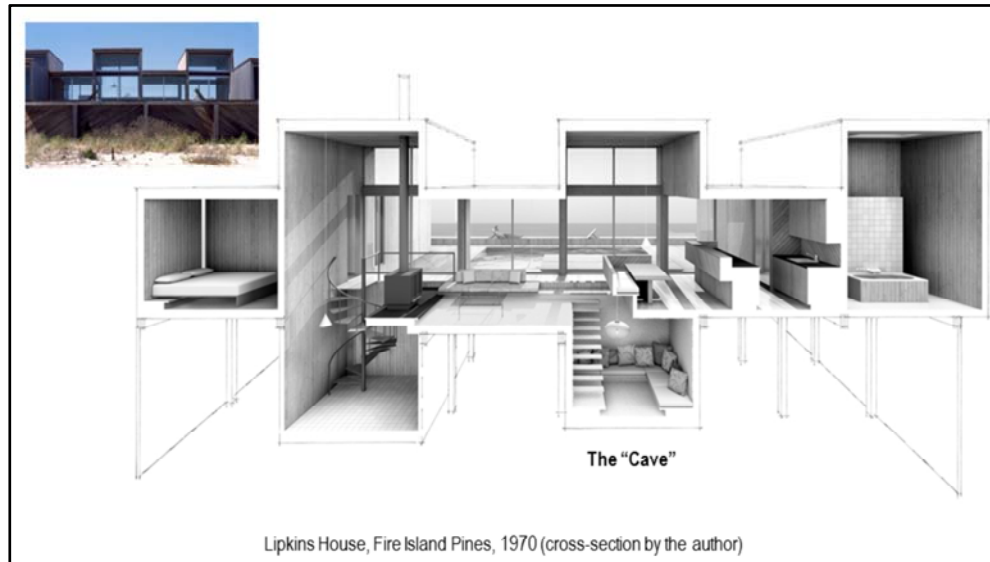


From a seated position, its solid deck rail created a filtered, idealized horizon line where ocean met sky.



Lipkins House, Fire Island Pines, 1970

With its thrusting cantilevers and pulsating roofline, Gifford conjured a discotheque upon the dunes at the Lipkins House.



Floor-to-ceiling glass extended across its entire coastal elevation. Its one secluded space was a subterranean lair dubbed “The Cave,” a windowless den of electric-blue, shag-carpeted walls and oversize pillows.

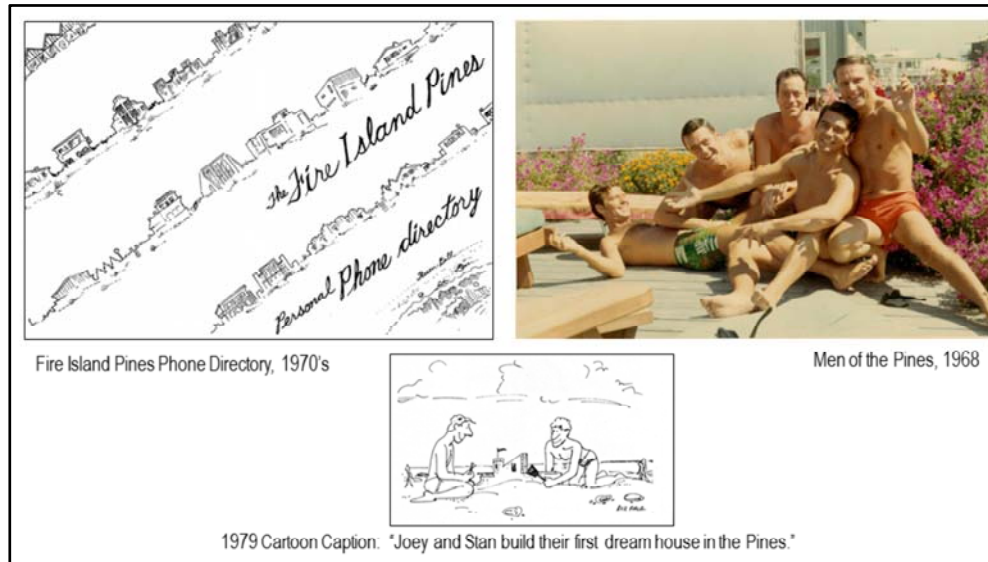


Bonaguidi House 1, Fire Island Pines, 1968

Sloan House, Fire Island Pines, 1972, addition for Calvin Klein, 1980

Most postwar houses shed their front porches and shielded nuclear families in backyard barbecue pits. Gifford countered with glass walls that opened to the nearby pedestrian boardwalks, fashioning voyeuristic vistas from within and without.

After all, the Pines was a place to meet like-minded people, a place to marvel, as Albert Goldman put it, at QUOTE “the remarkable shorting out of the barriers to interpersonal communication. Cruising along at sunset, with a glass in one hand and a modest pitcher of martinis in the other, you find yourself far more socially desirable than you ever realized.” [PAUSE]



By the mid-seventies, whimsical fantasies in cedar and glass traversed the entire beachfront of the Pines, best captured on the cover of the Pines Phone Directory. More than a mere listing, this was the little black book of social life in the Pines. Residents could be looked up by first name, last name, or house address, easing the anxiety of following up on introductions made in a haze of marijuana and cocktails. [PAUSE]



For this brave new world, Gifford invented an architecture of seduction...[pause]

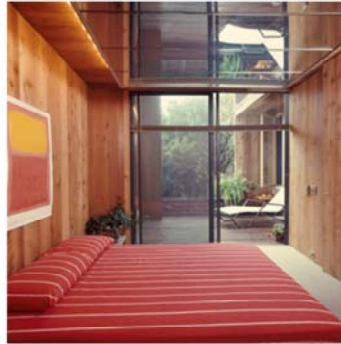


Travis/Wall House, Fire Island Pines, 1972-75

with hide-and-seek expanses of glass ...[PAUSE]



Cortner House, Seaview, 1981



Travis/Wall House, Fire Island Pines, 1972-75



Bonaguidi House 1, Fire Island Pines, 1968

outdoor showers , mirrored ceilings, prurient lines of sight....[PAUSE]

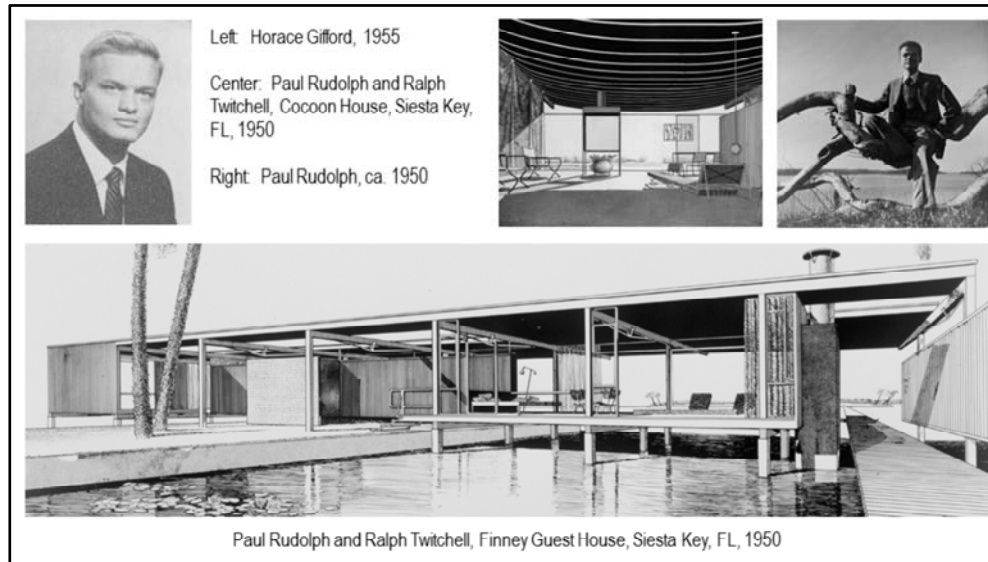


Scall Guest House, Fair Harbor, 1976

..and erotic conversation pits.[PAUSE...WATER]



Horace Gifford conferred a benevolent architectural order upon a culture in which all the old constraints were falling away. Yet Gifford retained a vestige of formality. In 1973, the architect hosted an elegant black tie party. But that's all they wore. Black ties. [PAUSE]



But we should not confuse the flamboyance of Gifford's architecture with frivolity. Growing up on the beaches of Florida, he forged a deep connection with fragile coastal landscapes and became enamored with lyrical Sarasota beach houses designed by the young Paul Rudolph. In his Fire Island SUMMER homes, Gifford would affect a plausible transplantation of many of the ideas that informed Sarasota's WINTER homes.



He paired his Florida insights with ideas learned at the feet of Louis Kahn, his professor at the University of Pennsylvania. In Kahn's work, the typical twentieth century obsession with glass and steel receded in favor of mysterious masonry structures that evoked abstract ruins. Kahn and Rudolph became the most important American architects of the 1960's, and Gifford styled himself as their architectural love child .



In a short but prolific career that produced 78 modernist homes, he honed a sustainable architecture as attuned to natural landscapes as our animal natures. As one client put it, QUOTE, “Everything, EVERYTHING is free and natural.”



His houses were intentionally small, tucked into undisturbed sites, and touched lightly upon the earth.



Bonaguidi House 1, Fire Island Pines, 1968

Gifford House 2, Fire Island Pines, 1965

Crawford House, Fire Island Pines, 1968

Believing that life at the beach should be carefree as well as MAINTENANCE-free, he loathed painted surfaces, clipped lawns, and all the brute force associated with tending a typical suburban home.



Reflecting both a communitarian and a voyeuristic ethos, he resisted fences. Bedrooms remained small to focus activity within commanding public spaces.



Dancing across the sand like divinely inspired driftwood, these houses echoed the fluidity of the cultural revolution that they housed.



Cashel House, Fire Island Pines, 1969

Travis/Wall House, Fire Island Pines, 1972-75

In Gifford's work, Stonewall-era sexuality merged with timeless environmental responsibility. Bathrooms that traded mirrors for plate glass may have invited prurience on occasion, but they also drew the inhabitant's gaze away from himself, towards an increasingly threatened nature.



Living in Gifford's own home, as I did, invites certain psychological assumptions about the man who invented it:



a light-flooded interior; a thoughtfully conceived plan; a symbiotic connection to all around it; everything in its place. But the resemblance of the man to his architecture was illusory.



In truth, Horace Gifford was haunted by specters both personal and political. Arrested for the crime of being gay, celebrated in the press, sidelined by manic depression, and struck down by AIDS, his life followed the arc of repression, liberation, and despair that befell a lost generation. His work reminds us of the power of architecture to shape a culture, as well as its powerlessness to prevent its destruction. Through it all, he invented optimistic, forward-looking dwellings that QUOTE reach out and grab for light.” On August 6, 1992, Horace Gifford died of complications from AIDS. He was fifty-nine. The one-two punch of AIDS, which also took much of his audience, and Postmodernism—which discredited his ideas--consigned his legacy to obscurity.



Revisiting his work, it is fitting to interpret these homes as revealing artifacts of their time and place. But they also speak to the perennial notion that crafting a more direct relationship to the natural world will lead to a restorative existence.



The fact that this notion, and this architecture, is often sustained by the artificial and acquisitive life of the city remains one of its many paradoxes.



Kauth House, Fair Harbor, 1964

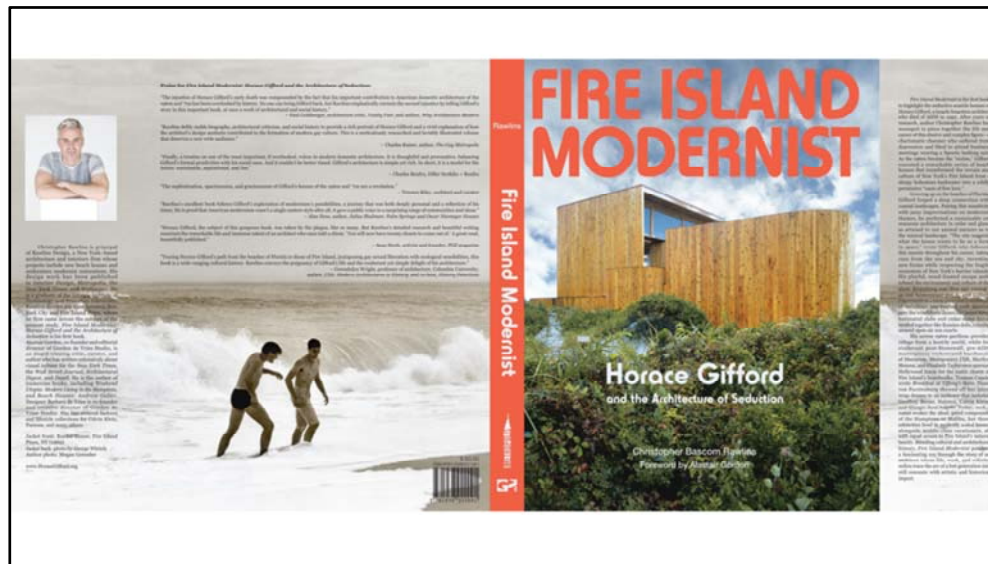
Samsonite ad campaign, 1980

But the longing for Eden persists, and his work bears the mark of a restless search for that illusory place. So perhaps the architecture reveals the man after all.



Gifford liked to say that QUOTE Someday we will learn to live WITH nature instead of living ON nature.” In their sustainability AND their seductive delight, the beach houses of Horace Gifford ennoble that wish and speak to us today with renewed power and purpose.

We cannot bring back Gifford or the lost generation that he represents, but we can preserve their most salient artifacts and the environment in which they flourished.



THANK YOU. [PAUSE]

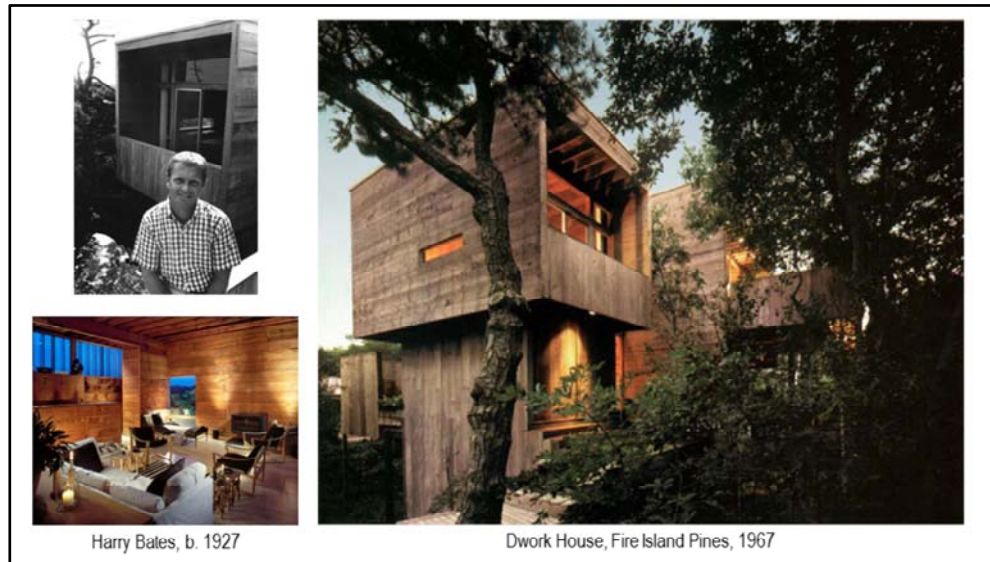
Now I'll be happy to take any questions, but there is a post-script to the book that I would like to share with you first. *Fire Island Modernist* gave Gifford his due, but writing a book is in many ways an act of ruthless editing and **exclusion**. There was so much material that did not make it into the book, and I began casting about for a way to share it. For starters, Horace Gifford was surrounded by a less prolific but no less colorful cast of characters:



Arthur Erickson (1924-2009)

Erickson/Kripacz House, Fire Island Pines, 1977

Like Arthur Erickson, Canada's most famous architect, who entertained fashion and disco royalty at a home that he built for himself in the Pines. For his housewarming, he filled the double-height space with hundreds of silver and gold balloons. At the stroke of midnight, he pressed a button and the ceiling retracted, releasing them into a starlit sky. It was an era for spectacle.



And Harry Bates, the only surviving mid-century architect that practiced in the Pines, and who at age 89 is one of the most celebrated architects of the Hamptons.



Andrew Geller, 1924-2011



Frank House, Fire Island Pines, 1961

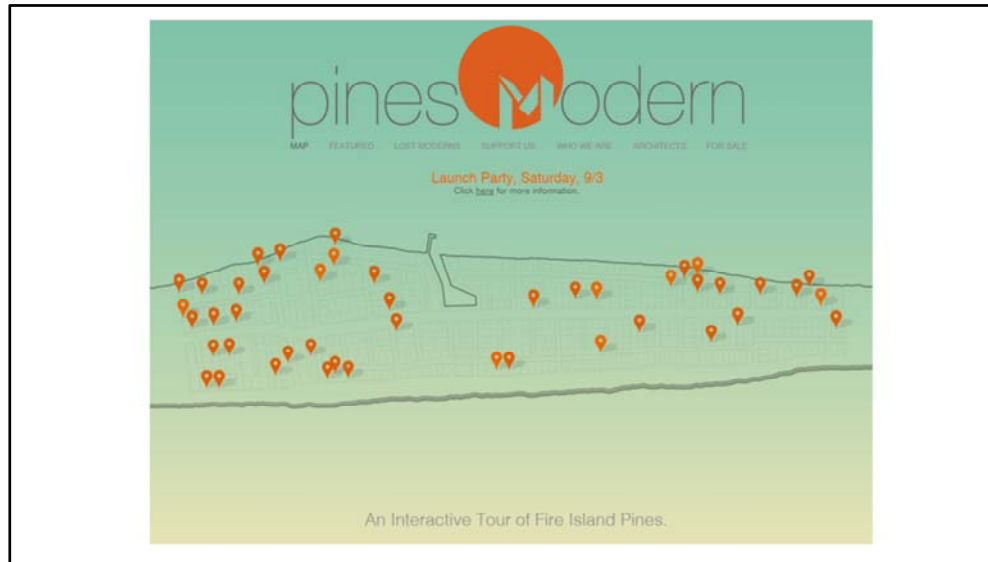


Hunt House, Ocean Bay Park, 1958

Or Andrew Geller, who began literally turning Fire Island's architecture on its head with quirky and endearing designs that revealed QUOTE "how far a little plywood and a lot of guts will take you."



The mining of this material began with a series of house tours, which we will continue, but these quick-selling tours can only accommodate so many people.



But the web offers the most accessible platform yet for sharing my research. So this month, I launched Pines Modern, an interactive tour of Fire Island Pines. Each one of those orange arrows represents a home that you can tour online, or as an accompaniment as you stroll the boardwalks with your phone or Ipad. We are a non-profit 501c3, and as tax-deductible donations come in, we will keep placing pins on this map.



And next Saturday, I hope some of you can join us for the Pines Modern Launch Party at one of the finest homes in the Pines. Just go to PinesModern.ORG and follow the Launch Party link to RSVP. Thanks again.