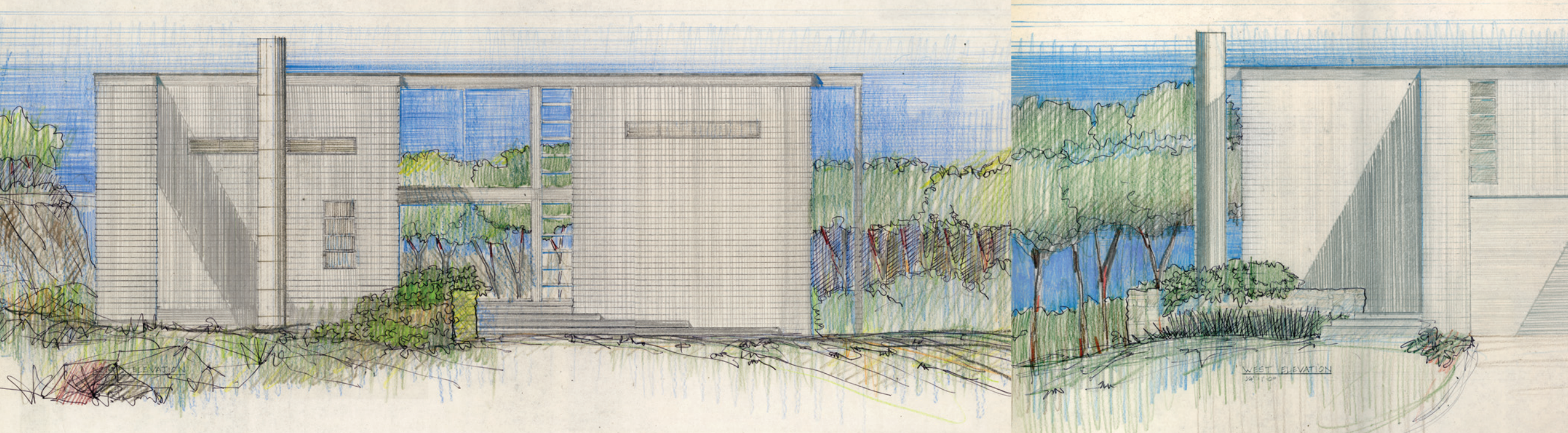


ELEGY

Epilogue



My educated guess is that half of us died in New York.
—Charles Kaiser



PAGES 182–82:
Silbert-Kiley House III
 (unbuilt), Roxbury, CT,
 1987, elevations

OPPOSITE:
 Living room of
Wittstein-Miller House
 II, as enlarged by
 Scott Bromley in the
 early 1980s

PAGES 188–189:
Gifford House II, Fire
 Island Pines, NY, 1965

On July 3 1981, the *New York Times* published an article entitled “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.” The idea of a sickness that somehow targeted gays seemed ludicrous to many, a fire-and-brimstone narrative that was easily laughed off. No one was laughing by the middle of the decade. For fifteen years, an HIV diagnosis equaled a painful death sentence, until protease inhibitors began to stem the epidemic in 1995. During this period, more people perished from AIDS in New York City alone than the total number of American soldiers who died in the Vietnam War.¹¹⁵ “My educated guess is that half of us died in New York,” wrote the gay journalist Charles Kaiser in the *New York Review of Books*.¹¹⁶ For the two predominantly homosexual communities on Fire Island that were virtual extensions of New York City, AIDS was a massacre that emptied its homes and spread fear among gay and straight residents alike. Some people thought the virus might be airborne. A landscape beloved by naturists and hedonists alike, transformed so recently by gay liberation, morphed once again, this time into a site of loss, mourning, and a new activism that transcended the right to personal freedom. Under the cloud of a president who refused to utter the word AIDS, groups such as Gay Men’s Health Crisis channeled Fire Island’s love for a good party into effective fundraising platforms. The Calvin Klein residence, now owned by David Geffen, hosted GMHC’s parties in the early 1990s. The same home became a principal setting for *Longtime Companion*, the first wide-release film to address the AIDS crisis. It traced the lives of a rapidly perishing group of friends; they begin as inveterate partiers and end up as dedicated caretakers.

Horace Gifford’s post-Stonewall creations ranked among the most celebrated in his body of work. He reigned as the undisputed standard bearer of Fire Island in the 1970s, even as world-famous architects like Arthur Erickson touched down to design homes there. Yet the seeds of his personal and professional decline had already taken root at the peak of his influence. An early champion of Gifford’s work was the *American Home*, a magazine that published lavish spreads of five Gifford homes, featuring one on the cover of its “vacation homes” issue in 1964. Its editor went so far as to proclaim Gifford “undoubtedly the top beach-house designer in the country.”¹¹⁷ But a management shakeup at the magazine in 1969 left Gifford out in the cold. By 1970, his romantic life was turned upside down when longtime partner Tom Prentiss left him for a woman. His friendship with C. Ray Smith, the gay *Progressive Architecture* editor, also suffered after Smith’s brief marriage to a woman in 1971.

House and Garden remained as the only publication to regularly feature Gifford’s work, including a cover piece about the Travis-Wall residence in 1979.

In 1972, Gifford became romantically involved with a younger man named Robert Greenfield. Greenfield was impressed with the glamorous and well-off forty-year-old architect, who promptly whisked him off to Fire Island on a seaplane. Soon, there were first-class trips to Europe. The two men stood in stark contrast to one another. While Gifford’s forthrightness was usually tempered by a reserved, Southern manner, Greenfield dispensed an undiluted brand of New York City chutzpah. At six feet, five inches tall, his physical presence was just as imposing as his personality. By all accounts, it was a tempestuous relationship. Greenfield was Gifford’s junior by fifteen years and had no discernible career, arousing suspicion among the architect’s protective friends that he was a “social climber.”¹¹⁸ While there might have been an element of truth to this critique, living with Gifford was not without its challenges.

Depression stalked Horace Gifford, most acutely during the dark winter months. When fashioning his own residence with “towers that reach out and grab for light,”¹¹⁹ more was at stake for him than many ever knew. He was afflicted with a severe case of what is now known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). The condition was an inheritance from both of his parents, with a manic component that may illuminate Gifford’s astonishing output during the sixties. As the seventies dawned, his radiant demeanor became shadowed by periods of taciturnity and impulsiveness. No one was spared, not even the editors who championed his work. Late clients such as Peter Graham recalled a “very, very sensitive man who could be recalcitrant if he didn’t get his way. You would have to seduce him out of it.”¹²⁰ Clients were expected to accommodate these passing storms, as Gifford’s uniformly frenetic pace gave way to fitful bursts of activity followed by retreats into oblivion. He completed nine homes in 1969 and only one in 1970. By the mid-1970s, he began to disappear for extended periods. During these withdrawals, locked in his bedroom with a telephone, he refused to speak with anyone but his sister, Jean, his lifelong confidante and first client. He tried everything to quiet the tremors in his mind, including electroshock therapy. Nothing worked.

Gifford cleverly established himself in the Pines as a leading architect before anyone else had thought to do so, yet some of his other choices may have hindered a wider success. By dropping out of the University of Pennsylvania, he denied

himself the qualifications to spread his ideas through teaching. His 1965 arrest blocked him from obtaining his architecture license. In the late sixties, he turned down a \$500,000 townhouse commission, reportedly for Halston,¹²¹ complaining that “I’d have to set up an office, buy suits, be a real businessman.”¹²² Instead, he could be seen on the beach strolling to meetings in a Speedo. Embracing this carefree and humorous image of a happy, hippie modernist tending his own garden partially illuminates the man and his milieu. Yet Gifford was not lacking in larger visions, and he felt the sting of condescension from colleagues who dismissed his beach-house specialty as an unserious adjunct of the profession. As he approached his fortieth birthday in 1972, a creeping dissatisfaction with the narrowness of his career had set in. But the overwhelming sense of helplessness that afflicts the clinically depressed obscured a clear path forward.

At the same time, the broader public began to reject modern architecture. Modernism’s political content had always been more muted in the United States than in Europe, where it enacted an explicit agenda to elevate the living conditions of the working class by harnessing industrial technologies. It owed its popular ascendance in the United States to a broadly shared prosperity and optimism about the future that was increasingly difficult to muster in the context of the Vietnam War, social unrest, and stagflation. As Horace Gifford turned inward, Americans turned on each other. This climate of scarcity and generational conflict contributed to the reactionary politics and callow nostalgia for “the good old days” that allowed postmodern architecture to proliferate.

Alas, the new vogue for premodern architectural referents was rarely accompanied by traditional craftsmanship. Ghostly silhouettes of historic architectural forms with the depth and substance of a child’s drawing were soon plunked across countless subdivisions and skylines as the seventies digressed into the eighties. Facile symmetries and fantasias in Sheetrock steadily displaced the site-specific contours and robust materials of modern architecture. While enclaves like the Hamptons were running out of modernist steam by the advent of the 1973 Arab oil embargo, the Pines remained true to itself. For all of its problems, the seventies were a golden age for gays by the standards of the repression that had come before. With little to be nostalgic about, modern architecture suited them just fine, especially the hedonistic strain of it being perfected by Gifford. He could have bided his time on the safe shores of Fire Island while postmodernism ran its course. Instead, Gifford picked this inopportune moment to leave.

In 1976, feeling emotionally and physically exhausted, Gifford abruptly shuttered his Kips Bay Towers studio, sold his Fire Island home, and decamped to Houston with Robert Greenfield for a fresh start. He hoped that the proximity of his sister, the abundant Texas sunshine, and the promise of large commissions from developer contacts would reinvigorate his spirits and his practice. Once there, Gifford’s Texan clients failed to deliver; none of the work came to fruition. Efforts to launch a beach-house revolution in Galveston netted a flattering profile in the *Houston Chronicle* but no commissions. By 1978, Gifford and Greenfield returned to New York. Their new multilevel home and studio in Manhattan’s Turtle Bay Towers put a brave face on a faltering career.

Much had happened while they were away. Scott Bromley, a young protégé of Philip Johnson, began staking his claim as the go-to architect for the dwindling number of lots in the Pines. Bromley had achieved precocious fame as the designer of Studio 54 and knew how to maximize an opportunity. In his hands, a quaint fund-raiser to purchase a fire truck for Fire Island Pines became *Beach ’79*, an all-night oceanside party sheltered by an artful tangle of maypoles and billowing sails made of multicolored mosquito netting. Celebrity disco performers presided over a shirtless bacchanal, all under the eyes of a gushing press. The *New York Times* noted that the owner of Studio 54 struggled to get a ticket.¹²³ The “circuit party” was born, and residents vied to outdo one another for the most decadent event of the season. Arthur Erickson, a famous Canadian architect, came close in a party at his new home in the Pines nicknamed “Lincoln Center.” At the stroke of midnight, the ceiling retracted and hundreds of silver and gold balloons floated into a starlit sky. It was an era for spectacles. In this increasingly crowded, expensive, and flashy playground, Gifford’s diminutive pavilions began to seem passé.

In 1981, Bromley purchased and set about enlarging Gifford’s Wittstein-Miller House II. It was a handsome expansion, undertaken with far more grace than the hatchet jobs that would befall many other Gifford residences in the years to come. But its transformation marked a changing of the guard, as well as an era when small houses were synonymous with Fire Island’s signature architecture. Things quickly got out of hand, as Fire Island’s landscape wilted under fenced-in, gargantuan homes.

For a season after his return from Texas, Gifford rented the residence he had sold three years earlier but despaired of its unkempt condition. He counted many friends on Fire Island, even held a salon of sorts, but Gifford spurned the

increasingly competitive milieu in which journalists were wooed and commissions were won. The prevalence of hard drugs, houses packed with renters, and a teeming party atmosphere were a far cry from the almost-secret society of small houses and candlelit dinner parties that the architect had joined two decades earlier. Suddenly, Gifford felt out of place in the very community that he’d helped to invent. In 1980, he left for good. His swan song to the Pines was his masterful work on the Calvin Klein residence. That same year, Samsonite Luggage recruited Gifford for a national advertising campaign. Samsonite’s “rugged, organized, and classically handsome” attaché cases were extolled by the architect as he posed in front of his “architectural classics.” With dozens of celebrated homes to his credit, national exposure, and famous clients, it might have been the moment for Gifford to graduate to the prestigious institutional commissions given to successful midcareer designers. Instead, an eighties media blitz marked the beginning of the end for the forty-eight-year-old architect.

In 1980, J. Hyde Crawford, a favorite client, invited Gifford to one of his homes in Bellport, a picturesque town on Long Island’s South Shore. Bellport offered a lower-key ambience than the Pines and was reachable by train and car from New York. In an echo of the impulsiveness that caused him to build a home in the Pines after a single visit in 1961, Gifford and Greenfield bought a historic Bellport house, originally built for a ship’s captain like Gifford’s great-grandfather N. N. Penny. His interventions to the home were minimal. What most remember were the lavish gardens he created after rising at dawn each day. It was an odd inversion for a man who had spent two decades tucking modernist homes into virgin landscapes. But the activity was a form of self-medication: Gifford told his client Pete Roe that he needed to be “up with the sun” to control his depression.¹²⁴

Changing public tastes, his own declining health, and the separation from his client base chipped away at modern house commissions. His attention and his convictions also drifted. With Greenfield, a fellow epicurean, he designed and co-managed Artichoke, a sleek and successful gourmet food shop in New York City, followed by a short-lived home furnishings shop in Bellport. He played the stock market. In this new locale, most design commissions were renovations of older homes. He had a brief and desultory flirtation with postmodernist themes but soon discarded this for a straightforward approach that paired historicist exteriors with whitewashed modernist interiors. Unlike the first two decades of Gifford’s practice, many projects from the 1980s were never constructed. Few were published. His last Fire

Island home was completed in 1985, but he was too depressed to see it through construction.

Occasionally, the fog lifted and great work was still possible. A 1987 house design layered a slender elegance onto a windswept, rocky ledge in Connecticut. Gene Silbert and John Kiley, clients who turned to Gifford during each decade of his career, asked for their home to be placed on top of the hill. Instead, Gifford sheltered it in the crook of the ledge, while a second-story bridge made a soft landing upon the preserved hilltop. But it was never built. The seventy-eight modern vacation homes he built between 1961 and 1981 were created for an audience largely lost to AIDS, and constitute his essential legacy.¹²⁵

On a cold November day in 1991, Horace Gifford boarded a plane for Houston, carrying only a small valise and a few rolls of drawings. He was destined for the care of his sister, who lived in the first house he ever designed. And it was there that he died on April 6, 1992, of complications from AIDS. He was fifty-nine. Gifford’s brother, an undertaker, prepared his body for burial in Vero Beach. Gifford’s mother, Marie, outlived her son. Robert Greenfield, his recently estranged ex-partner, died of AIDS less than a year after Gifford. No formal provisions were made for Gifford’s archive. But Greenfield’s dying wish to preserve Gifford’s original drawings and slides allowed this overlooked body of work to be interpreted by a new generation.

In his controversial screed about Fire Island in 1972, Albert Goldman interrupted his litany of scandals to reflect more thoughtfully on the Pines, a place whose 600 homes projected “the realization that life must be ordered and harmonious and benevolent if it is to be happy.”¹²⁶ As the author of forty of these Pines homes and the inspiration for countless others, Gifford conferred a benevolent order upon a rapidly changing culture, one that turned to him to make sense of a world in which all the old constraints had fallen away. His work reminds us of the power of architecture to shape a culture, as well as its powerlessness to prevent its destruction. We cannot bring back that lost generation, but we can preserve its enduring artifacts.¹²⁷ In his last public statement, Horace Gifford said it best:

In the end, the past is personal, and that is what makes its preservation so urgent. It is our own memories intermingled with the collective memory that we call history; it is not so much truth as interpretation; but in that interpretation we can find beauty and wisdom, inspiration for living and guidance for the future.¹²⁸



Acknowledgements

Endnotes

Project List

Bibliography

Image Credits

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It is not every day that an untested writer gets to immortalize an obscure architect in the pages of an elegant hardcover book. Until now, I have practiced rather than written about architecture, and the distillation of all I have learned about Horace Gifford has been an adventure and an education. First, there was the not-insignificant matter of learning how to write. Then, there was the hunt for hundreds of vintage images, scattered across dozens of venues. Soon, we were commissioning new photo shoots for previously unpublished homes. Finally, Gifford’s story had to break through a challenging publishing environment. At each of these junctures, this project might have come to a halt but for the assistance of the following people.

Special thanks are first and foremost given to Edward DiGuardia, who preserved Gifford’s papers and provided unstinting access and encouragement. Peter Stamberg and Paul Aferiat, fellow Gifford enthusiasts, introduced me to key associates and clients. William Murphy patiently walked me through his twenty-year professional and personal affiliation with the architect. Gifford’s niece Jane Slay shared moving personal recollections of her uncle, as did his longtime friend Robert Berlin. In Vero Beach, Pam Cooper of the Indian River County Main Library and Rebecca Rickey of the Heritage Center and Citrus Museum provided rich historical resources. William Whitaker and Nancy Thorne at the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania tirelessly fielded my inquiries. Photographers Michael Weber and Tom Sibley were generous with their time and talents. Robert Bonanno and Warren McDowell supplied many of the vintage Pines photographs that add contextual richness to what might have otherwise been a relentless parade of homes. Michael Lugerling read early drafts and offered sage advice. Philip Monaghan, Cay Sophie Rabinowitz, and Christian Rattemeyer were consummate cheerleaders and behind-the-scene fixers during my most harried moments. Paul Blackburn and Sebastien Queney’s assistance in preparing the drawings was indispensable.

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- 1 “For an Active Beach Life,” *House and Garden* (July 1974): 24.
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- 3 Gladys Rosenthal (client), interview by the author, Seaview, September 9, 2009.
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- 23 Ibid. Berlin became a psychologist.
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- 56 William Trautman (Gifford friend), in telephone interview with author, September 20, 2009. According to Trautman, Gifford never applied for his architectural registration because he believed that, because of his arrest, he was disqualified from obtaining his license. The New York State Office of the Professions did not respond to the author’s inquiries regarding the disqualification of applicants with offenses of this nature.
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- 99 Natalie Schram, “Tuned to Nature’s Forces—and Man’s Sociability.” *House Beautiful* (July 1972): 65.

- 100 Ibid, 63.
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- 112 Edward DiGuardia (friend), in telephone interview with author, September 3, 2012.
- 113 Ibid.
- 114 McCarter, *Louis I. Kahn*, 232.
- 115 According to the New York City HIV Epidemiology and Field Services Program, 62,281 people died in New York City of AIDS-related illnesses between 1981 and 1995; 58,282 Americans died in the Vietnam War.
- 116 Charles Kaiser, "When the *New York Times* Came Out of the Closet," *New York Review of Books*, September 25, 2012.
- 117 Alan Borg, buildings editor of the *American Home*, letter to Horace Gifford, October 13, 1966.
- 118 Bert Seides (friend), in interview with author, September 14, 2009.
- 119 Herzig, "Designer's Home Rises Above it All."
- 120 Peter Graham (client), in interview with author, June 23, 2009.
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- 122 Bruning.
- 123 Susanne Slesin, "Moonlit Benefit for the Pines," *New York Times*, July 9, 1979.
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- 125 This figure is provisional due to the unknown status of some projects. Addresses were often omitted from drawings, so not all homes have been located. The cited number is the best estimate of built projects and significant additions during this period.
- 126 Goldman, "I Have Seen the Future," 30.
- 127 One home in the Pines is known to be demolished, and approximately one-quarter of Gifford's homes overall remain in original condition.
- 128 Horace Gifford, "Architecturally Bellport is at a Crossroad," *Long Island Advance*, August 10, 1989.

Project List

Horace Gifford's architectural associates were Ronald Bentley, William Fuller, David Hatcher, Louis Mueller, William Murphy, and Joerg Schwartz. Same-sex partners of clients were often deliberately excluded from the name of a residence in order to protect the clients' privacy at the time. Where it was evident that both partners participated in the creation of a home, and the partner's name was obtainable, both last names have been listed. Dates are keyed to completed construction documents.

1961

Gifford House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Slay House, Houston, TX

1962

Wittstein-Miller House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Rumley House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Jenkins House, Fire Island Pines, NY

1963

Wittstein-Miller House II, Fire Island Pines, NY
Leedom-Cott House, Fire Island Pines, NY
McGregor House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Dell House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Kreiger House, Ocean Bay Park, NY
Switzgable House, Fire Island Pines, NY

1964

Runnels House, Sagaponack, NY
Donghia House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Schultz House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Kauth House, Fair Harbor, NY

1965

Evans-DePass House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Gifford House II, Fire Island Pines, NY
Sprague-Geller House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Applebaum House, Seaview, NY
Burge Pavilion, Fire Island Pines, NY
Fishman House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Breslin House, Saltaire, NY
Ackert House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Photography Studio for Mark Kauffman,
New York City, NY

1966

Runnels House II, Bridgehampton, NY
Hillborn House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Hoernly House, Long Beach Island, NJ
Wolfson House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Globus House, Corneille Estates, NY
Naiman House, Fair Harbor, NY
Rehbock House, Fair Harbor, NY
Pike House, Saltaire, NY
Krieger House II, Ocean Bay Park, NY

1967

Luck House, Bridgehampton, NY
Kahn House, Saltaire, NY

Barnes House, Saltaire, NY
Moss House, Ocean Beach, NY
Bonaguidi House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Scali House, Fair Harbor, NY
Silbert-Kiley House, Redding, CT

1968

Runnels House III, Noyack, NY
Silverman House, Seaview, NY
Rubin House, Seaview, NY
DeSwaan House (unbuilt), Bridgehampton, NY
Crawford House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Rampappas House (unbuilt), Fire Island Pines, NY
Bremeyer House, Fair Harbor, NY

1969

Cashel House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Slay House II, Vero Beach, FL
Basili House (unbuilt), Hawley, PA
Masur House (unbuilt), Fire Island Pines, NY
Rubrun House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Kahan-Kaplan House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Roeder House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Kenmore House (addition), Fire Island Pines, NY
Bellezza House (renovation), Putnam Valley, NY
Runnels Apartment (renovation), San Juan, PR

1970

Lipkins House, Fire Island Pines, NY

1971

Pilson House, Westhampton Beach, NY
Chasas House (unbuilt), Amagansett, NY
Raynor House, Kismet, NY
Barr House (unbuilt), Wilton, CT
Beldezza House (renovation), Putnam, NY
Silbert-Kiley Apartment, New York City, NY
Ayers House (addition), Fire Island Pines, NY

1972

Runnels House IV, Sagaponack, NY
Rosenthal House, Seaview, NY
Miller House, Seaview, NY
Essebag House, Seaview, NY
Sloan House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Globus House (addition), Corneille Estate, NY
Offices for John Kiley, New York City, NY
Shorin House (addition), Seaview, NY
Landau House (renovation), Englewood, NJ

1973

Duncan House (unbuilt), Danbury, CT
Runnels House V, Noyack, NY
Duhl House, (renovation and addition), Fire
Island Pines, NY
Ansel House (renovation), Water Island, NY
Rosenthal House (renovation), Fire Island Pines, NY

1974

Ross House (unbuilt), New Canaan, CT
Gifford Apartment (unbuilt), New York City, NY
Landau House (renovation), Englewood, NJ

1975

Duhl Townhouse, New York City, NY
Duffy House (unbuilt), Manursing Island, NY
Travis-Wall House, Fire Island Pines, NY
Bonaguidi House II, Fire Island Pines, NY

1976

Chasas House, Amagansett, NY
Scali Guest House, Fair Harbor, NY
Fairway One Waterwood (unbuilt), Houston, TX
Marshall Street Townhouses (unbuilt), Houston, TX
Slay House (addition), Houston, TX
Meyers House (renovation), Fire Island Pines, NY

1977

Peden Avenue House (unbuilt), Houston, TX
Travis-Wall House (swimming pool addition),
Fire Island Pines, NY

1978

Graham House, Eastport, NY
Silbert-Kiley Apartment II, New York City, NY
Bonaguidi Terraces, New York City, NY
Marlo Sloan Apartment, New York City, NY
Gifford-Greenfield House and Studio, New York
City, NY
Rosenberg House (renovation), New York City, NY
EGR Travel International Offices (unbuilt),
New York City, NY

1979

Thal House, Montauk, NY
Artichoke Gourmet Foods, New York City, NY

1980

Silbert-Kiley House II, Roxbury, CT
Runnels House VI, Noyack, NY
Cortner House, Seaview, NY
Klein House (addition), Fire Island Pines, NY
Schwartz House (addition), Seaview, NY

1981

Seidner House, Fair Harbor, NY
Silverman House, Sagaponack, NY
Schneiderman House (unbuilt), Westhampton
Beach, NY

1982

Zacharia House (addition), Sagaponack, NY
Lecktrecker House (renovation), Bellport, NY

1983

Orentreich House, Fair Harbor, NY.

1984

Rosenberg House (renovation), Bellport, NY
Robbins Apartment (renovation), New York City, NY

1985

Orentreich House, Dunewood, NY
Roe House (renovation), Bellport, NY
Weiser House (renovation), Bellport, NY
Bellport Harbor Bayfront Park (unbuilt), Bellport,
NY
Orentreich Medical Group, New York City, NY
Rosenberg House (renovation), New York City, NY
Cold Spring Dairy, Cold Spring, NY

1986

Bellport Memorial Library Landscape (unbuilt),
Bellport, NY
15 Hulse Street (renovation, unbuilt), Bellport, NY
Perlo-Rosenberg House (renovation), Bellport, NY

1987

Silbert-Kiley House III (unbuilt), Roxbury, CT
Perlo Apartment (renovation), New York City, NY

1989

Hulse Street Neighborhood Preservation Plan
(unbuilt), Bellport, NY

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