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A backlash against bullish building in the Hamptons.



DOWNSIZING

The Kuchin house, left, was built for \$150,000 on a prominent stretch of sand dune above Two Mile Hollow Beach. Constructed with metal siding and floor-to-ceiling windows, it is a modest 1,000-square-foot antidote to the rambling trophy houses visible from its deck.

(inset). The Silverman house, below, is 1,900 square feet.

Where Bigger Was Better, Small Wonders

Photographs by Rick Lew for The New York Times; inset top right, Maxine Hicks for The New York Times

By ALASTAIR GORDON

EAST HAMPTON, N.Y. The landscape of eastern Long Island is long and low, with the brown expanse of potato fields and dunes sweeping down to the sea. New houses stand out for all to admire, edifying as high as zoning laws permit, competing for water views. Over the last 10 years, 30,000-square-foot mansions have been going up like Levitt prefabs in varying styles of shingle and pop Palladian and, recently, Miami stronghold style with white stucco walls. But, as the summer of 2001 winds down — and margin calls from brokers filter in — there is evidence of a mood shift here: three houses finished in the last few months suggest a new spirit of restraint. They are

part of a gathering anti-McMansion movement, antidotes to the architectural Viagra of recent years. All three are under 2,000 square feet, relatively affordable (from \$150,000 to about \$400,000), and require a minimum of maintenance. Each cuts against the grain of Hamptons excess to offer a lighter, slightly whimsical take on summer living.

They may be small, but they're not austere. "At first we called it a throwaway house," said Ken Kuchin, who built a sculptural white metal shed on a prominent stretch of sand dune, one of the last open oceanfront lots in East Hampton. He spent \$150,000 on the house — less than some Hamptonsites spend on imported patio tiles — but it grew into something more, a little sonnet to the sun and sea. "We wanted it to be very casual — a place you could just walk into in a wet bathing suit, with



sand on your feet," Mr. Kuchin said. But what will the neighbors say of a 1,000-square-foot, stripped-to-the-bone home with an outdoor shower beside the entrance, for all to see? Instead of sharing cups of sugar, residents here have a habit of taking one another to court. There is something about the light and landscape (and the proximity to New York City) that brings out proprietary instincts. "The house is very visible and very raw," Mr. Kuchin said. "It sticks up off the ground." A few neighbors complained to the Village Board about the metal siding. Realtors who were shown the property reacted as if it were a minor act of subversion.

"You can't see someone's apartment in the city, but out here everything's visible," said Peter M. Turino, co-owner of Danemer Associates, which specializes in high-end

estates. "It's also very competitive. People use the same architects and interior decorators and compare notes: 'We have imported tapestries from France and you don't!'"

To its neighbors, Mr. Kuchin's white beach house may serve as a galling reminder that the times are changing. With a lagging real estate market, excess may finally be going out of fashion. "I think we're at a transitional time, and it's going to get worse before it gets better," said Michael Braverman, a Hampton broker for 28 years. He said hundreds of mid-range houses were on the market but not selling. "The great estates are still turning over, but the middle-range spec houses are sitting there. They're the first ones to be in trouble."

Mr. Kuchin, 47, a retired transpor-

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Small Wonders in the Hamptons

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tation executive could easily have built a trophy mansion when he and his partner, Bruce Anderson, a 49-year-old social worker, bought the five-acre lot for \$3 million in 1988. But they saw it as an experiment in simple beach living, not a grand declaration of status. (The property is now valued at \$7.5 million, though Mr. Kuchin has no immediate plans to sell.)

The house might have been even smaller, but the Village of East Hampton requires that residences be at least 850 square feet, Mr. Kuchin and Mr. Anderson began with that size and expanded another 200 square feet during the design process. "The whole idea was to feel the ocean, to fit into the natural landscape and feel the salt spray," Mr. Kuchin said.

The architect, Preston Phillips, said he found the tight budget a creative challenge. "I knew it was an opportunity to do something unique, but it would require great restraint — no granite countertops, no Della faucets." In fact, Mr. Phillips spent more time working on the Kuchin house than he has on houses that cost millions. "Every design move and material was under scrutiny," he said. "The biggest challenge was actually making it look good." In the end, Mr. Kuchin's house cost about \$150 per square foot, the average in the Hamptons is closer to \$225.

They began with the simplest shape — a 19-by-50-foot box with pre-painted metal sid-



ANTI-MANSION Ken Kuchin's architect, Preston Phillips, built his own simple stucco home in a wooded stretch of Bridgehampton, above, in 1988.

ing normally used for barns (\$1.50 a square foot) screwed into plywood walls. PVC tubing was used for railings around the deck.

Mr. Kuchin repeatedly asked his architect to raise the house to take advantage of ocean views and the prevailing southwest breeze. "It was Ken's idea to keep raising it," said Mr. Phillips. "It was his mantra: let's raise it another foot." The roof was also raised six feet with twin shed roofs, sloping in opposite directions to create a butterfly roof, an emblem of the modernist beach houses of the 1960's and 70's.

MANY of the new mansions here are filled with such precious furnishings that they require constant climate control and are completely sealed off from the elements. What's more, neotraditional houses must be positioned in a formal way, with relatively small windows and covered porches, effectively shutting themselves off from the best views. At the Kuchin house, floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panorama of wild seascapes and scudding clouds.

"You don't just get part of the view, you get everything: the dunes, the ocean and the sky in equal horizontal bands," Mr. Phillips said. "If we had left it a flat roof, we would have lost the sky." The sensation is enhanced by an azure vinyl covering on the sloping ceilings. "I wanted it to be iridescent blue so it would look as if the sun were reflecting off the ocean," he said.

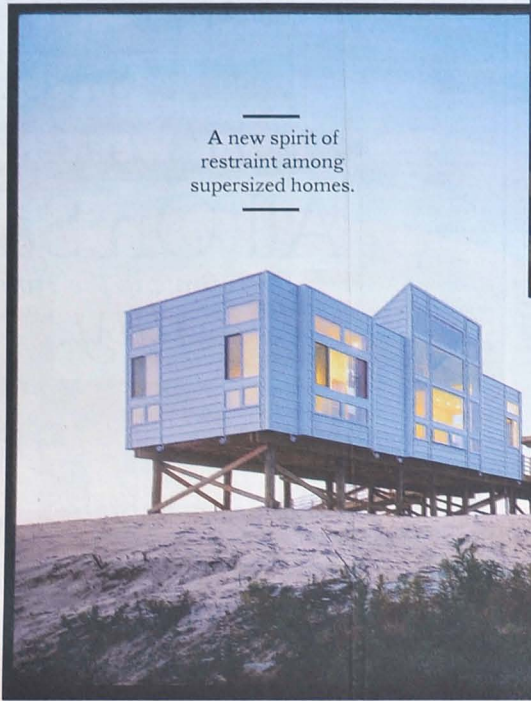
The deck is as big as the whole house, with a flat-roofed pergola for shade. "The idea was that we would be outside most of the time," Mr. Kuchin said. A ramp leads to a footpath that meanders through bayberry and pine all the way to Two Mile Hollow Beach. The interior could not be more understated, with a galley-style kitchen, living and dining rooms together, a single bath and bedroom separated from the living area by a double-sided fireplace.

In a true beach house, the focus is always on nature. And here, views are everything, with floor-to-ceiling windows framing the

Living dunes
The return to a simple summer style is also taking root far from the expensive dunefront lots. In the Northwest Woods of East Hampton, Stuart and Susan Silverman

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A new spirit of restraint among supersized homes.



Photographs by Rick Lew for The New York Times

DUNESCAPE The Kuchin house, above. Inset, the owners, Ken Kuchin (left) and Bruce Anderson, flank their architect, Preston Phillips, in a living room framed with ocean views.

INSIDE OUT The Silvermans (far left), with Chris Coy, their architect) wanted their house to blend with the woods. Only glass separates family and woods on one side (left).



devised their own weekend paradise. "We told our architects that we weren't looking for a huge house but a jewel, something small but beautiful," Mrs. Silverman said. "The rooms didn't need to be big or fancy with marble and all that. We just wanted a room for family living and a great room outside."

The 1,900-square-foot house appears much larger. "The idea was to physically define what you can't see," said Chris Coy, the architect who designed the house in the woods, along with his partner, Robert Barnes. "They wanted a feeling of spatial serenity. They wanted to feel like they were part of the woods when they were inside the house."

The house opens to the woods with a 24-by-24-foot window. The architects wanted to give it the feeling of a Scandinavian retreat,

where simple, outdoor living took precedence over appearances. "We tried to make the Silverman house disappear into the wilderness," Mr. Barnes said.

Mrs. Silverman added, "When we first showed the plans, some of our friends went, 'Oh my God, how do you have the nerve to do something like that?' Most people don't feel very confident about expressing their originality. They don't understand their needs, and they let other people decide for them."

For Helene Winer, owner of Mecca Pictures Gallery, building small was a defense mechanism.

She bought a 700-square-foot bungalow overlooking Mecox Bay in Bridgehampton in 1983. She was happy with its spartan simplicity until she found herself crowded in by looming neighbors who built high to gain prime views. The house to the east — "a

kind of shingle erection" according to Ms. Winer — rises high. "They could see right into my living room," she said. The neighbors to the west also built prominently, in what Mrs. Winer described as "a Soprano style."

Kate Everts, a partner with Fredrick Stelle in Stelle Architects, a Bridgehampton firm, heard Mrs. Winer's plea. "She called our office and said, 'Help, I'm being invaded by ugly McMansions.' She wanted to create a peaceful world while blocking out the aggressive new neighbors." Ms. Everts added 1,200 square feet of living space while retaining the pared-down aesthetic of the original bungalow. The new section is oriented to the north and looks onto Mecox Bay while blocking out the looming new intruders. "We thought of it like a horse with blinders," Ms. Everts said. "You have abso-

lutely no sense of the neighbors when you're inside the house."

The Winer house is a lesson in self-restraint. It's a little Bauhaus beach house perched on cedar stilts with an all-glass wall facing north, toward the bay, and a screened-in porch for dining. Ms. Winer grew up on the West Coast, and she wanted something simple, like the Santa Monica surfer shacks she remembered from her youth. "We didn't pump it up any higher than it needed to be," she said. "It felt natural. You just walk in and out on the ground level." She kept the landscape as simple as possible, with dune grass and a narrow footpath cutting through the bayberry and marsh grass to the edge of bay.

Ms. Everts said, "Helene knows who she is, and that's what the house is about." The Hamptons is probably not about to convert entirely to simple modern homes. Traditional styles, however ersatz, will no doubt continue as the preferred expression of social arrival. "Traditional architecture is still very in," Mr. Turino said. "It looks like old establishment, and that's what most people with money want."

But Rick Shumway, a contractor who worked on the Winer house, said he had been hired to build a half-dozen modest modern homes in the past few months, a number that surprised him.

In keeping with a less bullish market and diminished expectations, the recent resurgence of the modern beach house, however limited, may signal the beginning of an actual trend — one that offers a leaner alternative to having it all.



PUTTING ON BLINDERS To block the view of mansions crowding in on Helene Winer's lean little bayfront bungalow, Kate Everts, a Bridgehampton architect, added 1,200 square feet facing Mecox Bay.

Jeff Healey/Dezeen Architects