

## A Modern Beach House

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Text by Carol Berens  
Photographs by Geoff Spear



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Built during the days of social upheaval in the late 1960s, this exquisitely-detailed house, confidently poised in a clearing of piney woods, pursues an aesthetic rather than political agenda. This house (the second that Gwathmey built in the Hamptons) and its siblings ignited the imagination of a place and an era. Within a few years of their construction, unadorned, gray-stained, vertical cedar sided cubes and cylinders cropped up throughout eastern Long Island, imitations of Gwathmey originals.

More than 30 years after its first owner moved in, the house's design statement still dwarfs its diminutive size. Gwathmey bestowed the grandeur of a large estate on this small complex by setting the 1200-square-foot house atop a slight rise above a quiet country road. A small second building, a storage shed, stands sentry 50 feet in front of the house, defining the site and creating a processional entrance. The shed mimics the round forms and angular profile of the main building and creates a visual tension and dialogue between the two sculptural forms on the property.

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**Opposite page, clockwise from top left:**

The scooped-out entrance creates a deep void in the front facade cylinder; The glazed rear living room wall shows there is a thin line between inside and outside; The rear facade shows the play of solids of the wood paneling and the voids of the large windows and sliding doors. The cylindrical chimney anchors the house even as it soars above the roof line; Beach towel, 1980s Hermes, Paris.

**Above:** In the living room, Amador picked Mies van der Rohe's *Barcelona* chairs to succeed the Breuer *Wassily* chairs Gwathmey had chosen. The slate floor replaced the putty-colored vinyl asbestos tile. The Angela Adams rug was borrowed for the photo shoot, but fit so perfectly in the space, Amador bought it  
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(continued from page 69) As we walk toward the shed, Amador points out that the simple sliding door's lock is on the right and the handle to pull the door open is on the left. "See where the lock is?," he asks. "It's counterintuitive. When I saw that, I fell in love with the house. I knew whoever designed it, thought differently, thought through all the details."

Acting on Philip Johnson's observation that "every architect likes to have in his portfolio a little jewel," Joseph Sedacca, an art director for New York's Museum of Natural History, searched the A-list for an architect to design his weekend house on three acres in an isolated corner of East Hampton. He contacted Paul Rudolph, who, in declining the commission, recommended a recent student, Charles Gwathmey. Although his parents' house and studio in Amagansett had recently been published, Gwathmey, whose partner at that time was Richard Henderson, had little experience and was relatively unknown in 1968. In a leap of faith, Sedacca chose Gwathmey because he "excited me about design."

Sedacca's program was simplicity itself: a two bedroom, two bathroom house with a combined dining/living area and a separate kitchen hidden from view. Gwathmey responded by creating a building that > 102

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(continued from page 99) combined the hard angles of a cube with rounded cylindrical shapes. He then eroded and molded these forms and volumes—pushed and poked and pulled from both inside and out. The house is a composition of solids and voids. He scooped out the ground floor entrance and second floor terrace from the turret-like facade. To anchor the glazed rear facade he pasted a tall quarter-cylinder chimney that soars above the two-story living room wall.

Inside, in contrast to the modernist house of the 1950s, space flows vertically, not horizontally. This height and expansive glazed walls serve to make the living room feel larger than its 500-square-feet. The spiral stair juts into the room, and the second floor master bedroom hovers over the kitchen wall. The spiral staircase (which is treated as a piece of sculpture corkscrewed into the middle of the room) invites active viewing of the room from different perspectives as one goes round and round ascending or descending. The kitchen and the master bedroom are cozily tucked inside the curves of the entrance cylinder.

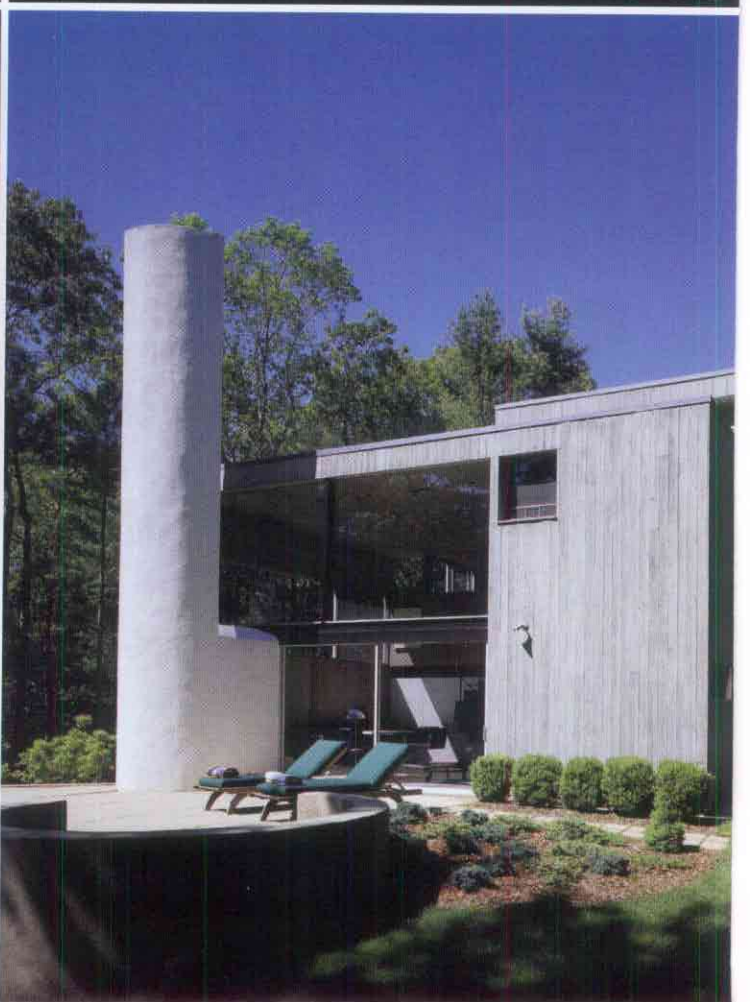
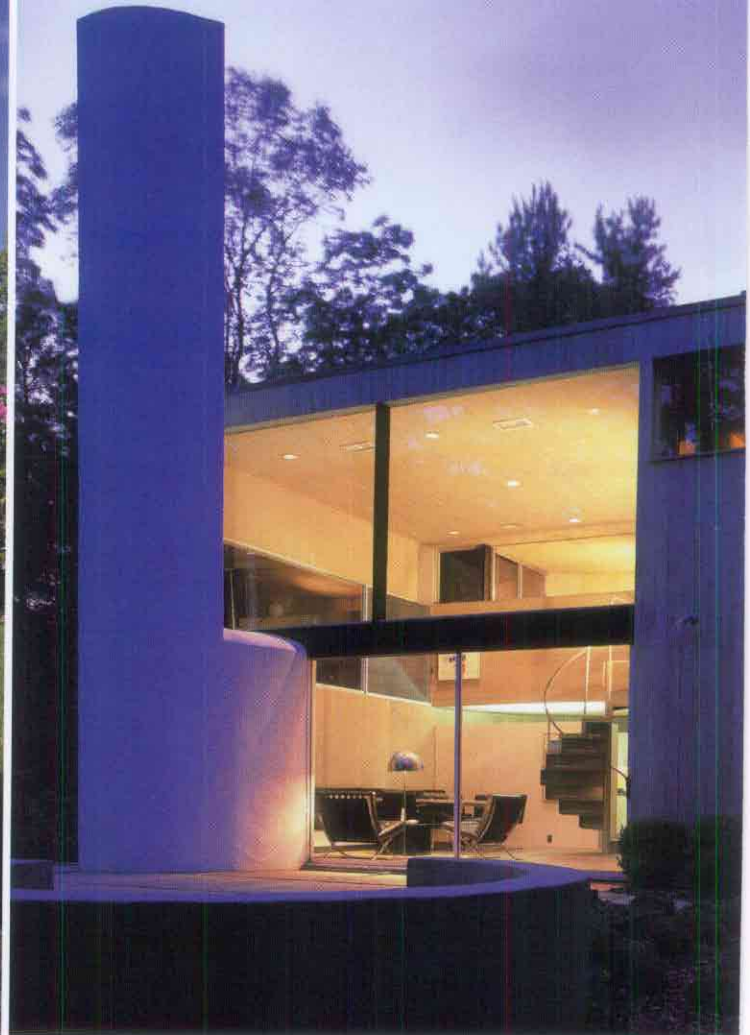
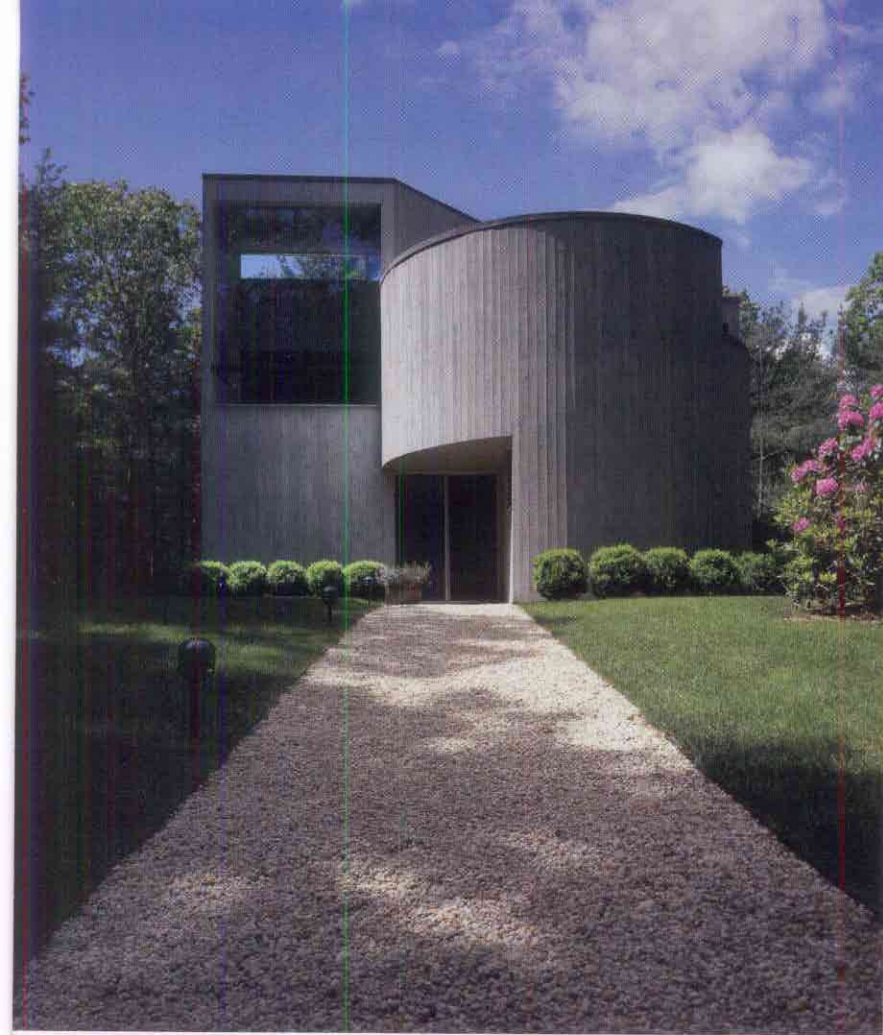
The vertical cedar siding and high windows create a fortress-like privacy at the entrance, but the house completely opens up in the rear with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the patio and trees beyond. There is a "thin line between inside and out," Amador observed. During the summer the sun streams in and it's glorious, but, during the winter when the sky matches the gray stain of the house, the cold is all embracing.

Gwathmey designed the interiors with as sure a hand and with as much control as he did the exterior. With the exception of a few chairs, everything is built-in. There is no need for furniture; no need for decoration. Most of the walls are the same stained cedar as the exterior, and the large expanses of glass preclude art work. In fact, its role as a maintenance-free weekend summer house is filled superbly—the only thing left to do is unpack a bathing suit. (Except when something went wrong. "Because it's a custom-made house, when something had to be fixed, I had a custom-made problem," noted Sedacca.)

In terms of style and intent, the early Gwathmey houses infused American architecture with a new purist formalism and theory. Poised in time and spirit between the intellectual European modernism of the Bauhaus and the emotional references of a home-grown postmodernism, the house recalls the fervent debates about the future of modernism. Asked recently whether at the time he thought he was making design breakthroughs, Gwathmey said that an architect must design for the "specific problem, not its impact," although one could hope the design "resonates and provokes

other architects." He believed in his convictions and took the risk.

Sedacca barely altered the house during the time he lived there. Amador, interested in upgrading the house, contacted Gwathmey, who was hesitant to go back to earlier work unless a complete change was contemplated. In the end, the original builder, John Caramagna, came back to update the house. Its recent refurbishment changed little of the design intent, and the house once again glows, a quiet testament to the design arguments of 30 years ago. And, perhaps more importantly, as Gwathmey said, "Having two happy sequential owners is great." □







**Opposite:** The dining table and banquet were designed by Charles Gwathmey for the original owner in 1968. *Brno* dining chairs by Mies van der Rohe for Knoll. Ceramic vases in foreground by Pamela Sunday, 1999. Bauhaus poster by Herbert Bayer, 1967. *Mona* floor rug by Angela Adams, 2000.

**This page:** The spiral staircase is treated as a piece of sculpture corkscrewed into the middle of the room. Custom bookcase by Charles Gwathmey for original owner, 1968. *Four Seasons* prints by Robert Motherwell, 1978. [see resources](#)