

ARCHITECTURE
ISLAND THEMES REVISITED
EXPANDING THE SHINGLE STYLE TRADITION ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD

*Architecture by Robert A. M. Stern Architects/Interior Design by Wilson & Wood
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"A house represents the psychology of a family," says Robert A. M. Stern, the architect of a shingle-clad retreat on Martha's Vineyard. "This house didn't have to be a bold statement —my clients didn't need to be emancipated from the island sensibility." A pedimented entrance porch and a low roofline mark the front façade.





Halfway to completion, a house that had been designed for weekends and summers on Martha's Vineyard had to take on a whole new role. The owners, a media executive and his wife, relocated to Los Angeles. "From our New York City house, we could have jumped back and forth to the island,"

he says. "But coming cross-country, we spend longer blocks of time there, especially with our two kids, who live on the East Coast. So the house turned into more of a gathering place."

Another key factor in the makeup of the house was the couple's living style. "They're well-grounded, very low-key people," says Robert A. M.

Stern, the architect they commissioned. "They've been around, he's in a high-powered, pressure-cooker industry—and the architecture had to create certain settings for their daily life and for special occasions. The house is not some abstraction about who they want to be or whom they want to impress."

Accordingly, Stern's design

is a paragon of amiable scale, rambling massing, muted colors and refined cape-style detail. Not evident from its profile is that the main house contains 8,000 square feet of living space, the guesthouse another 3,500. Contributing to the subdued effect is the siting, the way the house angles toward the water: Arriving by boat, one has to be



almost level with the structure before it is visible.

The auto approach, a circular drive paved with local beach stone, loops past the two-story house. Rows of shutters painted the typical vineyard trim color of pale blueberry play off the white-cedar-shingle cladding. A foundation of New England fieldstone supports the skirted

walls of the building, whose entrance is a pedimented portico flanked by two pairs of Tuscan columns.

“As for style, the house is very much in keeping with some of the small, unwinterized homes on the island and some of the larger ones down by the harbor,” notes the husband. “We had a house in Chilmark, high on the ridge,

and it was great when the kids were little. When they got into their teens, they weren’t so happy about being in the woods. They were pushing to get closer to town and to the water.”

Vineyard architecture is traditionally modest, much of it derived from the shingled saltbox. Stern modified the vernacular here, giving it

“In a primary residence, the rooms tend to be discrete,” notes project architect Randy Correll. “Second houses have more relaxed plans.” Living room sofa and love seat fabric, Cowtan & Tout; wing and club chair fabrics, Brunswick & Fils. Elizabeth Eakins rug.

BELOW: The second-floor sitting room—a secluded conversation area that looks out to the water—is at the house’s north end. Broad double-hung windows, by Tischler und Sohn, and an angled ceiling lend the space a towerlike quality. The chandelier is from Summer Hill.



volume and a more extended plan while incorporating many of its informal features. The major rooms have an almost modernist openness: The spaces, well defined though they are, flow easily into one another. There’s a refreshing variety in heights, too, unlike the nineteenth-century precedent of low and flat ceilings.

The house is a butterfly plan, with a series of angled wings. The double-height entrance hall, dominated by a staircase, fronts the living room, which in turn steps up to the dining room. Jutting out from there is a screen porch that overlooks the harbor; in the summer, with the ventilation of ocean breezes, the porch is one of the most used areas of the house. In contrast, on the other side of the living room is the library, which provides a rare opportunity for privacy. “I wanted a room that you could get away to—that you could close off if you had to,” says the husband.

Much of the house’s easy-going character comes from the details. “The design of the casings around the doors

and elsewhere establishes a hierarchy of spaces,” explains Randy Correll, Stern’s project architect. “The living room has the most important status. As you work away from it, the moldings become simpler and smaller.”

For the second floor, where the bedrooms are, the detailing is more period. “A lot of Vineyard houses were built around the time of the Greek Revival in the mid-nineteenth century, so we went with moldings derived from Doric elements,” Correll says. “Because most of the upstairs ceilings go up into the roofline, we omitted crown moldings there. The door gets the more significant molding, with a little entablature.”

The painted wood brackets along the perimeter of the porch are Gothic in tone; the Palladian windows also have Gothic tracery. Where oculus-type portholes appear, they add interest—and scale—to the exteriors.

The architects were amenable to unexpected sources of inspiration. On a whim, Correll gathered a pile of weath-



ered stones from the beach, which he used to build a fire surround in the dining room. The stones ended up setting the room’s palette as well.

Throughout, the walls were kept mostly off-white as a foil to the naive figurative paintings of Vineyard artists. “We

stuck to island painters,” the husband says of the regional art displayed. “The island is unique,” adds his wife. “There’s no division between summer and year-round people. Here the year-rounders become part of your life.”

For all the details, it is the



architecture—primarily the deft fitting of so generous a volume in an unassuming envelope—that is the house's great accomplishment. Largely due to the gambrel roof, which softens the outline of the house and draws it closer to the ground, the building

forms a natural relationship with the site. The dormers are continuous with the upper pitch of the gambrel, further mitigating the roof silhouette.

On the matter of subtlety, architect and clients were in agreement. "Always save a vista for a second glance, a third

level of discovery," Stern advises. "I don't smack people in the face and give everything away at the first moment. A house should slowly reveal its assets. You don't want it all in one giant heap so that you experience it and then immediately forget about it." □

Designers Ann Wilson Dixon and David Michael Wood gave one of the bedrooms "a summery character" with a ceiling fan, a faux-bamboo four-poster and, from Summer Hill, gauzy draperies. The ceiling has the shape of the gambrel roof. Cowtan & Tout fabrics cover the bed and daybed.



THE DESIGN IS A PARAGON OF AMIABLE SCALE, RAMBLING MASSING, MUTED COLORS AND REFINED CAPE-STYLE DETAIL.



At the rear, the screen porch, center, and the gazebo, far right, are single-story projections devised to anchor the house to the site. "By

bringing the roof down to a commanding, picturesque form at the corners," Stern says, "we visually reduced the building mass."