

# MID-CENTURY MASTERPIECES

A TOUR OF FIRE ISLAND PINES



CHRISTOPHER RAWLINS



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IN MEMORY OF THOMAS STELTER, 1968-2015

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the whirlwind that accompanied the release of *Fire Island Modernist* in 2013, I decided to inaugurate a mid-century house tour to include Horace Gifford's work, while illuminating the many other talented architects that made the Pines into such a unique landscape. This has come together very quickly, and would not have been possible without crucial and last-minute support from many dedicated people. Michael Crisafulli and Morton Newburgh have been wonderful and adventurous clients. I cannot count how many times Marc Blackwell and Eric Reinitz have allowed me to barge into their spectacular home, friends in tow, eager for one more look. Charles Renfro, a Gifford for our time, has brought new life to a forlorn classic. Ron Martin's meticulous care of his home and its historical records denote a tiny fraction of the ways in which he has led and loved this community for four decades. Well before mid-century aesthetics were back in vogue, James Streacker and Scott Ahlborn discovered, restored, and enriched what a less sensitive intellect would have torn down. And Garry Korr could have ignored my pestering inquiries about his renovation plans, but instead he has undertaken a heartening series of restorations that are fast restoring an iconic home to its rightful place.

I am indebted to Philip Monaghan, a tireless advocate for the preservation of mid-century modern architecture who helped to conceive these tours. Joey Mendoza dedicated his time and talents to create the logo for this event, and the ensuing web site, that will allow everyone to enjoy an informed tour of the Pines. The architects Rodman Paul, Scott Bromley, and Hal Hayes are gracious and collegial role models for me, as I engage the the Pines in my capacity as a practitioner. I thank Amerikom for once again printing a first-rate catalog. Tommy McCall and Victor Zonana are generous hosts. *Boffo* hosted 2013's house tours, and organizing it all myself this year has aroused a new appreciation for their talents. Tom Sibley enthusiastically photographed four of the six homes on this tour. His dedication and passion leap off the page. Rafael Kalinoski, my summer intern, made this project both feasible and enjoyable. And Pines Liquor has made it all go down so much easier.

My dear friend Thomas Stelter beamed as he watched me cultivate my passion for architecture in college. He passed away suddenly as this catalog was being written, and it is to Tom that I dedicate this tour.

# FOREWORD

As far back as I can remember, I have been a house explorer, with interests that extend beyond a seductive proportion or a well-crafted detail. Houses are not static objects. They are the stages upon which our lives unfold, and where culture is created. Since my first foray to the Pines, seventeen years ago, I have been peering over fences and knocking on doors. It was immediately apparent to me that the Pines is a community that looks and lives like no other, but how did it become this way? After modest beginnings in the 1950's, a talented roster of architects emerged to create an architecture as distinctive as its inhabitants. Harry Bates, Earl Combs, and the prolific Horace Gifford lived and worked in the Pines. Their homes shared the spotlight with inspired cameos by Arthur Erickson, Andrew Geller, Marcel Bretos, James McCleod, and Don Page. While each pursued different forms, all shared the belief that life at the beach should be carefree as well as maintenance-free. Rare were the painted surfaces, clipped lawns, and all the brute force associated with maintaining the typical suburban home. Naturally-weathering cedar and cypress pavilions in a riot of shapes established our signature architecture. Yet for all of their sculptural purity, these homes offered a relaxed and sensual ambience that resonated with weekenders attired in nothing more than a bikini and Bain de Soleil.

The Stonewall generation artfully and gently colonized this fragile landscape. They realized that, like most beautiful things, the Pines is an easily marred countenance. Today, when confronted by an aggressive fence, or a steroidally bloated house, or a renovation that obliterates the finer aspects of the original, I worry that the Pines has lost its way. This tour of mid-century homes is a call to action that aims to unlock our history, rethink our priorities, and *honor the homeowners* who have maintained the integrity of their vintage properties.



# 635 FIRE ISLAND BOULEVARD

Home of CHARLES RENFRO

Architect: HORACE GIFFORD, 1961 Renovation: BROOKLYN OFFICE, 2015

“Where’s that favorite relaxation spot of yours? Mountains? Seashore? Or a tranquil lake where the big ones never get away?...When you find that place, make your second home as wonderful as this one: handsome, tough, and completely carefree,” wrote *Better Homes and Gardens* about Gifford’s first Fire Island home, located at 638 Fire Island Boulevard. The magazine sold the plans directly to subscribers. Two replicas of the original were built in the Pines, and 635 Fire Island Boulevard presents the most intact version of the original design. Its new owner, himself a prominent architect, worked with his good friend Anne Nixon at Brooklyn Office to dust off this once-forlorn and easily overlooked house.

Horace Gifford once told a reporter that “it is not until forty, maybe forty-five that an architect does work of real monument.” At twenty-eight he saw himself as a student, not a master, of architecture. Accordingly, Gifford’s first beach house adapts the forms of his teacher Louis Kahn’s Trenton Bath House to life on the dunes. The bar-shaped home is anchored by a central, glassed-in space sheltered by a pyramid-shaped roof. Juxtaposed with this vaulted space are modest flat-roofed bedrooms on each side. Sundecks to the north and south create a criss-crossing floor plan. Like the southern vernacular homes of Gifford’s youth, it is raised several feet off the ground to capture breezes, but not high enough to break through the tree line, making it nearly invisible from the public walkway. Its approach consists of a narrow, meandering boardwalk that traverses the wetlands.

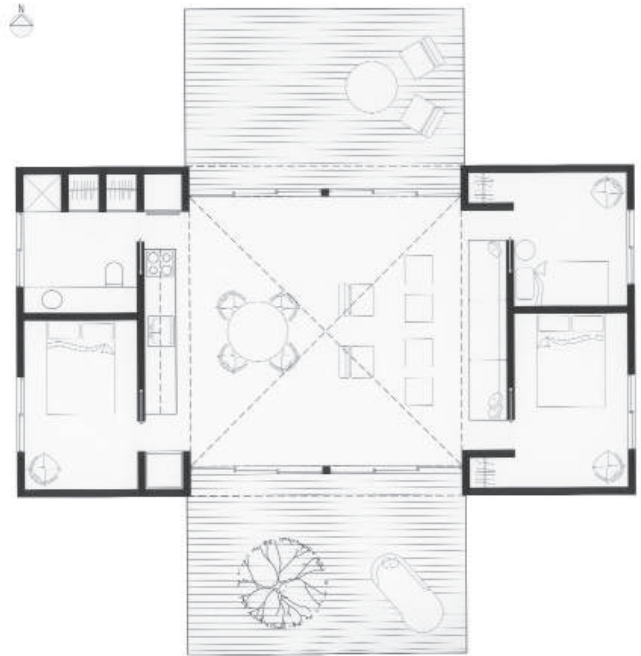
Although he would later become more adventurous with form and light, the essential grammar of Horace Gifford’s design aesthetic can already be seen in this debut structure. The home is held aloft on locust posts, ensconced in multiple sun-decks, clad with naturally-weathering cedar and redwood, and framed by an untouched landscape. It is “a tent,” as Charles Renfro aptly describes it, designed to host an especially artful form of camping.

At right: Louis Kahn, Trenton Bathhouse, Ewing Township, NJ, 1955.





Above: Gifford's identical home at 638 Fire Island Boulevard in 1962.  
Below: Original plan. Its northern deck now extends deep into the landscape.





# 219 BAY WALK

Home of JAMES STREACKER and SCOTT ALBHORN

Architect: UNKNOWN, 1961

A typical early 1960's cottage by an unknown architect, 219 Bay Walk transcends its humble origins through the meticulousness of its restoration and the addition of a modernist landscape. The house was built in 1961 for Harry and Helen Kraft. Harry was an engineer for Grumman Aircraft and a long-time Pines Fire Department volunteer. Helen served as its dispatcher. During the summer months, they lived on a boat in the Harbor and rented their house.

Upon purchasing the home in 2000, James Streacker and Scott Albhorn undertook a series of subtle improvements with outsize results. An accumulation of gestures--none of them showy, all of them poetic--result in a pleasing diversity of outdoor spaces, from a raked sand garden culled from the Harbor dredging, to the perch of an upper deck with low benches, to a slate-lined valley below. Nature is everywhere, yet nothing is left to chance. One example is an inviting bench at the entry porch, painted to match the leaves of the adjacent Japanese maple. Best of all, the homeowners refrained from erecting a tall fence around it all, thus capturing the original spirit of Fire Island Pines as a public place to enjoy private architecture.

The new architectural gesture inside is a dining room that was converted from a bedroom. Carefully composed openings in its wall maintain a zone of privacy amidst all of the admiring passers-by. In its un-fussy way, the original architecture is also well suited to the beach. A raked ceiling leads to clerestory windows that draw breezes through the main space. A rich palette of wood and tile, including hard-to-find "wormwood," warms the interior. The kitchen will resonate with fans of *Mad Men*: Betty Draper would feel right at home chain-smoking around its Formica peninsula.







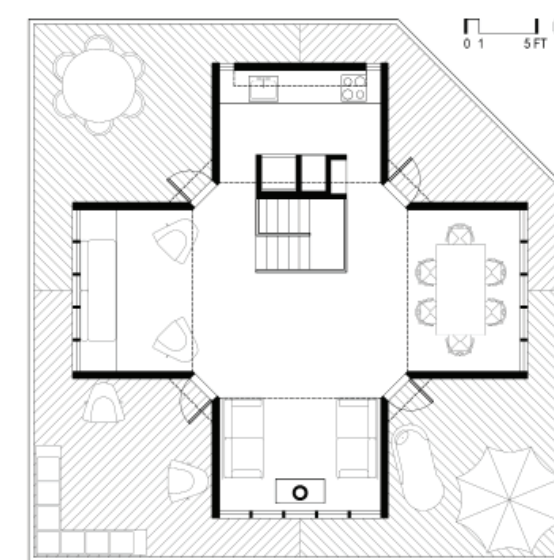
# 482 TARPON WALK

Home of GARRY KORR

Architect: HORACE GIFFORD, 1965

Horace Gifford's early homes were modestly situated in the landscape, their rooflines arcing just above the trees. But soon the gables, hips, and arcs of Gifford's early confections gave way to a more abstract vocabulary that relied exclusively upon flat and shed roofs. Scale became intentionally ambiguous, as his influences veered toward monumental sources. In the midst of a tumultuous year which found Horace Gifford arrested in the Meat Rack, he produced some of his strongest work to date with a series of towering houses that "reach out and grab for light." The most iconic of these was created for Robert Evans and Dr. Scott DePass. The house is delicately tethered to the landscape on its slender tower bases, a "space ship," as Gifford described it, hovering over its earthbound neighbors. Three spacious decks facing due west, east, and south chase the sun. From a seated position, the solid deck rail creates a filtered horizon line where ocean meets sky. The central living space is left open, for dancing. Two living areas, a dining room, and a kitchen claim the four tower niches. It acquired the nickname "Kodak House" due to its resemblance to the ubiquitous instant cameras from the 1970's.

Insensitive additions exacted their toll, particularly a cumbersome deck and railing at its base which robs the house of its hovering quality. Fortunately, its current owner is chipping away at this wear and tear in a phased renovation. Working from the top down, Garry Korr's home already boasts a new roof, shingles, and difficult-to-replace jalousie windows. Once again, the Kodak House is almost ready for its close up.









# 214 BEACH HILL WALK

Home of MICHAEL CRISAFULLI and MORTON NEWBURGH

Architect: DON PAGE, 1962 Restoration and Addition: RAWLINS DESIGN, 2012-Present

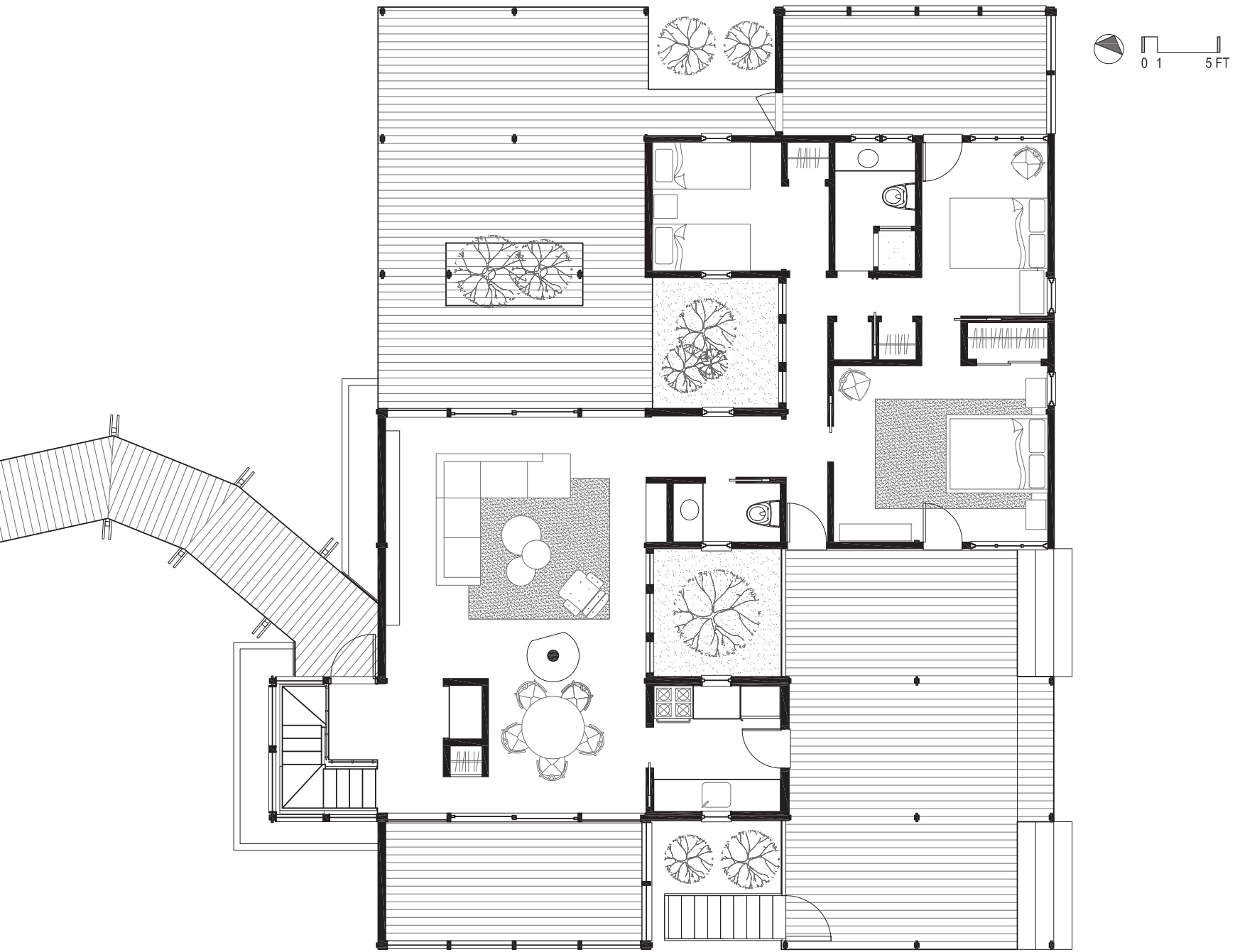
This early addition to the modernist landscape of the Pines was commissioned by Stanley Posthorn (1915-2009), a public relations executive for Time Inc. who was credited with the success of Forbes and People magazine. An art collector, Posthorn acquired early works by his friends Andy Warhol, Joe Brainard, Ellsworth Kelly, and his nephew Jim Dine. Seeking a coastal retreat as well as a place to display his art collection, Posthorn called upon Charles “Don” Page (1917-2007). The display of this art was accentuated by a blank wall across the entire front façade, relieved only by a covered porch that led to its front door.

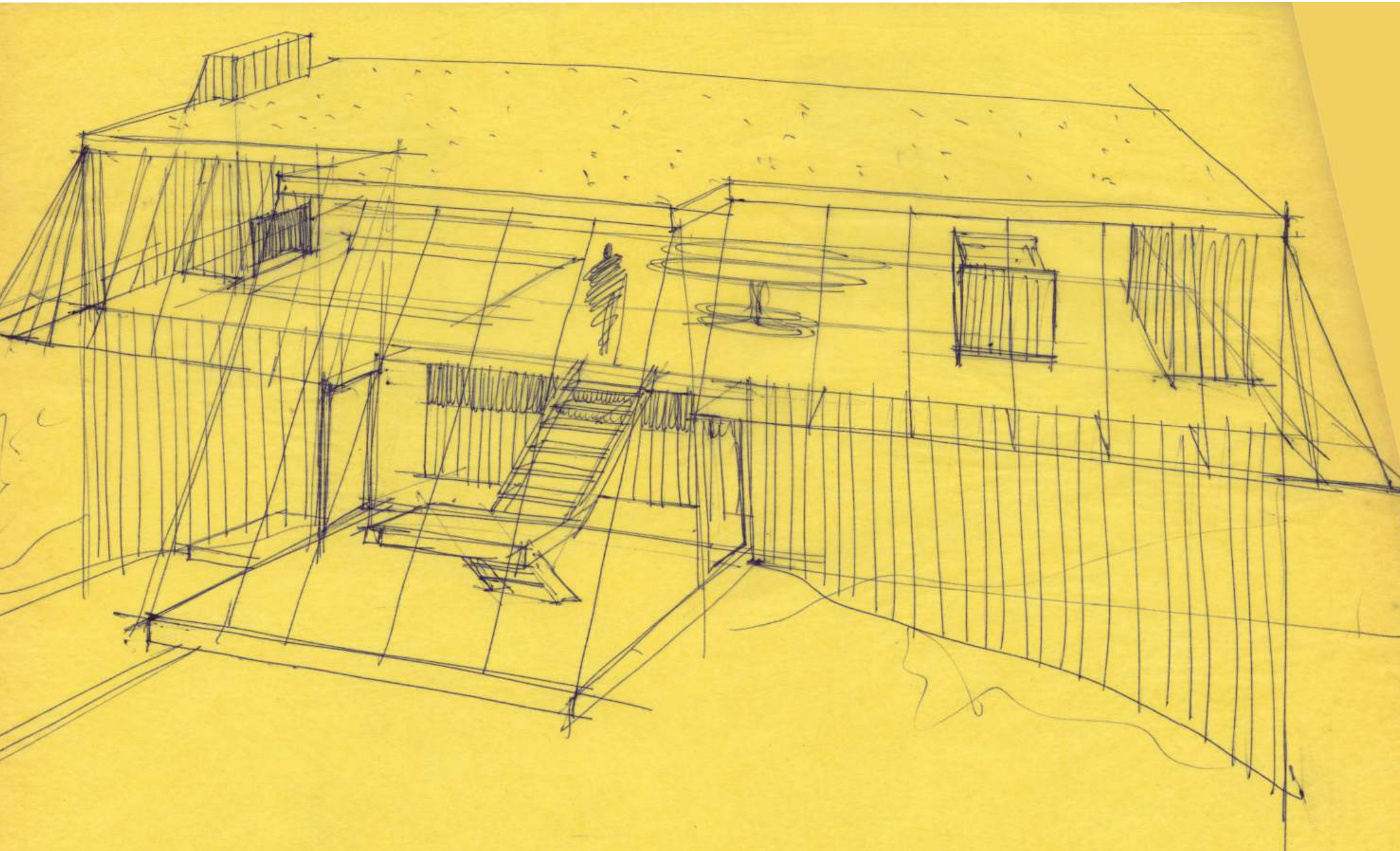
Page headed the graphic design department of I. M. Pei’s office, and the plan he designed for 214 Beach Hill Walk was rigorously composed. Starting with a rectangular platform that hovered over its site on wooden pilings, Page laid out a grid overlaid with an S-shaped interior plan that cradled two planted courtyards. The remaining space was further delineated into a symmetrical array of screened porches and terraces. Its modular proportions were marked with black posts and horizontal beams that created an intimate scale within the gable-roofed rooms. All windows were aligned across their courtyards in order to see through the entire house. Alas, the home’s construction details and finishes were no match for the home’s graphic and spatial clarity, perhaps as a result of Page’s non-technical background. These shortcomings are being addressed in an ongoing renovation by Rawlins Design. Vinyl floors were replaced with robust porcelain tiles in a matte, textured pattern. An out-of-scale brick hearth that created a trip hazard was reimagined as a floating, rotating ethanol fireplace. Subtle up and down-lighting was integrated into the black cross-beams. A closet that cramped the Foyer became a mirrored Bar that opens up the space while leaving the floor plan unchanged. The Kitchen and Powder Room were completely renovated, and the entire home was refurnished with new and vintage modernist furniture.

Further muddling the original design intent of the house was a lower-level apartment, built by subsequent owners, which bloated the original airiness of the structure. Rawlins Design reconfigured and integrated the apartment into the main house by transforming the covered entry porch into a glass-enclosed stair that presents a more inviting face to the public boardwalk. The entry boardwalk was rebuilt in keeping with the original winding approach, while the lower apartment level was stained black to blend into the vegetation and restore a sense of lightness to the original, gray structure. Central air conditioning for the entire home was discreetly tucked into a closet. The latest phase of work integrates a new outdoor shower, hot tub, and a renovated pool into the ensemble. Combining formal restraint with dramatic changes, 214 Beach Hill Walk is an exploration in the art of forging ahead while honoring the past.









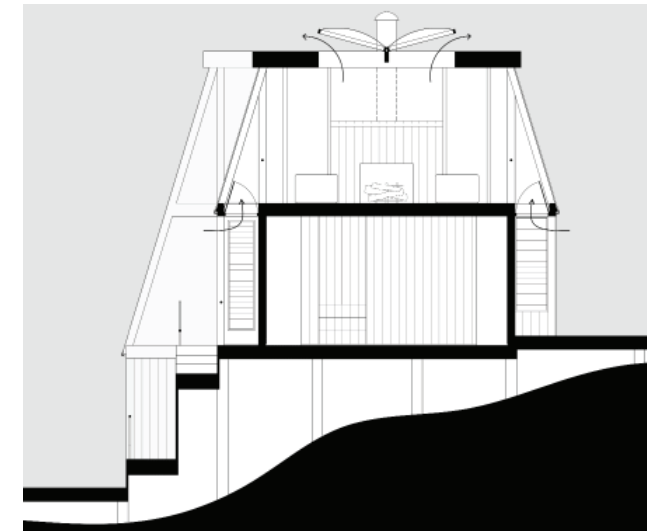
# 529 SAIL WALK

Home of MARC BLACKWELL and ERIC REINITZ

Architect: HORACE GIFFORD, 1975

Lawrence Bonaguidi, a repeat client, commissioned a “tree house” from Horace Gifford which clung to a dramatic outcropping at the eastern edge of the Pines. A twisting stair scaled the steep site, leading to a perfectly square foyer. A spiral stair passed the tree line, revealing preserved dunes that stretched eastward. In the gaps created between slanted, clifflike glass walls and the suspended floor, trap doors opened up to ventilate the home, drawing air through a large “chimney” skylight at the center of the space. The home’s remove from the ground, combined with the floor’s separation from its glass walls, doubled the gravity-defying excitement of life in the tree-tops. Two built-in sofas defined a sunken living area, with cushions that slid off their frames to create a fireside love nest. On the north side of the house, the slanted glass careened all the way to the foyer floor. To the south, the sloped glass walls linked the living area to the master bath below. Its mirror was positioned so that a primping or showering host maintained a visual connection with the public spaces above.

Marc Blackwell and Eric Reinitz purchased the home in a forlorn state. While respecting the essential gestures of the house, they have put their own stamp on it in the form of a poolside kitchenette, bathroom renovations, luxe accessories designed by Mr. Blackwell, and a roof deck that soars above the ever-climbing tree line.





At left: vintage photos  
Below: the home today, with a new roof deck, pool,  
and poolside kitchenette





# 607 SHORE WALK

Home of RON MARTIN

Architect: HARRY BATES, 1964

Built in 1964 by Walter Reich for Alan Morton as a rental property, two minimal post-and-beam volumes--a main house and a guest house--frame a verdant courtyard, inspiring the nickname "Dual in the Sun." The private nature of 607 Shore Walk illuminates the courtly reserve of its architect, Harry Bates, versus the voyeuristic bent of his rival Horace Gifford. But the lucky guests who entered this exclusive domain witnessed some of the most glamorous times in the life of the Pines.


Jeanette Edris Rockefeller, a socialite married to Governor of Arkansas Winthrop Rockefeller, purchased the home as her relationship with Rockefeller cooled. They divorced in 1971 after Winthrop left office. She bought it to be next door to her friend Joe Lombardo, an antiques dealer, designer, and brother of famed bandleader Guy Lombardo. They filled it with possessions from Winrock Farms, the family estate in Arkansas. Mrs. Rockefeller's bed remains in the guest room, and a stone planter and sculpture in the courtyard exemplify artifacts from her tenure. Controversially, Lombardo ordered seven coats of paint applied to its maintenance-free, natural wood finishes in his bid to create a more stately home for Rockefeller. In 1969, Harry Bates returned to design a second-floor addition to the property, but it was never executed. Rockefeller and Lombardo produced a fabled party at his home in 1972, featuring a full orchestra. It culminated in a fireworks display, with fire hoses at the ready thanks to a generous donation to the Fire Department.

An illustrious new chapter in the life of the house began in 1974 when it was sold to Ron Martin, John Macunovich, Jim Meade, and David Napoli. Their "Lady Pizza Goes to Havana" party transformed the home into a Cuban nightclub, circa 1940. Supermodel Pat Cleveland, pigtailed aloft in helium-filled balloons, turned the courtyard into a catwalk at their annual Labor Day Party in 1976. The following year, DJ Howard Merritt used a 607 Shore Walk party to debut the disco anthem "Native New Yorker." "Beach '79," also known as the Party of the Decade, was conceptualized in its living room.

But in 1983, Ron Martin and his partner Dr. John Fenoglio began planning the Pines Care Center, as their home transformed from a hedonistic paradise into a site of loss, mourning, and activism. Ron Martin remains as the sole survivor and good steward of 607 Shore Walk, and served as an officer of the Fire Island Property Owners Association for 30 years, including as President from 2006-2010.





No.	Date	Revision	Description
 <i>Harry Bates</i>			
RENOVATIONS & ADDITIONS FOR MRS. WINTHROP ROCKEFELLER SHAW WALK FIRE ISLAND PINES, NY.			
<b>Harry Bates Associates</b> ARCHITECT 510 Madison Avenue New York, N.Y.			
INTERIOR ELEVATIONS & DETAILS			
Drawn RJS, RJD		Drawing Number <b>A-4</b>	
Scale AS SHOWN			
Date 2-21-69			





## PHOTO CREDITS

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ENDPAPER: Ferron Bell

635 BEACHCOMBER WALK

Black and White Interior: Vincent Lisanti

Trenton Bath House: John Ebstell

Color Photos: Tom Sibley

219 BAY WALK

Photos: Tom Sibley

482 TARPON WALK

Black and White Photos: Bill Maris ©ESTO

Color Photo: Horace Gifford

214 BEACH HILL WALK

Photos: Tom Sibley

Plan: Rawlins Design

529 SAIL WALK

Sketch: Horace Gifford

Cross-section: Rawlins Design

Far Left Photo: Michael Dunne/ElizabethWhiting.com

Far Right photo: Tria Giovan

Other Photos: Horace Gifford

607 SHORE WALK

Photos: Tom Sibley

Title Block: Harry Bates, courtesy Ron Martin

PINES MODERN LOGO: Joey Mendoza

AUTHOR PHOTO: Gustavo Monroy

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219 BAY WALK

James Streacker, interview with author, July 9, 2015.

482 TARPON WALK

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529 SAIL WALK

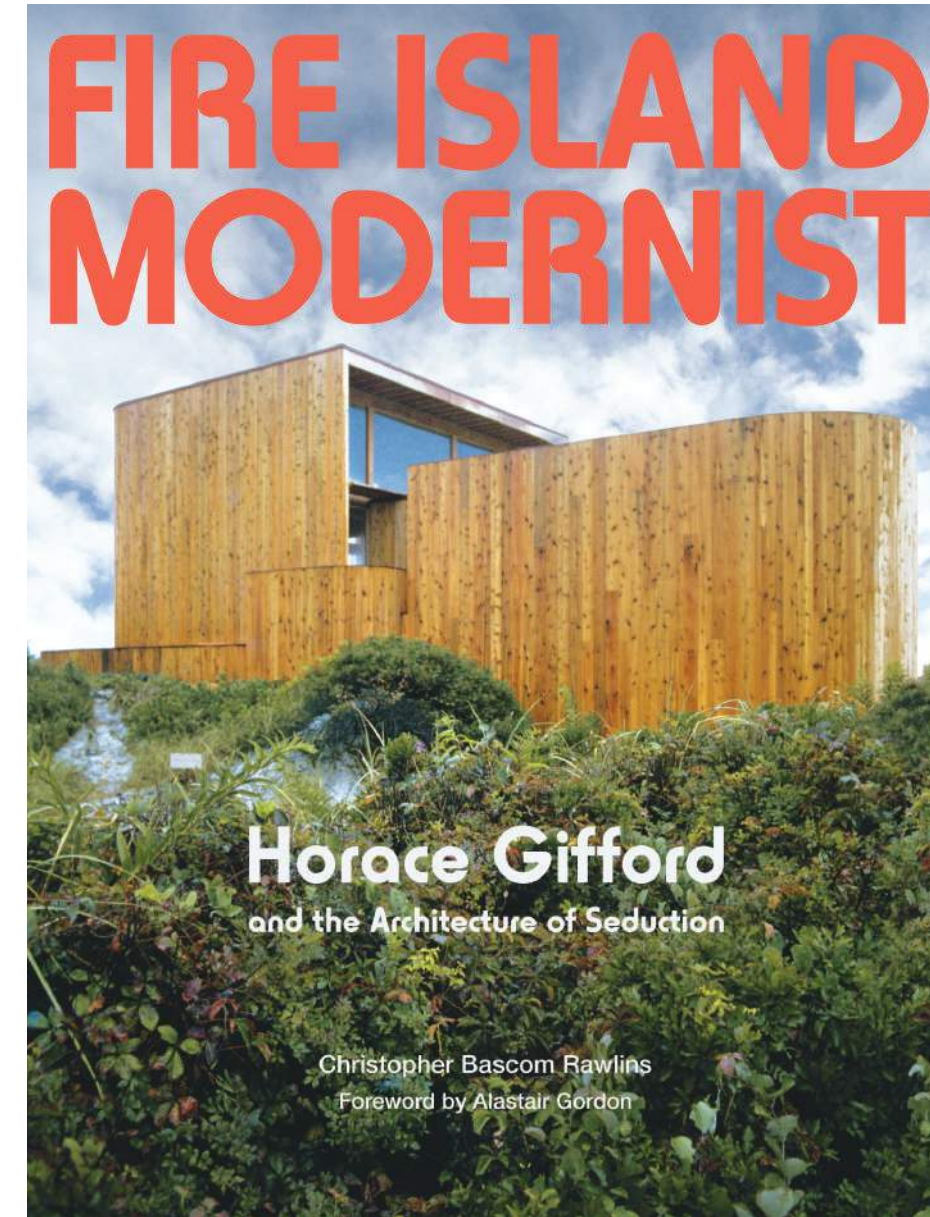
Rawlins, Christopher. *Fire Island Modernist*.

607 SHORE WALK

Ronald Martin, interview with author, July 9, 2015.

Harry Bates, interview with author, June 24, 2014.

## ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER RAWLINS





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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Rawlins is a writer and the principal of Rawlins Design, an architecture and interiors firm whose projects include new beach houses and mid-century modernist restorations. He is the author *Fire Island Modernist: Horace Gifford and the Architecture of Seduction*, currently in its second printing. Christopher is a graduate of the Georgia Institute of Technology and Princeton University. He lives in Manhattan and Fire Island Pines.

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