

NEW YORK



The three-level, 11,000-square-foot home by the sea.

ASSEMBLED IN LIGHT

A beach house on Eastern Long Island created by Barnes Coy Architects combines modern, sustainable design with extraordinary attunement to nature. BY ALASTAIR GORDON

Le Corbusier spoke of “forms being assembled in light,” and light creating the expression of a structure, something that Robert Barnes and Chris Coy—co-founders of Barnes Coy Architects—explored throughout their 25-year partnership. They both grew up on Eastern Long Island and came to understand the special qualities of light out east, that same sea-brewed radiance that lured artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning to the Hamptons after World War II.

“One thing light does is to carve the forms of our architecture,” says Coy. The Bridgehampton-based firm often works with minimal forms, transparency and rugged textures to capture and express the light, while flying beams, cantilevered overhangs and outrigger-type elements are used to throw webs of shadow across the exterior surfaces of their buildings.

From the ocean beach, looking up over the line of

dunes, the Z House resembles a classic modernist pavilion: flat-roofed, one story tall, and rectilinear—think Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe or Marcel Breuer—and from such a distance, it appears to hover just above the dunes, buoyant and airy, the open plan bracketed within a white stucco superstructure interspersed with sheathes of hurricane- and impact-proof glass.

When you come closer, however, the illusion dissolves and you see that it’s not a single-story pavilion, but a three-level structure with more than 11,000 square feet of living space, very much anchored to the flood-prone site on three cast-concrete plinths.

Originally, a neo-traditional house from the 1980s sat on the property, but clients and architects agreed that it should be demolished to make way for a new structure, one that was modern, sustainable and better suited to the clients’ needs.

A master plan evolved after close scrutiny of the natural environment and examination of local and federal building codes. After presenting the clients with several different schemes, the architects settled on a final design that satisfied everyone: a curving facade that mirrored the concave setback line of the wetlands that surrounded a pond to the north, while the opposite side, to the south, would open up to the Atlantic Ocean with hovering, box-like bays running parallel to the Coastal Erosion hazard line.

With the basic footprint established, the design process became organic and self-organizing, the goal being immersion into the surrounding landscape of rolling dunes, ocean beach and wetlands. The overall form was filled in, and then gradually eroded to become more like an armature, a kind of skeletal scaffolding within which the various elements could be arranged. In the final design, as built, the outer membrane of the house curves, projecting outward in space. It folds and retracts in other places, like a bureau with some drawers punched out, others pulled in.

There's an inherent sense of spectacle in the architecture of the Z House, a breezy transparency and restless shifting of planes, especially on the upper levels. Glass curtain walls on both the north and south facades are made of 6-foot-wide panels of flat (not curved) glass, as if the outer membrane had been peeled back to reveal the interior spaces. For privacy, the owners can lower mechanized blinds concealed within the ceilings.

The spatial heart of the design is a central staircase that rises up from the ground level like the chambers of a nautilus shell. As an artifact, it has the purity of an Ellsworth Kelly sculpture, and gives a nuanced order to the rest of the house. The open treads are thick slabs of white oak, while railings were made from curved panels of steel ground to an ultra-smooth surface, and finished with seven coats of sparkling white auto-body paint. A fritted-glass skylight casts light down through the elliptical openings of the staircase, further emphasizing its complex geometry and shapely curves.

The house's second-level spaces—guest rooms, a child's bedroom and playroom—were too low to catch full ocean views over the dunes, so they were directed to the north, toward the pond. When you reach the third level, internal spaces expand laterally toward the Atlantic on one side and the lake on the other.

Interior design by Manhattan-based Pembroke & Ives was coordinated in collaboration with the architects and clients. A long, undulating table by Wendell Castle, something like a giant pink tongue, commands the open kitchen-dining area, as does a looping bentwood chandelier by John Procario. A dynamically textured chimney separates the main living space from a more private study to the east that features brushed-cypress walls.

The eastern end of the house is more tightly clustered—

the master bathroom being a boxlike entity framed with teak and bulging to the east like a Persian balcony—while the western end deconstructs itself, shedding all vestiges of opacity and leaving only an open-faced framework that supports the pool terrace and an upper-level sky deck designed for family gatherings and outdoor dining, with its own kitchen, zinc bar and Corten steel firepit.

But the most dreamlike element is the transparent glass swimming pool, a high-concept fishbowl that mediates between ocean on one side and wetlands on the other. The pool is 10 feet deep and is raised 20 feet above grade for ocean views. It was made from mirrored glass with a large, transparent "window" facing west, and makes for the most surreal moments of surprise when someone swims past the transparent opening and appears suspended in chlorine-blue space.

The opposite side of the pool serves as the back wall of a private study, where you can sit in a comfortable couch and gaze up through the water, a most unusually sub-aqueous sensation.

"I wanted the water to appear solid, as if you were swimming through the room," says Coy. "It's a *Dr. No* moment."

Alastair Gordon is writing a monograph on the work of Barnes Coy Architects that will be published next year. 🌊



North and south walls are 6-foot panels of glass.



In the kitchen-dining area: the pink table by Wendell Castle.



A curved facade mirrors the flow of the wetlands.