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Fire Island Summers

Horace Gifford's Seaside Architecture

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SKETCHES IN THE SAND

Horace Gifford's Fire Island Beach Houses

by CHRISTOPHER RAWLINS

Something kept drawing my eye through that particular tangle of holly trees. A meandering wooden bridge, suspended high above a hillside, wove its way to a house seemingly floating in the trees. By night, an attenuated sliver of illuminated glass confirmed its inhabitation. Other odd and seductive homes invited exploration with the hook of a soaring roofline, a breezeway cut through the middle, 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. “Who designed this place?” “Horace Gifford.” “Who?” I was a student of modernist architects. Why didn’t I know this one? I was exploring Fire Island Pines, one of eighteen coastal communities dotted along this narrow spit of land which protects the south shore of Long Island from the Atlantic Ocean, forming the Great South Bay. Thirty miles long, and barely a quarter of a mile wide, Fire Island rewards the considerable effort of reaching it with car-free walks and expanses of protected dunes between its hamlets.

Horace Gifford was a bit player in the architectural one-upmanship of the nearby Hamptons, but Fire Island — and especially The Pines — is where he quietly honed his craft, shaping the mid-century architecture of the island more than any other individual. In a brief but prolific career, Gifford’s rigorous but informal beach houses transcended an earlier beach shack vernacular while retaining their virtue of simplicity. These homes entice with intimacy rather than ostentation. They are generally modest in size, artfully wedded to their sites and wrought in now-weathered wood and glass. Though critically praised and published during his lifetime, Horace Gifford is now an obscure figure outside of the small coastal communities where he focused his efforts.

Above As the 1960’s became The Sixties, Horace Gifford led the modernist transformation of Fire Island. Photograph by Edwin Wittstein.

Left Gifford’s grand yet intimate spaces combine bold forms with simple materials. Photograph by Tom Yee/Conde Nast.



Above The 1972 Sloan Residence swirls and whirls on its beachfront site. Photo by Tom Yee/Conde Nast.

PRECEDENTS



Middle Louis Kahn's Trenton Bath House (1955) was the primary inspiration for Gifford's first house. Photo by John Ebstel.

Right Paul Rudolph's Hook Guest House, 1952-53. photo by Ezra Stoller.



Opposite The Fishman Residence (1965) rises above the tree line, symmetrically framing southern ocean and bay views while obscuring views of neighboring houses on Fire Island's narrow lots. Photo by Bill Maris.

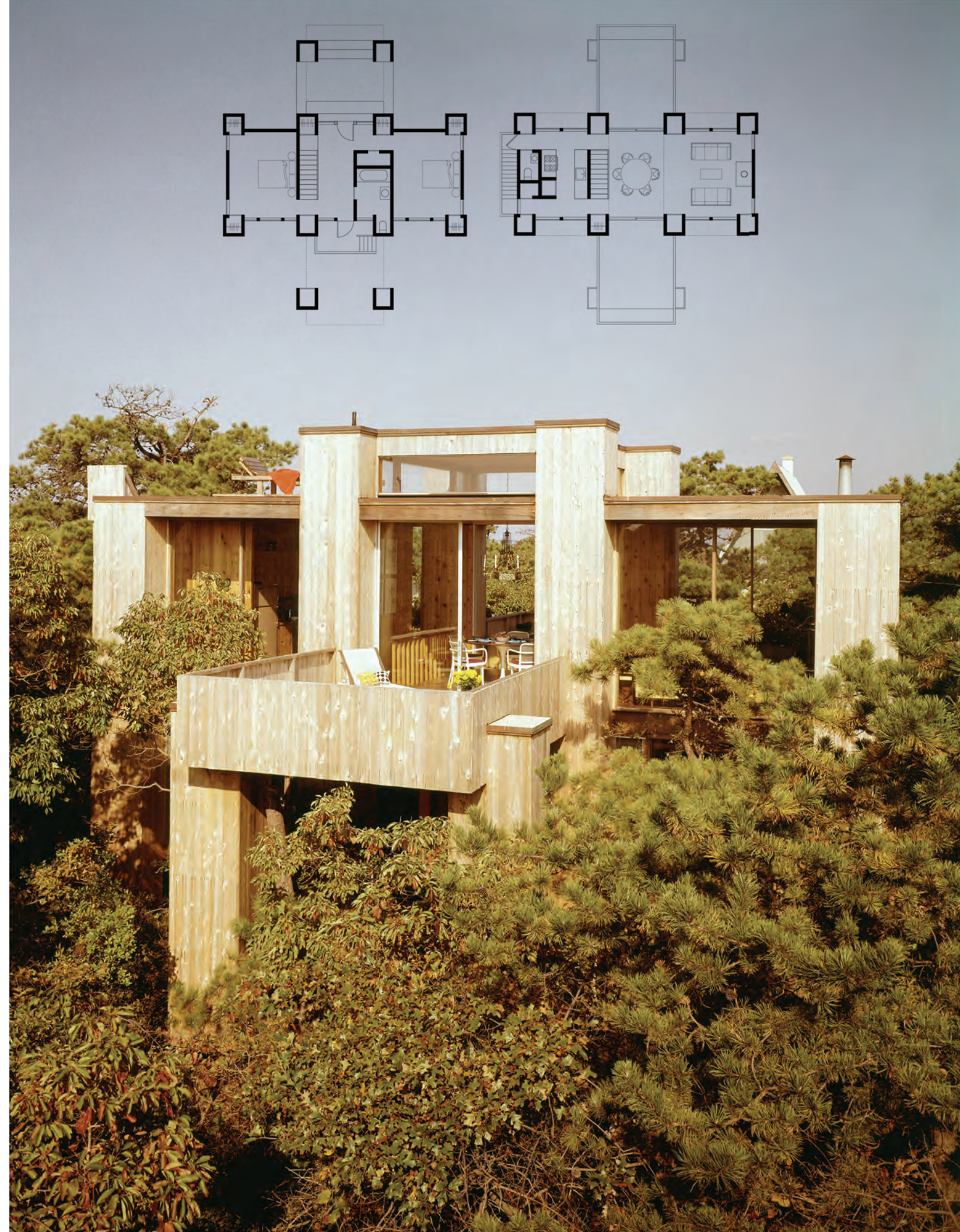
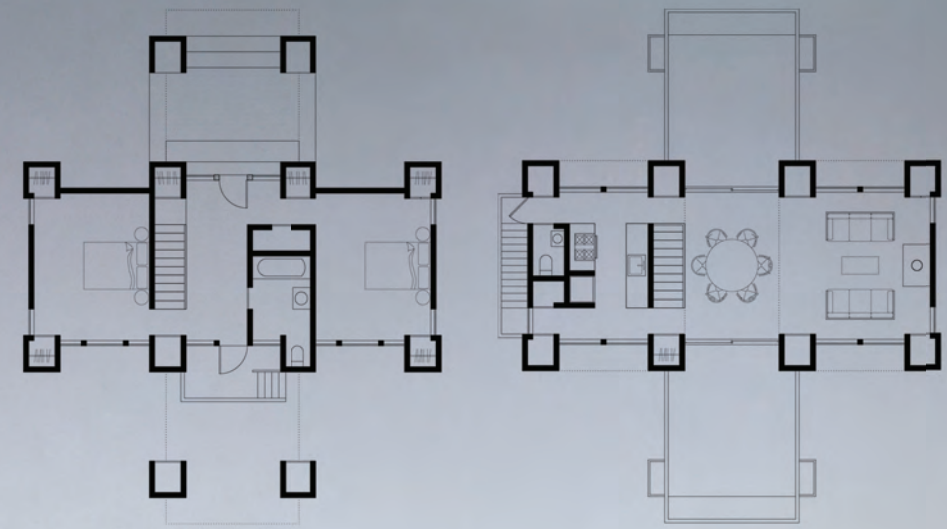
MENTORS

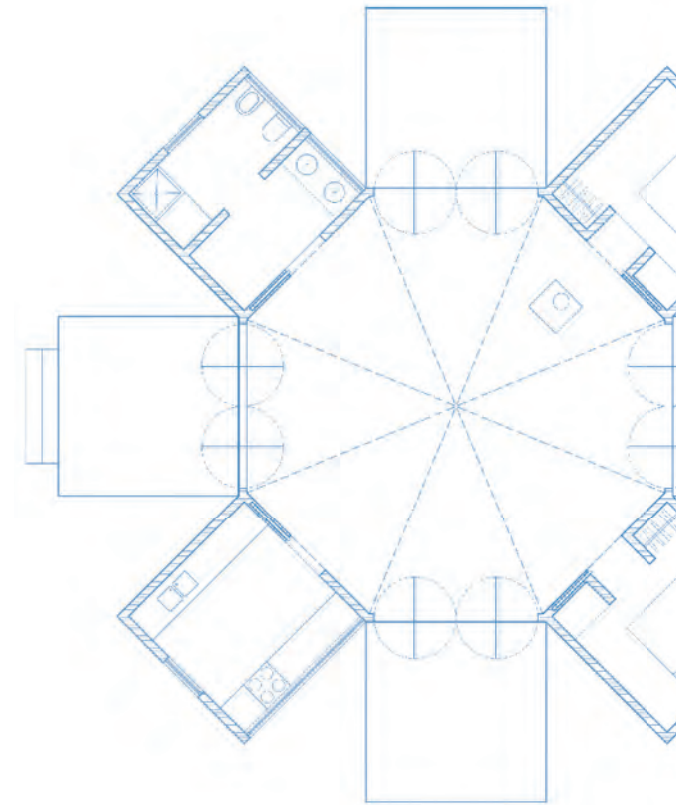
Gifford's lifelong passion for the work of architects Paul Rudolph and Louis Kahn informs his entire oeuvre. The Kentucky-born Rudolph first came to prominence as the author of modernist winter homes along the coast of Sarasota, Florida. Gifford, a fellow Southerner raised in Vero Beach, was captivated by Rudolph's structures from his earliest days as an undergraduate at the University of Florida. A scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania followed, where Gifford studied under Kahn, who brought an abstracted iconography of ancient ruins to bear upon his magnificent structures. In contrast to the pervasive modernist glass box, Kahn's masonry buildings were mysterious clusters of forms, organized into a series of "served" and "servant" volumes, or spaces for people and spaces for mechanicals. Freshly armed with a heady brew of architectural ideas, the 29-year-old year old Gifford ventured to the Edenic Fire Island in 1961, finding fertile ground for synthesizing the ideals of his two heroes.

As the 1960s became The Sixties, a remarkable series of beach houses appeared, resembling the architectural love-children of Louis Kahn and Paul Rudolph. But they transcend mimicry or pastiche. In Gifford's work, we are afforded the pleasure of seeing paths not fully explored by his more prominent mentors, whose fame caused them to largely abandon the exquisite residential commissions of their early careers. A self-effacing man by all accounts, Gifford undertook the seemingly modest task of working primarily with one building type, on similar sites, in a limited material palette, within low to moderate budget parameters and in a mode of expression that was traceable to a small handful of architects. He made no effort to conceal his influences, following a voluntary apprenticeship that led to an original architecture.

ARTFUL RUSTICITY

The landscape and urban design of Fire Island shaped the work as much as any other architect. Sea air and a ban on cars encouraged a lightweight, wooden architecture whose raw materials were easily transported along boardwalks. For all the permutations of floor plans and roof lines, a Gifford home is easily identified by its materials and details: held aloft on tree trunks or locust posts, ensconced in decking, clad in naturally weathering cedar and redwood, tailored with built-in furniture and framed by an untouched landscape. Gifford insisted, sometimes against the wishes of his clients, upon homes that were as environmentally benign and unencumbered by upkeep as possible. Until a late-in-life passion for landscape design took hold, he strongly discouraged clients from having traditional yards. Swimming pools are rare. Unlike many architects, he often tried to reduce the size of homes. "Sometimes the client's ideas must be challenged to see if they're realistic," he told the Houston Chronicle in 1977.





Above and left The Wittstein-Miller Residence (1963) was originally presented as a sketch in the sand for its delighted clients, the famed set designer Edwin Wittstein and his partner Robert Miller. Photograph by John Hall, drawing by the author.



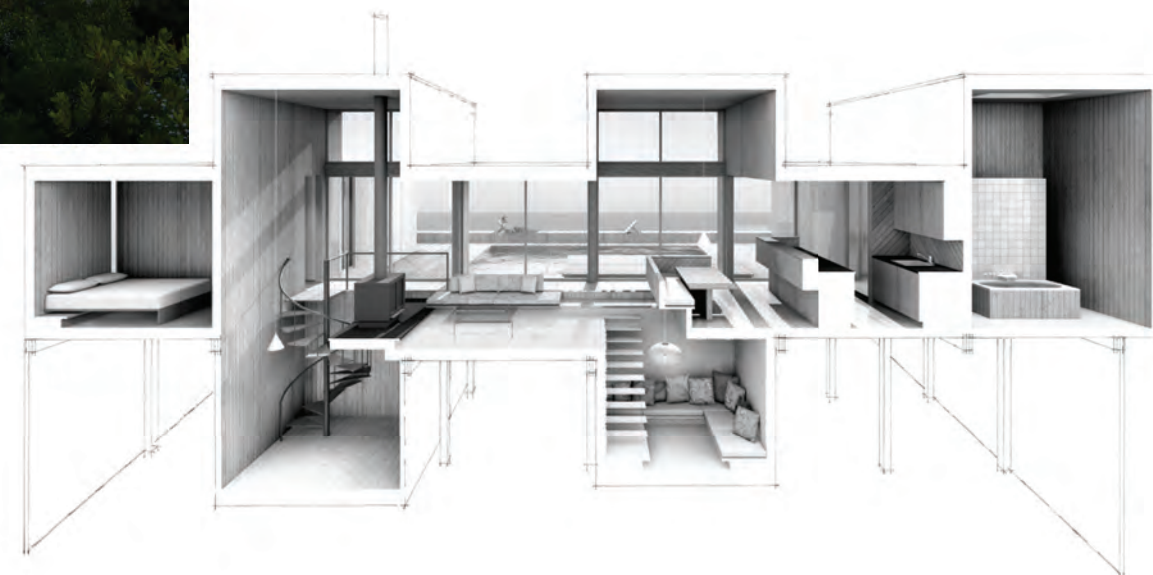
This page The jauntily sloped and cantilevered facade of Bonaguidi Residence #2 (1975) allows for trap-door windows in the floor which draw breezes through a large operable skylight in the center of the space. Photos by Horace Gifford.

“Usually, they can be reduced in size...and still satisfy them.” He resisted mid-century consumerism, discouraging washers and dryers, telling clients to take little baskets of toiletries to the bathroom, and in general promoting a kind of enforced simplicity tailored to the fragile coastal environment, which he also saw as an important antidote to city life. All surfaces are treated essentially like floors, covered with planks of wood that flex with the inevitable movements of beachfront houses supported on posts. A shadow line, or “reveal,” between horizontal and vertical surfaces confers a sense of lightness upon the interiors. Tall sliding glass doors with the thinnest possible frames bring the outdoors in. And louvered “jalousie” windows of clear and frosted glass — an import from his native Florida — invite the user to continually calibrate his or her relationship to the outdoors.

Jalousie windows were not all that he imported. Paul Rudolph’s early Florida homes were gadget-like in their preoccupation with capturing breezes and shading their inhabitants. But the increasing ubiquity of mechanical air conditioning in Florida led Rudolph to a still-striking but aloof aesthetic of objects astride rather than within the landscape. A palette of dark cypress and rich colors also gave way to the muted grey and white surfaces so congenial to the black and white Ezra Stoller photographs that were making Rudolph famous. Fire Island, whose seasonality was enforced by minimal ferry and seaplane service during the winter, had a summer climate quite similar to Sarasota’s winter climate. This allowed for a plausible transplantation of a regionally-inflected architecture across the latitudes. In their engagement with the landscape and their tactile warmth, Gifford’s homes continued the early, interactive tradition of Rudolph’s work even when they adopted the spatial qualities of his later work.



Left and below Gifford’s 1970 Lipkins Residence conjures a disco atop the dunes with its pulsating roofline and thrusting cantilevers. Inside, a sunken living area of elegant elongation leads down to “The Cave,” a windowless den of carpeted walls, oversized pillows and mirrored ceilings. Photograph by Michael Weber, Drawing by the author.



By Alan C. Bory

TOWERS, DECKS, AND A VIEW



Five wide decks on different levels lead through house for view of the bay behind. Central roof unites middle decks to corner towers.

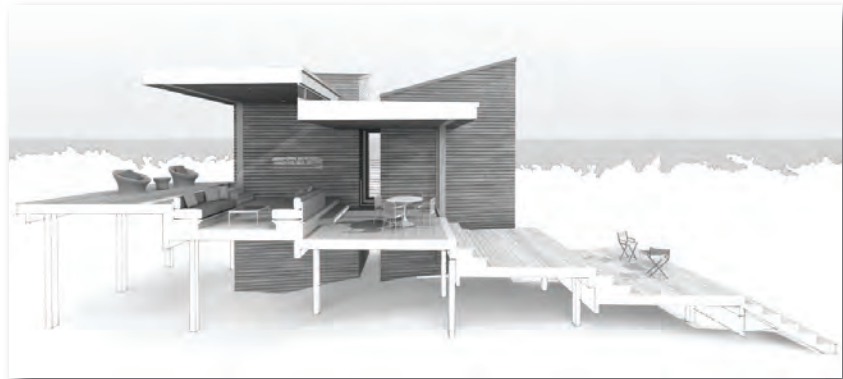


Sliding glass doors are only separation between living-dining decks and outdoors, and make uncluttered interior seem larger. Inexpensive couches were designed by the owner.

If you're planning a vacation house you may run into the same problems as designer Horace Gifford. Land is scarce and expensive and what's left often doesn't have a view. Gifford designed his house on New York's vacation mecca, Fire Island, for a 60 by 100 foot lot surrounded by thick foliage and other houses. Clever planning turned these obstacles into positive features. Five wide decks gradually lead to a vantage point where the Great South Bay is visible, without obstructing the view from nearby houses. The small house (900 square feet plus 800 square feet of open deck) gives a variety of big and small spaces, yet is very inexpensive. The simple details and exposed siding make no attempt to hide the basic construction. The design is both forthright in approach and subtle in effect. (continued)



Four towers, facing different directions, are raised above nearby house for visual impact.



A COMMUNITY TRANSFORMED

The Pines in the 1940s was an uninhabited, windswept area within walking distance of the community of Cherry Grove. Out-of-sight but accessible beaches became a favored haunt for nudists. Undistinguished beach shacks predominated as The Pines developed during the 1950s, when a motley assortment of writers, leftists, reclusive celebrities and families shared The Pines uneasily with a newer contingent of gay men and women who began migrating from Cherry Grove. The Pines' demographic course was set in 1959 when John Whyte, a successful model, purchased and rebuilt most of the commercial property after a fire swept through its harbor. His entourage of models and photographers injected a glamorous note into the still-sleepy outpost. All of this local color was a perfect client base for Gifford's experimental architecture, but his first beach house would be for himself.

The Gifford Residence could not have been simpler, and its precedent was not a house at all but rather the Trenton Bath House, a cross-shaped open-air pavilion designed by Louis Kahn. Having established his calling card, commissions immediately materialized. It didn't hurt that Gifford was charming and movie-star handsome. His cruciform, octagonal, and atrium-style homes proliferated across The Pines. At least one house was sketched in the sand for a delighted client. Other Fire Island hamlets took notice. While working in nearby Fair Harbor, Gifford encountered Charles Gwathmey's first house. It too was influenced by Louis Kahn, with a

pinwheel of shed-roofed rooms cloistered around a flat-roofed living area. The following year, in 1965, several Gifford homes used this basic configuration as their point of departure. But Gwathmey's squat, shed-roofed rooms became bold towers in Gifford's hands. Gifford's second personal residence pulled the pinwheel plan apart to create an inhabitable breezeway. He staggered the house upon multiple levels, surrounding it with "towers that reach out and grab for light." As he told *Newsday* in 1966, "I planned it for sun, but when the moon goes around it is so beautiful." It is perhaps his first mature work, drawing widely for inspiration, from Southern dogtrot structures to Adolf Loos' diagonally-animated spaces. Louis Kahn reportedly congratulated Gifford for creating "a mountain and a valley."

SOPHISTICATED SYNTHESIS

Interviewed in 1968, Gifford explained, "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. It's a way of stretching the dollar, you see." And the houses were affordable, a result of carefully cultivated relationships with local builders who grew confident with Gifford's manner of building. His mid-60s homes were cheaper than comparably-sized Paul Rudolph homes from a decade earlier, but money became less of an issue as increasingly affluent clients sought his services. A slight ebbing of his once-frenetic output coincided with the beginning of his most consistently accomplished work, homage having given way to a sophisticated synthesis. Double-height spaces carved with conversation pits simultaneously achieve intimacy and grandeur. Narrow east and west-facing clerestory windows bend the light in ways unknown to the early houses. One "tree-house" sports trap-door windows within cantilevered floors, pulling breezes through a large operable skylight at the center of the space. Gifford relished the sculpted abstractions of Brutalist architecture, while leaving aside its gargantuan scale and aggressive concrete materiality. Houses began to swirl and whirl like divinely inspired pieces of driftwood, on a shore that was becoming increasingly recognized for its architectural sophistication.

Above right "My style is becoming more complicated as I learn about light coming into space." Like a nested table, telescoping cubes with clerestory windows animate Bonaguidi Residence #1 (1968). Photograph by Louis Reens.

Right A dance of platforms artfully dodging the trees hover just over the landscape, supported by unshorn tree trunks that blend in with the wooded site. Photograph by Louis Reens.



Portrait Talent and a quiet self-confidence abetted movie-star looks and a charming demeanor to make Gifford an influential architect by the age of 30, above. Photograph by Edwin Wittstein.

Above Birds occasionally fly right through the inhabitable breezeway that Gifford designed for himself in 1965. Photo spread from *The American Home*, with photos by Bill Maris.

Above, inset Cutaway perspective by author Christopher Rawlins illustrates Gifford's use of levels to create defined yet open spaces. After stepping down off the boardwalk onto a sandy path, one ascends a series of indoor and outdoor terraces, prompting Louis Kahn to describe the home as "a mountain and a valley."



BOLD BUILDINGS FOR BARE BODIES

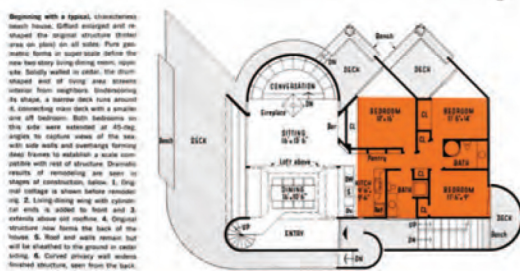
Tales of hedonistic and creative New Yorkers travelling by seaplane to stylishly rustic retreats were an irresistible draw for the press. Any remaining anonymity for the island was swept away by Albert Goldman's 1972 *New York* magazine exposé entitled "I Have Seen the Future, and it's Fire Island." Quips like "Orgy is where it's all headed, and orgy is a grand old tradition on Fire Island" made for great copy, but the truth was more complicated, as Gifford knew. He spent his thirty-third birthday in handcuffs for "intending to commit immoral acts," or what might now be termed Cruising While Gay. This arrest, in a state where a candidate for an architectural license must be "of good moral character," may have prevented him from ever obtaining his license. Fortunately, Gifford was not above a bit of architectural swinging. The Roeder Residence, studded with a sheepskin-lined "Makeout Loft" requested by the client, sheathes a square cottage in a dynamic diagonal wrap that gyrates towards the "Meat Rack," a nature preserve infamous for vivid displays of *human* fauna. The Makeout Loft faces the beach, hovering over a skylit, semicircular conversation pit with psychedelic upholstery. Bedrooms face the Meat Rack.



DESIGN IDEAS

The possibilities of remodeling

■ Throughout property is a core community, and if one wants land on the shore, he must often buy a house along with it. If the house is sound, one of the best methods of obtaining a new vacation home might be to remodel the old one. In this case, the land was good—the last beachfront plot on Fire Island's National Seashore preserves off Long Island 16.7. Its owner, Stuart Plaster, engaged Architect Horace Gifford of New York City to take the existing beach shack and make something beautiful out of it. With skill and imagination, Gifford incorporated the same original structure into the unusual design shown here.



Above left The prurience of the Roeder Residence's "Makeout Loft" almost overshadows the home's quieter virtues: a choreographed entry sequence, superb acoustics and dazzling plays of light through circular skylights onto a curved wall. Photo by Horace Gifford.

Left House Beautiful spread of the Roeder Residence. Large photo by Howard Graff, others by Horace Gifford.

Right The Roeder Residence (1969) initiated a series of homes which appropriated the sculpted abstractions of Brutalist architecture, while leaving aside its gargantuan scale and aggressive concrete materiality. Photo by Horace Gifford.



Gifford's rigorous but informal beach houses transcended an earlier beach shack vernacular while retaining their virtue of simplicity.



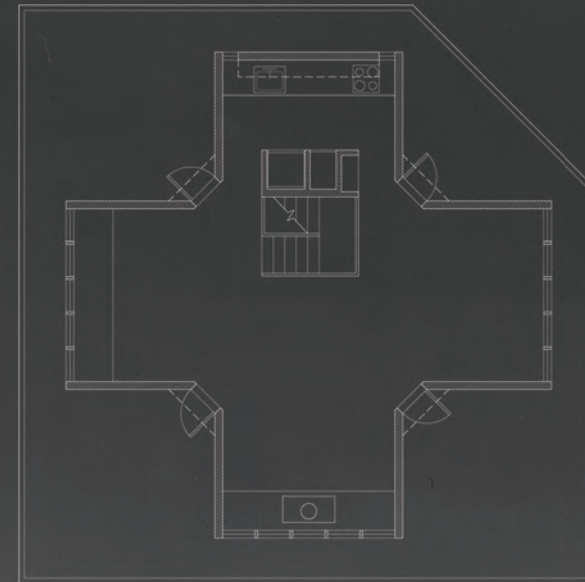
This page The “disembodied” facade of the Travis/Wall Residence (1972-77) pays homage to the iconic Milam Residence by Paul Rudolph. The north-facing brise-soleil provided minimal shade, but its real function was to magnify the contrast between the opaque, layered approach to the house (*left*) and the transparency of its bay-front facade (*above*). Color photographs by Horace Gifford, b & w photo by Ezra Stoller.

Opposite: The Evans/DePass Residence (1965) rises above the fray, radiating outward from a central core. Its solid deck rail affects an idealized horizon line of ocean and sky. Photo by Maris/Esto.

By the late '70s, The Pines' 750 homes comprised a rare example of a modernist town, dominated by flat and shed-roofed homes of cedar and glass. Seventy Gifford homes across Fire Island, with notable contributions from Andrew Geller, Harry Bates and Arthur Erickson, were responsible for this. In 1966, the editor of *The American Home* proclaimed Gifford “undoubtedly the top beach house designer in the country.” Two years later, the American Institute of Architects exhibited his work and *Progressive Architecture* showcased twenty of his homes. By 1980, the forty-eight year old architect could claim 100 home designs and list Calvin Klein as a client. Samsonite Luggage made him its spokesman, photographing Gifford in front of his “architectural classics.”

And then he was gone. Changing public tastes were a factor, but Gifford also maintained a decidedly nonchalant approach to his career. He lacked a Master's degree, having dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania in spite of a scholarship. This precluded the spread of his ideas through teaching. He did not (or could not) obtain his architecture license. Asked in 1968 why he turned down a high-profile townhouse commission, he complained that “I'd have to set up an office, buy suits, be a real businessman.” One client recalls him strolling to meetings “wearing a bikini and carrying an attaché case.” Then Gifford impulsively moved to Houston for two years in the mid 1970s. Although he returned to New York in 1978, he never again resided on the island that he had transformed. Such bohemian and peripatetic ways conspired with failing health to wind down his practice, and his last Fire Island home was completed in 1985. He died at age 59 in 1992. It was a remarkable run, though, executed without a hint of the narcissism or sharp elbows that often accompany the creation of great works. Gifford was more concerned that “someday we will learn to live with nature, instead of living on nature.” In their simplicity, sustainability, engagement with the landscape and their sheer delight, Horace Gifford's beach houses ennoble that wish and remain as relevant as ever. •

Christopher Rawlins is the principal of New York-based Rawlins Design Incorporated (www.RawlinsDesign.com) and the author of an upcoming Horace Gifford monograph, to be published in 2011.



Seeing Gifford Houses

While you can't enter these homes, you can get a good look from the outside.

Fire Island Pines

635, 637, and 638 Fire Island Boulevard

552 Beachcomber Walk

566 Driftwood Walk

603 Tuna Walk

605 A Tuna Walk

574 Coast Guard Walk

205 Pine Walk

122 and 122A Ocean Walk

252 Bay Walk

266 Bay Walk

482 Tarpon Walk

519 Porgie Walk

529 Sail Walk

Seaview

39 Homesite

43 Evergreen

Juniper Walk--two houses from the beach, east side

Fair Harbor

11 Fifth Avenue

152 Bay Walk

37, 47, and 55 Walnut Walk

The homes in The Hamptons and Connecticut are either totally secluded or significantly altered. The author is seeking a preservation-minded buyer for an endangered Gifford home in Connecticut. Contact Chris@RawlinsDesign.com for more information.