

ENTASIS

Chapter Six

Horace had us crawling on our hands and knees searching for the best possible site.

—John Kiley

Designer of numerous beach houses manipulates

VARIATIONS ON A PLAN

In seven years of designing in seven different beach communities on the south shore of Long Island, Horace Gifford has completed a total of 43 vacation houses. Not many designers who do not yet have their registration can make that statement. Still fewer can claim such variety and special elegance as the work of this Florida-trained, New York-based designer shows, despite relatively low cost and spotty construction for modest beach houses.

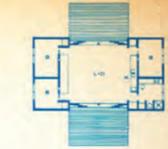
If there is a single rationale apparent in his development so far, it is the simple one of making variations within established limits. This approach, however, depends on a set of fixed forms or elements or traditions, such as those known formulas of the 18th-Century writers and craftsmen elaborated and ornamented. For Gifford's projects, the constants have been similar sites, similar programs, and similar prices. He has pursued skillful manipulations within these narrow courses, rather than purity of invention or ambitious reaches into unknown areas, and has developed a secure-looking design craft in the process.

The Constants
The sites, all in beach communities within 50 miles of each other, have been ap-

proximately the same size. Most are 60' x 100', but others have been 60' x 80', 80' x 80', and 80' x 100'. Only one has been appreciably larger. Zoning in these areas has permitted most houses to be close, and setbacks are much the same. The essentially similar programs with which he has worked have called for a large living space, which is also used for dining and sometimes has a kitchen in it, two to four bedrooms, one or two baths, electric heat if any, and ample deck space for sunning. Square footage varying from 800 to 2000 has averaged 1100 sq ft of enclosed space with 600 to 100 sq ft of deck space.

Prices also were fairly constant for any one year, although, as Gifford observes, "Prices have gone up in the last 6 years from \$11 per sq ft to \$18. Some of this," he adds, "is due to the upgrading of materials and to people's desire for more convenience and comfort in a beach house."

To these basic constants, the designer voluntarily added another—structure. Standard steel construction, set on lowest posts, is used throughout. Neither steel, concrete, nor block have been employed, because, first, few of the houses are year-round and, second, transportation of materials is frequently a problem, since at



some of the villages all materials have to be hand-hauled the last 200 ft to the site.

The Variations

If these constants were the only determinants, all the houses might look as much alike as those in Levittown—or like the many shacks in the communities where Gifford himself builds. In fact, a steady progress is apparent in manipulating a basic plan toward some fairly complex environments. Obviously, it is only by sensitive attention to other determinants that such rational variety could have been produced.

"The fact that I had to do so many houses with similar programs, similar budgets, and similar sites," he says, "brought about a desire to change and vary them as much as I could. So any slight variations in the site or the client's real requirements were eagerly watched for."

Starting with a simple rectangle as a plan, Gifford first divided it into a central rectangular living space and a strip of sleeping and bathing spaces on each end. The living space was open to the outdoors through sliding glass doors on both long sides; the sleeping areas were pretty much solidly enclosed.

"In all of the houses," he observes, "the

Manipulation of the simple and basic forms of the beach house (top) into a more complex form (middle) and a more complex form (bottom) is shown in the three photographs (1), (2), and (3). (1) is a simple beach house, (2) is a more complex beach house, and (3) is a more complex beach house.



While 1965 delivered a succession of professional advancements and personal setbacks, the world three years later seemed to hold only great promise for Horace Gifford. He was ensconced in his new, thrice-published beach house on Snapper Walk in the Pines. In 1968, the American Institute of Architects included his work in a traveling exhibition focused on vacation homes, even though he never joined the organization. A *New York Times* review of the show singled out the "tree house" effects of his Fishman residence.⁸⁵ Other journalists took a more retrospective turn, connecting Gifford's individual works to a larger truth: he wasn't just creating houses, he was helping to invent a *place*. In May 1968, a local newspaper published a spread of his work entitled "He Sends Cutting Edges Into the Sky." In it, Gifford held forth on the qualities of his recent work: "My style is becoming more complicated as I learn about light coming into space. The use of entasis. Do you know what that is? Selective ambiguity. I've learned a little about fooling the eye, making spaces bigger than they are," he explained. "It's a way of stretching the dollar, you see."⁸⁶

Deriving from the Greek word for "distension" or "stretching," entasis was a means by which the ancient Greeks manipulated proportions to create a desired effect. The Parthenon's slightly bulging columns dramatized the weight they carried, like a flexed muscle. Ancient Greek theater sets employed exaggerated perspectives to create the illusion of depth. As an inveterate theatergoer, youthful set builder, and child actor, Gifford would draw upon these precedents to choreograph the domestic dramas of his beach houses. The techniques of entasis rarely surfaced in modern architecture, obsessed as it was with straight lines and modularity and industrial "perfection." Entasis was a premodern lie that aspired to a more beautiful truth, and Gifford harnessed it to his own purposes. Towering spaces paired with low-lying furniture belied economical footprints. The dramatic shafts of light that he directed through narrow east- and west-facing clerestories onto straight walls tracked the sun with mathematical precision. But when this light struck curved or mirrored walls, a riot of effects were possible. Floor-to-ceiling openings and a single material used inside and out created an "ambiguity of scale"⁸⁷ as Gifford described it, that allowed his homes to be perceived as abstract sculpture in the landscape.

At this moment of professional maturation, a young critic appeared whose sensibilities were perfectly attuned to the architect's evolving aesthetic. C. Ray Smith's autodidactic expertise in theater design had expanded into a love for

architecture, and, by 1968, he was president of the United States Institute for Theater Technology and features editor for the esteemed *Progressive Architecture* magazine. He had a wide-ranging sphere of accomplished friends, including Paul Newman, with whom he had studied acting at Kenyon College. His closest friend was Albert Fuller, the harpsichordist and Early Music Revival pioneer. Smith and Fuller's 1967 excursion to the Pines was a social and architectural revelation. They tracked down Gifford, toured his homes, and soon, Gifford was one of Smith's two closest architect friends. The other was Paul Rudolph.

Smith celebrated Gifford's efforts with a retrospective showcasing twenty of Gifford's beach houses in the May 1968 issue of *Progressive Architecture*—a prodigious achievement for a thirty-five-year-old designer without an architecture license. Entitled "Variations on a Plan," it allowed Gifford to hold forth on the variety he managed to wring out of a basic approach:

In all of the houses, the sleeping and service elements have been used as the solids in the design and the larger elements have been treated as the voids...The fact that I had to do so many houses with similar programs, similar budgets, and similar sizes brought about a desire to change and vary them as much as I could. So any slight variations in the site or the client's real requirements were eagerly watched for.⁸⁸

With forty-five houses to his name, he had already transcended the modest implications of the article's title, for his recent work could no longer be understood with just a floor plan. The feature concluded with Gifford's own Snapper Walk residence, copiously documented to describe its volumetric sophistication. In spite of the changes, Gifford kept what worked—minimally intrusive site plans that saved trees, low-maintenance cedar and redwood detailing inside and out, and a spectrum of sundrenched and shady spaces. But increasingly robust budgets, a more nuanced design agenda, and commissions that strayed from Fire Island ushered in a period of tremendous professional growth.

What would it be like to inhabit a beach house in the rolling countryside of Connecticut? Gene Silbert and John Kiley spent a great portion of the sixties as guests at other people's vacation homes, trying them on for size. Marcel Breuer's houses, which paired floating white cubes with heavy stone bases, impressed them the most, but they also swooned at the modern beach houses that they had encountered in the Pines.

PAGES 126–27:

Pilson House, Westhampton Beach, NY, 1971

OPPOSITE, ABOVE:

Article about Gifford's work in *Progressive Architecture*, May 1968

OPPOSITE, LOWER RIGHT:

Cashel House, north deck

OPPOSITE, LOWER LEFT:

Horace Gifford, 1968

Gene Silbert designed textiles at 80 West Fortieth Street, a grand Beaux-Arts pile built in 1901 with double-height artist studios that surveyed Manhattan's Bryant Park. He often found himself sharing the elevator with a tall, striking, suntanned man. The two chatted and flirted but never exchanged names. This man would step off at the floor occupied by the architects I. M. Pei and J. Gordon Carr, but he disappeared in 1965. Two years later, Silbert and Kiley went to Kips Bay Towers to meet their chosen architect, and the mystery man in the elevator turned out to be Horace Gifford. The revelation was an ice-breaker that inaugurated a lifelong friendship, cemented by weekly design meetings for three homes, two apartments, and offices for John Kiley.

The couple's property in Connecticut was unlike anything Gifford had ever encountered within the confines of Fire Island. Its twenty-five acres spilled across the ridges of Redding, enveloped by a thick tangle of mountain laurel. Gifford stalked the property with a fevered intensity, looking for a sign. The possibilities for such an expansive space seemed endless. "He had us crawling on our hands and knees searching for the best possible site," Kiley laughed. Soon, Gifford discovered a ledge where the mountain laurel gave way to a grove of wild strawberries, indicating a change in soil, light quality, and wind patterns. "Here, we discovered we were at the edge of a cliff with an amazing view of the valley below," Kiley recalled. "On a clear day you could see Long Island Sound in the far, far distance. So that's where we built the house, jutting out from the cliff."⁸⁹

As the clients requested, the plans and materials differed little from Gifford's beach houses. Only the heavy chimney stones, something rarely transported over the boardwalks of Fire Island, betrayed the home's location. The Silbert-Kiley residence presented an opportunity for Gifford to integrate Breuer's earth-hugging form of modernism into his repertoire, and Breuer's influence would reappear in several homes during this period. A subtly landscaped path to the house passed a sinuous courtyard wall that shielded the guest room and study. The T-shaped plan nestled into the shaded hillside to the east, housing a screened-in porch. To the west, a sundeck with low railings hovered bracingly over the edge of the cliff. Glass walls on the north and south facades lent the house a classic modern form, while a barrel-shaped plunge pool, inspired by New York City's iconic water towers, relieved its boxy profile. Inside, Gifford used mirrors and carpeted platforms to introduce optical illusions and a swank undercurrent to the cool minimalism on display. For years, Silbert and Kiley had been guests, and now it was their turn to host, as a seemingly end-

less stream of visitors arrived, highballs in hand.

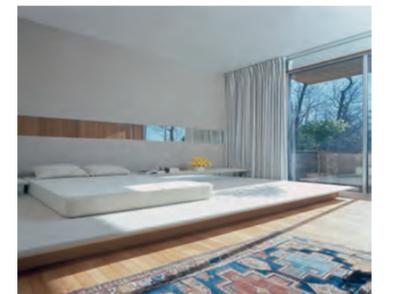
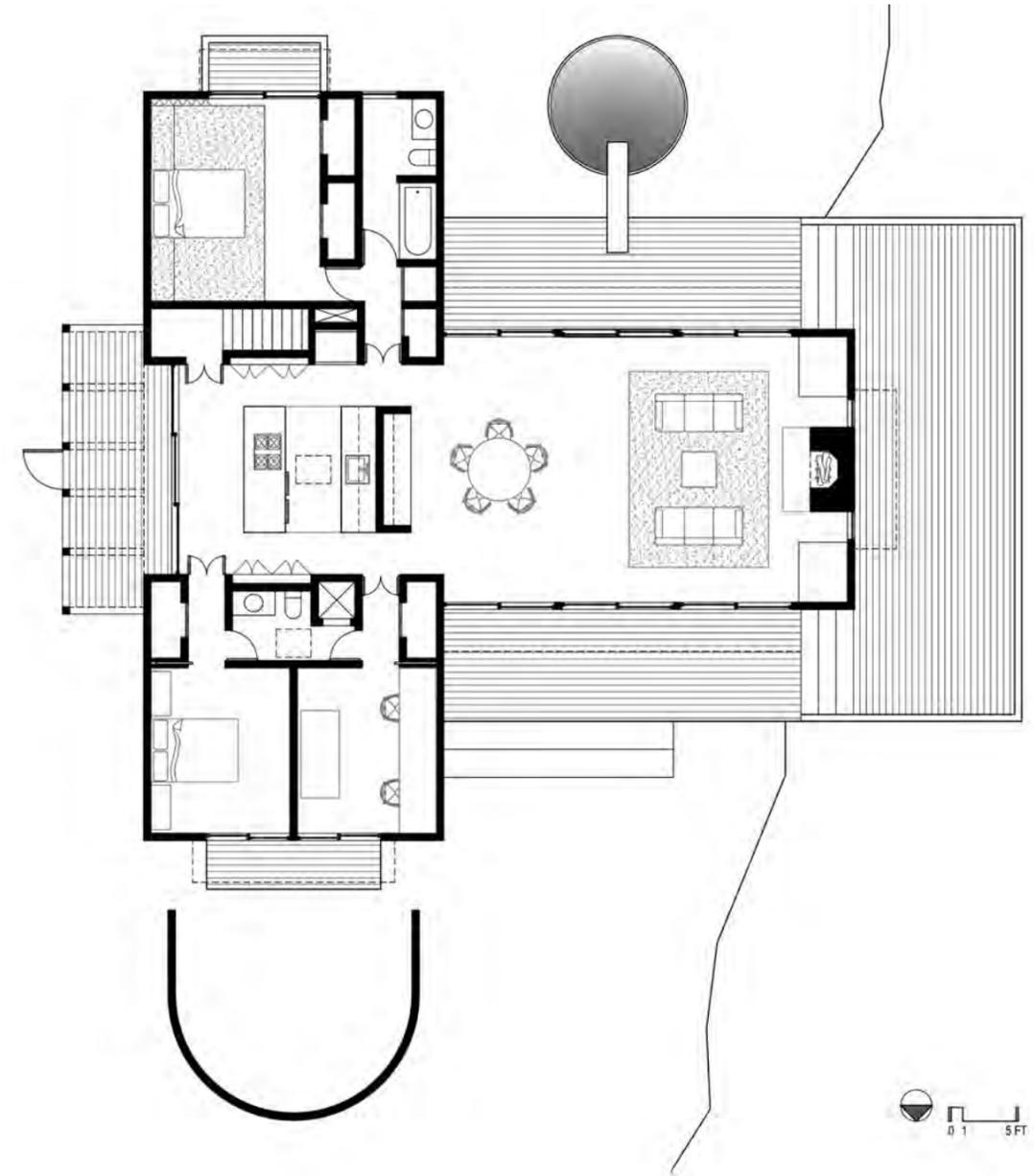
A play of heavy and light volumes, hinted at in the Silbert-Kiley residence, saw further development in a beach house that Gifford designed in Bridgehampton, New York. David Luck was a cell biologist whose social circle included the architect Peter Blake, the playwright Jerome Robbins, and the designers Ward Bennett and Joe d'Urso. Luck's house was a classic, early Gifford layout, with a symmetrical bar-shaped enclosure facing Mecox Bay and a sundeck extending to the front and rear, forming a cross. The Bridgehampton site dictated a different three-dimensional presence, though. Acknowledging the flood-prone nature of the property, Gifford arranged four concrete-block piers that rose from precast cesspits and cantilevered the house to safety.



ABOVE:
Silbert-Kiley House,
Redding, CT, 1967,
approach

LEFT:
Silbert-Kiley House

OPPOSITE:
ABOVE: **Silbert-Kiley House, floor plan;**
BELOW, RIGHT: **master bedroom;** BELOW, MIDDLE: **living area;** BELOW, LEFT: **plunge pool**





The property was next door to Peter Blake's iconic and eponymous residence from 1960, which hovered serenely over its site like a Miesian dogtrot. The Luck House's carved-out porches, exposed columns, and cladding details all engaged in the sincerest form of flattery toward its neighbor. But its overall profile revisited domestic experiments on the Sarasota coast by Paul Rudolph and his student William Morgan. Gifford's original contributions were found in his now-trademark clerestory windows and elegant details, like slatted pocket doors, tucked into the concrete piers, that could emerge to draw a dappled wooden curtain across the facade. This grafting of Kahn, Breuer, Blake, and Rudolph could have become a Frankenstein in the hands of a lesser craftsman, but Luck's residence emerged strengthened by its complex genetic code.

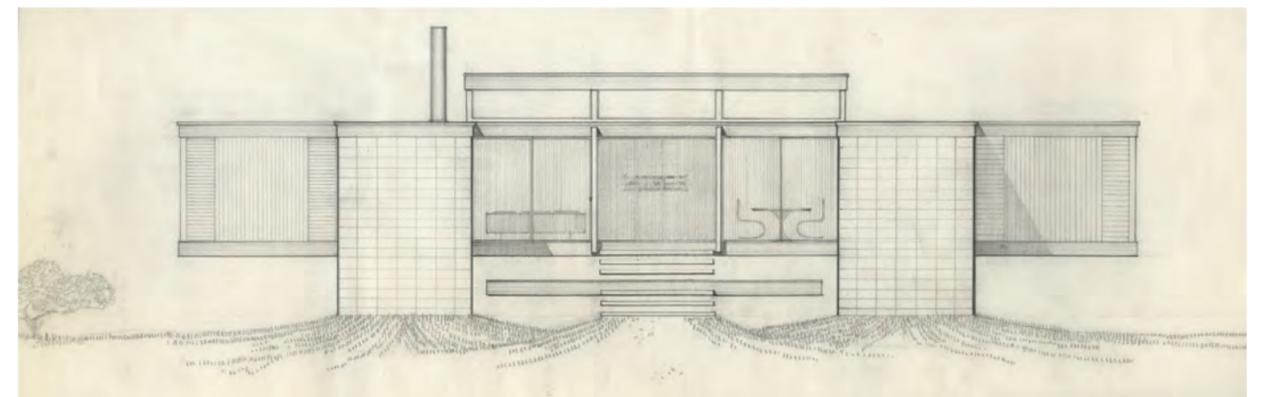
Gifford's sister, Jean Slay, and her husband, Clyde, turned to him in 1969 for a new vacation house in Vero Beach. Having enjoyed eight years in her Gifford-designed home in Houston, Jean relished the opportunity to engage the services of her now-seasoned brother. A single square, snipped at its edges and oriented forty-five degrees to the ocean, housed the extended Gifford clan. The intensity of storms along the southeast Florida coast led Gifford to an entirely different constructional approach than the one he was perfecting on Fire Island. Gifford engineered a house of concrete posts and beams, tile floors, and glass so that "water can just sweep through it with little damage," he explained.⁹⁰ A concrete-and-tile



ABOVE:
**Luck House, Bridgehampton, NY,
 1967**

LEFT:
Luck House, living room

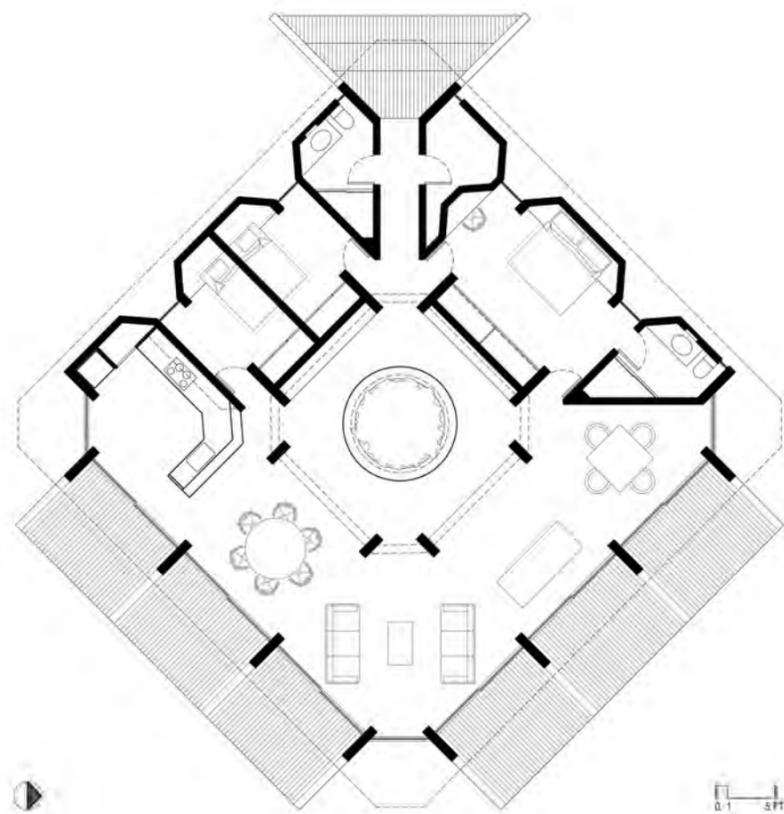
OPPOSITE:
Luck House, elevation





dining table, as anchored as the architecture, contrasted with lightweight folding captain's chairs and wicker accessories that could be secreted away in double-height closets as storms approached. Sheltering it all was an enormous, solid timber roof in the form of a truncated pyramid, relieved by an eight-foot-diameter skylight in the center.

Back on Fire Island, an inspired synergy with a knowledgeable client led to a rare collaboration for the architect, who usually worked alone. J. Hyde Crawford was a multitalented illustrator, designer of the Bonwit Teller logo, and founder of Quadrille Fabrics. He was handsome and confident, and admired the same qualities in his architect. As Gifford recalled to *House and Garden*, Crawford "was a delightful client who knew exactly what he wanted."⁹¹ Since both men could draw, they exchanged sketches, a twist on the usual process of an architect presenting plans to a client for approval. Three separate high-ceilinged volumes requested by Crawford housed a guest wing, a living area, and a master suite. Gifford joined these pavilions with two glass bridges that held a guest bath and the dining room.



PAGES 134–35:
Luck House, renovated interior

LEFT:
**Slay House II, Vero Beach, FL,
1969, floor plan**

OPPOSITE:
Slay House II, interior





OPPOSITE:
**Crawford House, Fire Island Pines,
 NY, 1969, illustration by J. Hyde
 Crawford**

ABOVE:
**Bonwit Teller logo, designed by
 J. Hyde Crawford**

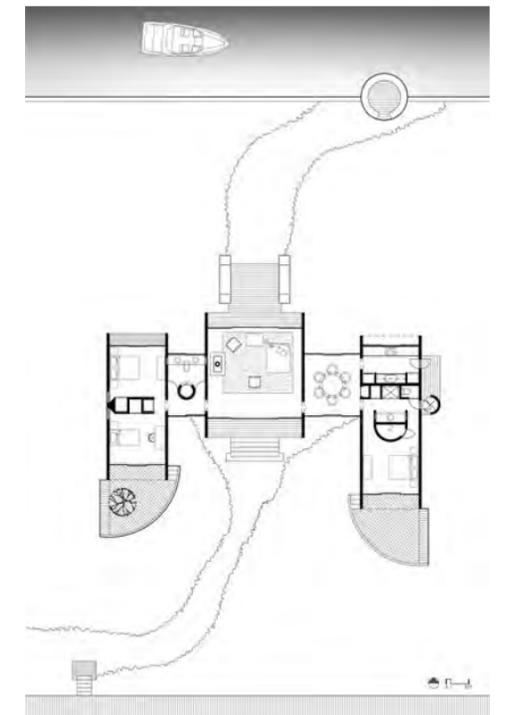
PAGES 140–41:
**Crawford House, exterior facing
 Great South Bay**

Crawford's informed influence nudged Gifford out of his formula of a single grand space surrounded by subservient bedrooms. Every room surprised—even the closets, which were circular and skylit. Asked by *House and Garden* how he could coax such a measure of luxury out of such a modest budget, Gifford explained that, "the luxury details are a matter of using standard things in an un-standard way. Simplicity does not mean that variety cannot happen within the given framework."⁹² A prefabricated fiberglass unit served as the basis for Gifford's constructing a round shower, which he then embellished with wood cladding and a bubble skylight. He made gray square tiles look fresh by setting them on the diagonal.

Outside, the roofline undulated from room to room, yet a quality of serenity prevailed, since the house was so well integrated into its double lot on the Great South Bay. "The outstanding feature of the house is that we did not diminish the beauty of the site in any way. Glass tends not to enclose—that's why we used so much of it."⁹³ Windows underneath countertops created the illusion of floating slabs, as circular skylights cast dramatic and unpredictable shadows upon an otherwise orthogonal architecture. "Once we decided to break the rectangles with circular forms—cylindrical showers and closets, round skylights—marvelous things began to happen," said Crawford.⁹⁴ The master bath was the only space that did not face outward, but its circular skylight painted the space with a dramatic, ever-changing ellipse of light.

The Crawford residence added to a growing roster of waterfront homes that proclaimed the modernist makeover of the Pines. Gifford was hardly the only modern architect working there by this time. Harry Bates and Earl Combs were less prolific but both enjoyed multiple, high-profile commissions there, working in a similar idiom of naturally weathering cedar and glass. Their houses were joined by one-off creations that revealed the eclecticism of late-modern style. By the mid-seventies, whimsical fantasies in cedar and glass traversed the entire beachfront, as captured in artist Ferron Bell's illustration for 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 address, easing the anxiety of following up on introductions made in a haze of cocktails and marijuana.





OPPOSITE:
Crawford House,
living room

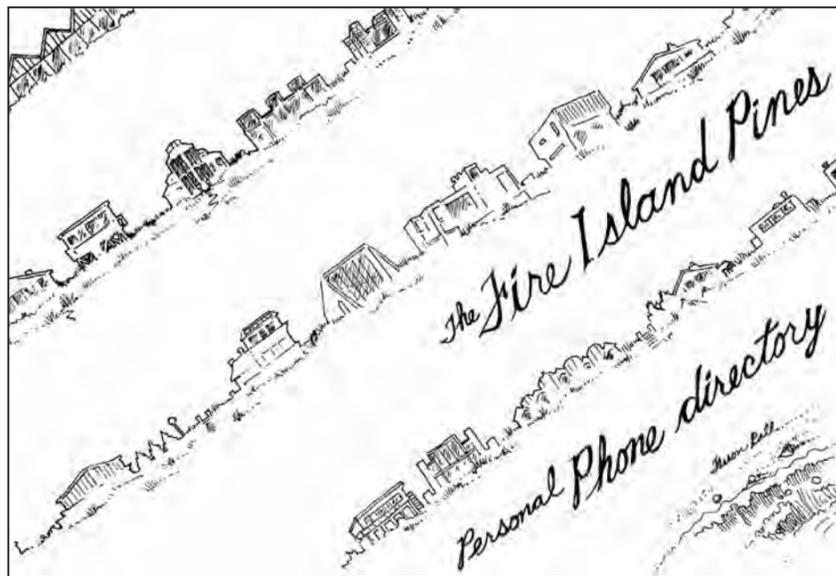
ABOVE:
Crawford House,
kitchen

LOWER RIGHT:
Crawford House, floor
plan

LOWER LEFT:
Crawford House,
shower

A few miles down the beach, in Fair Harbor, Gifford had callers as well. Sam and Joan Scali hired the architect to design a guest house to supplement the Spartan bunks of the home Gifford built for them in 1967. Rather than echo the nested cubes of the original structure, he responded with an asymmetrical take on his first pyramid-roofed project. A skylit living area commanded the north-west corner of the site, with rooms poking out as needed to the east and south. Set on a low plinth, with deep overhangs and a *shoji*-like arrangement of glass doors, this home was aptly nicknamed the “Japanese house” by neighbors.

Westhampton Beach, another barrier island directly east of Gifford’s usual terrain, resembled Fire Island in many respects, except it allowed cars and was traversed by two-lane road. Here, the architect found a new client, textile executive Alfred Pilson, and he also explored new geometries. The Pilson residence was sited on a dune, and its most striking features were its “bell-bottom” shading devices, unique in Gifford’s oeuvre. Fragmented octagonal decks filled the voids between bedrooms that were expressed as individual forms. A baroque dance of stairs twisted and turned to reach the decks. A bridge supported by telephone poles and punctuated by a waterside perch delivered its occupants to the beach. At first glance, the cacophonous plan seemed to be a break with beach houses past, but there was an underlying order behind the pyrotechnics.

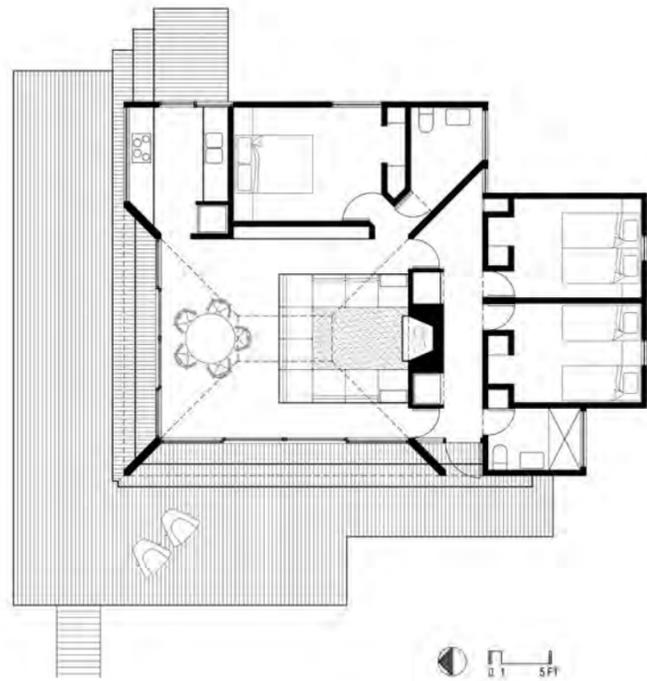


LEFT:
Fire Island Pines Personal Phone Directory, cover by Ferron Bell, 1970s

OPPOSITE, ABOVE:
Men of the Pines, 1968

OPPOSITE, BELOW:
Cartoon by Rick Fiala, ca. 1979





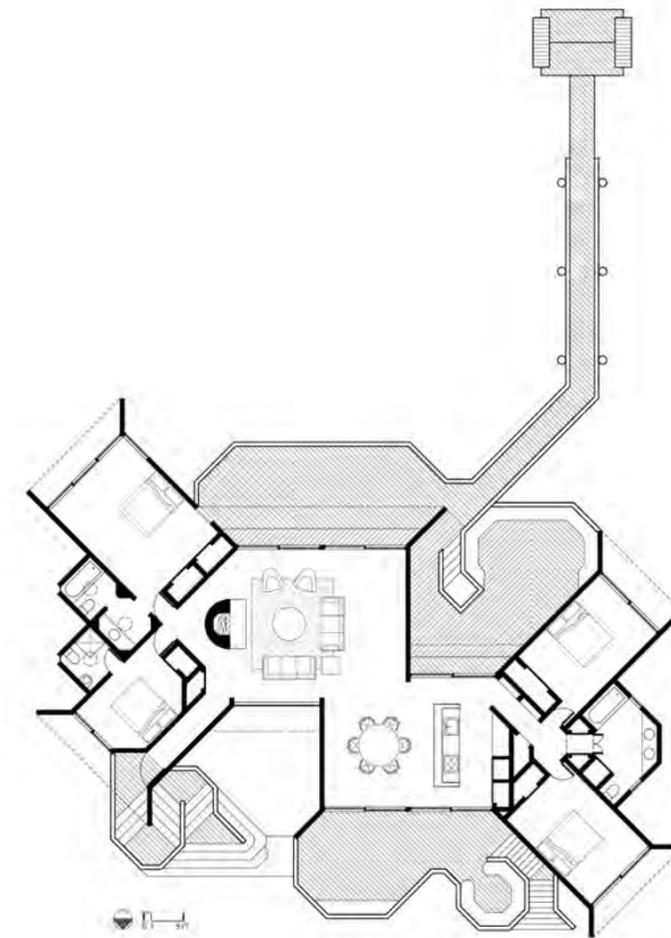
ABOVE:
Scali Guest House, Fair Harbor, NY,
1976

LEFT:
Scali Guest House, floor plan

OPPOSITE:
Scali Guest House, living room with
conversation pit







Much like Gifford's earliest work, the house consisted of a glassy central living space flanked by enclosed bedroom wings. But the public space was sheared down the middle, affecting distinctive enclosures for the kitchen, dining room, and living area. Its enlarged scale, combined with expensive touches like a round fireplace rendered in stone, foretold a new era for the Long Island beach house.

The complexity of the Pilson residence diagrammed the changing face of the Hamptons in the 1970s. Once, it was a place for city dwellers to get away from it all, but its days as an idyllic setting for tiny houses on large lots were numbered. Entrepreneurial types found East End golf courses and garden parties to be genial settings for approaching captains of industry. Pilson's textile company actually paid for his Gifford beach house as a hub for entertaining clients. Its attention-getting forms and spaces spoke to a new cultural landscape that was less about relaxation and more about cutting deals. The minimalist grammar of modern architecture existed in an uneasy relationship with the language of money and the objects that prove its existence. The Pilson residence revealed Gifford trying to bridge that gap.

In contrast to the Hamptons, Gifford's base in Fire Island Pines remained a sphere of pleasure rather than business. Yet its obsessive pursuit of nirvana, aided by drugs and emboldened by changing mores, made the Pines no less ambitious, in its way, than the Hamptons. The community once served as a cover for discreet homosexuals. In the heady era of gay liberation, the Pines threw open its closets and turned to Horace Gifford to capture the full-blown hedonism of this cultural moment.

PAGES 148–49:
**Pilson House, Westhampton Beach,
 NY, 1971, ocean side**

OPPOSITE:
Pilson House

ABOVE:
Pilson House, floor plan

RIGHT:
Pilson House, living room

