

architecture

Le monde perdu d'Horace Gifford

On Fire Island, off New York State, architect Horace Gifford has left behind an incredible series of modernist villas. A pioneer in the emergence of "sustainable architecture", these residences also constitute a place of memory for the homosexual community.

/Texte Jean-François Lasnier
/Translation Christopher Rawlins

We don't build with concrete or wood, but with space and light. This was, in essence, the lesson of the great American architect Louis I. Kahn. A lesson meditated and extended by Horace Gifford (1932-1992), who was his disciple at the University of Pennsylvania. All of his constructed work indeed appears as a series of inspired variations around this axiom. And the consistency of his work is all the more striking since the architect devoted himself to the same typology, the seaside villa, on the same territory, Fire Island, in New York State. But such concentration in a peripheral location also has its drawbacks, since it favored Gifford's oblivion, precipitated by his premature death from AIDS in 1992.

Ci-contre Horace Gifford, *Bonaguidi Residence 2*, 1975, Fire Island Pines, 529 Sail Walk ©HORACE GIFFORD.



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Gifford moved to Fire Island in 1961, a thin strip of land spanning forty-eight kilometers across from Long Island. Located two hours from Manhattan, it offered a haven to the gay community at a time - the 1950s and 1960s - when homosexuality was still repressed and, above all, socially discriminated against. Over time, the island became a symbol of homosexual emancipation, until the AIDS epidemic decimated a large part of this community and took with it a whole section of its memory.

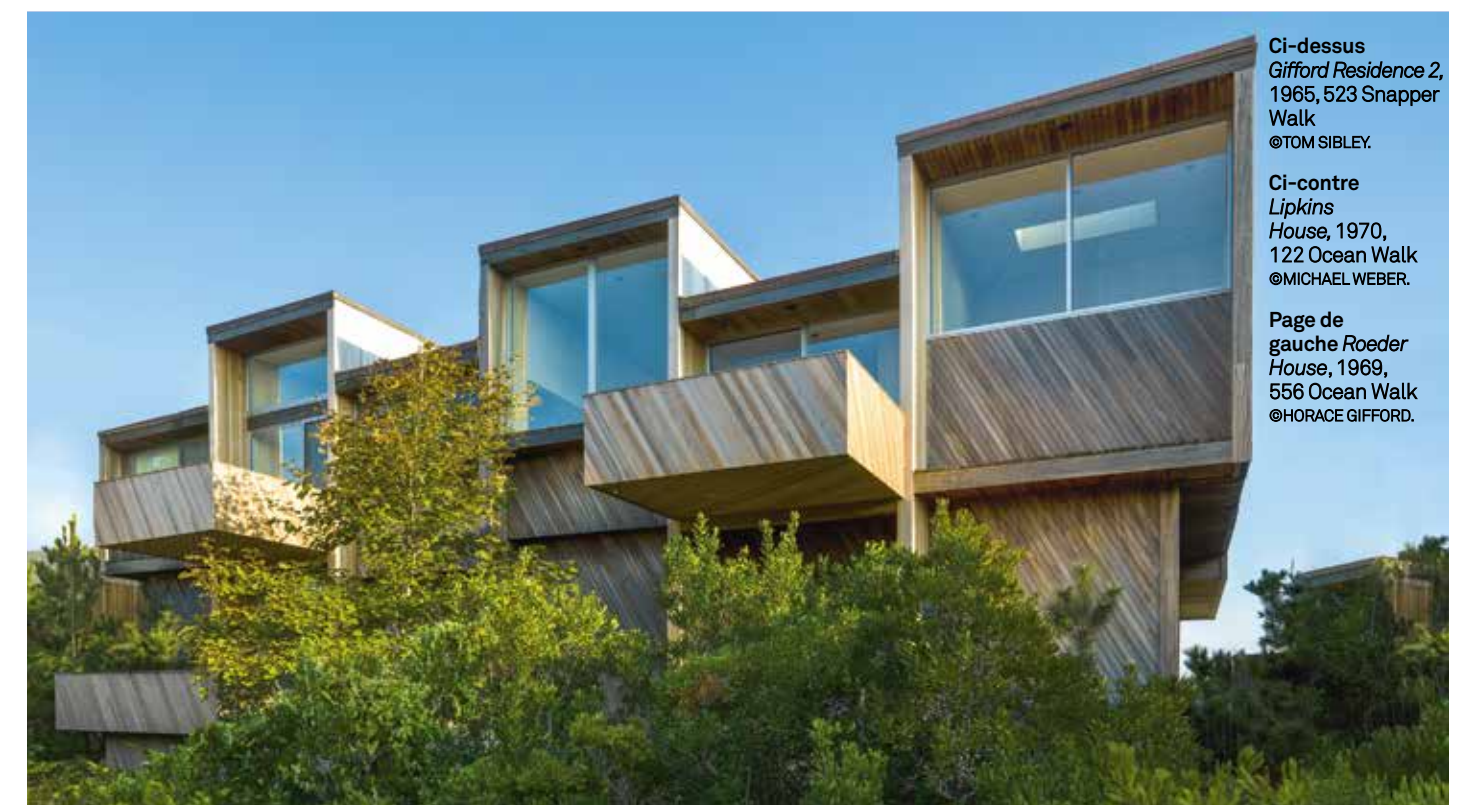
Closely linked to this moment in history, the villas built by Gifford are the most visible vestige. As soon as he settled in, he bought a piece of land to build his own home, the best publicity there was for his talent. Soon orders were pouring in. Through the early 1980s, Gifford built sixty-three houses on Fire Island, including forty in The Pines, one of two hamlets, along with Cherry Grove, where the gay community is concentrated. In all his achievements, the architect achieves a modernism as modest in its materials and dimensions as it is powerfully expressive in its structure. Built in wood, the houses have large bay windows opening onto the landscape. Each time, Gifford proposes a configuration carefully thought out according to the qualities of the place.

Custom Homes

Modernism, particularly in the post-war decades, was criticized for its indifference to context, exporting in all latitudes the same standard forms, easily replicable. "These criticisms are correct and many modern buildings have aged badly," notes architect Christopher Rawlins, architect of the rediscovery of Gifford. "But there was at the same time a modernist architecture better suited to its environment, attentive to the site, to the topography, to the social environment in which the constructions were inserted. It is this specificity that many architects are looking for today."

If he fits in some sort of modernist tradition, with its quotes from Wright or Kahn, Gifford's work stands out for its refusal of prefabrication. Before he started operating on Fire Island, prefabricated homes were shipped by boat and their transportation to the construction site damaged the dunes.

Finding this practice inappropriate in this context, he conveyed individual wood elements of construction across the narrow boardwalks to preserve the natural topography. Likewise, he reduced the physical footprint of his homes, anchored in the sand with pilings. In short, Gifford practices "sustainable architecture" avant la lettre. Generally speaking, his work is quite economical: space and equipment are relatively limited, and his houses require little maintenance or air conditioning. Thanks to their high ceilings and terraces, they appear larger than they are.



Ci-dessus
Gifford Residence 2,
1965, 523 Snapper
Walk
©TOM SIBLEY.

Ci-contre
Lipkins
House, 1970,
122 Ocean Walk
©MICHAEL WEBER.

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gauche** Roeder
House, 1969,
556 Ocean Walk
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The uses of the owners determine the interior distribution, with expansive reception spaces prioritized over small bedrooms. In other words, these villas are designed for social life more than for a peaceful retreat. Their large windows offer voyeuristic vistas inside and out at a time when it was becoming safe to freely display your sexual orientation.

A Heritage to Preserve

In their structural qualities, the villas of Horace Gifford transcend their functional qualities. Pure expanses of solids and voids endow them, in their abstraction, with an eminently sculptural dimension: a compositional sleight of hand which also advances the seductive nature of these houses. For Christopher Rawlins, "this architecture has a 'hyper-masculine' character." He compares them to the Polaroids of the 1970's showing muscular young men in tank tops. They are on display...When Rawlins discovered Fire Island in 2001, the atmosphere had changed. "The fashion designers had largely been replaced by lawyers and bankers."

But the villas remain, even if they have often been altered, and some distorted. "Up to a point, they benefited from local appreciation, but their larger importance was not understood." Some had been painted, even though they drew their character from untreated, naturally weathering wood. Documenting the homes as they were originally designed has better enabled owners to become good stewards. A number have been renovated in recent years to hew closer to their original qualities. While there is still no legal protection to preserve their integrity, they are today more threatened by nature itself, rather than vandalism and bad taste. The consequences of climate change are particularly acute on a territory like Fire Island. The frequency of devastating storms has increased, and the authorities spend millions of dollars to fight against the inexorable beach erosion.

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Kodak House, 1965,
482 Tarpon Walk
©HORACE GIFFORD.

Ci-contre Travis-Wall
Residence, 1972-75,
252 Bay Walk
©TOM YEE.



A MOMENT OF HISTORY

When, in the early 2000s, Christopher Rawlins discovered Horace Gifford's architecture on Fire Island, there was very little information about his work. Thus, began patient research for more than ten years, which allowed the author to find nearly all of Gifford's original drawings and collect an abundant archive of images. Rawlins' book, published in 2013, recaptures a moment of history through the prism of architecture to reveal an inspired creator. J.-F. L.

“ Pure expanses of solids and voids endow them, in their abstraction, with an eminently sculptural dimension ”

À LIRE

- FIRE ISLAND MODERNIST,
HORACE GIFFORD AND THE
ARCHITECTURE OF SEDUCTION,
par Christopher Rawlins, Metropolis
Books (2013, 204 pp., \$60).
- Voir également le SITE INTERNET :
www.pinesmodern.org

