

John Pawson
Anatomy of Minimum

Alison Morris



PHAIDON



Montauk House

Long Island, USA

'No house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other.'

Frank Lloyd Wright

Long Island is a place of shifting reflections, dissolving horizons and vast skies. Here, where the Atlantic Ocean makes landfall on the soft edge of a continent, the friable faces of the dunes echo the ragged edge of the water. In winter, when snow lies on the beach, the sea-bleached palette pales to translucence. Neither literally nor metaphorically dry land, its character is shaped by water — not just the broad expanse of the ocean but also the multiplicity of inlets, bays, pools and ponds that support diverse and abundant flora and fauna.

The property that is the subject of this project is located at the easternmost end of Montauk, at the tip of the South Fork peninsula. A small inlet forms a valley to one side of the site, disrupting the linearity of the dunes and generating a more dynamic arrangement than the usual frontal address to the ocean. The plot was purchased with existing structures, but the intention was always to clear these and to confront from scratch the question of what constitutes an appropriate and resonant interface between the natural and the man-made in a place where the sea, the shore, the grasses and the sky exist in a state of constantly shifting permeability. What manner of mark does one make in the sand?

At heart designing a home comes down to the particular way in which the architecture responds to the same key questions. There is the desire to occupy a site in the fullest way possible — to reflect a sense of where you are — but at the same time the wish to create a strong sense of place in terms of a specific architectural environment. There are decisions about how it will feel to move from inside to outside and vice versa, from the thickness of the wall through which one will pass to the proportions of the openings and the detailing of the frames. What are the tones, textures and patterns that will fill the visual field? At the same time as ideas about the atmosphere and the visceral experience of the architecture are coming together, there is the programme to consider — the rituals of behaviour, the relationship between gathering places and private quarters — in order that the choreography of habitation accommodates the lives of the occupants. For this house it is a family moving between Manhattan's urban grid and the looser routines of the beach.





Dune, sea and sky comprise the defining conditions of this site at the eastern extremity of Long Island, seen here before the existing shingle-style house was cleared away. The boardwalk path to the beach remains.



The form that emerged from the design process responds to its soft, organic context not through the direct reciprocity of an organic form but with crisp, orthogonal lines that flex in response to the underlying topography. The stacked horizontal strata are pulled north, away from the ocean and towards the small valley to the west, allowing the lower deck to engage naturally with the flow of the dunes, requiring massive earthworks to construct the necessary foundations and retaining walls. The introduction of two courtyards within the floor plan allows the structure to nestle into the dunes, whilst still allowing light into and views out of the inland-facing sections of the house. An early study model shows a tower emerging from the knuckle of the house, aligned to the North Star, designed to counterpoint the structure's low lateral mass. This tower is absent from later drawings, with vertical relief instead provided by a series of pristine planes rising from the upper deck.

The expansive territories of the roof are of sufficient scale that they read as a piece of land art, whilst also having the effect of ordering and framing space and views. The vertical planes that are critical in creating balance across the overall architectural composition have the additional effect of punctuating the vast sea horizon, compressing what is elsewhere fluidly diffuse, creating focus and sharpening the way in which the eye registers both foreground and distance. A substantial factor defining the visual and physical experience of the architecture lies in small details — in nuances of colour and texture; in the different character of canted and perpendicular edges; in the charge generated where two planes touch and in the different charge that exists where they stand aloof from one another; and in the significance of the use of the shadow gap in conjunction with forms so massive.

The interior spaces of the house are configured on a single level, with private quarters located at either end of the floor plan and living spaces located at the pivoting point or fulcrum, where a flight of stairs rises with quiet theatre to the roof terraces. The east and west courtyards have profoundly different proportions and spatial characters from each other but share a quality of meditative introspection, their close horizons sitting in graphic contrast with the openness of the house's seaward side. The divergent characters

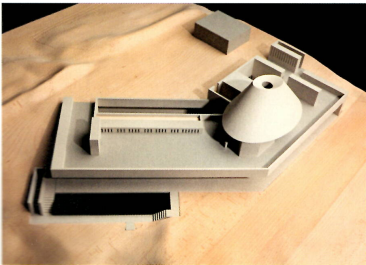
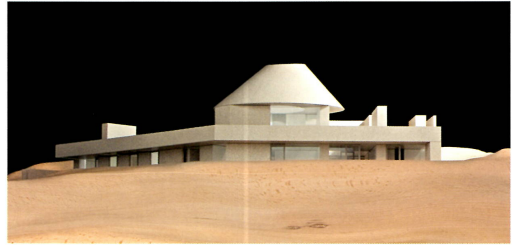
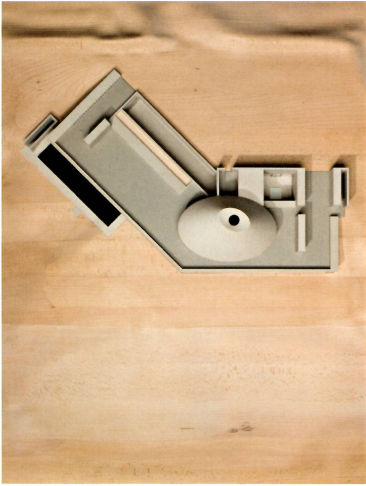
of the east and west courtyards are echoed by their corresponding roof terraces, where different qualities of space also cast their occupants into different relationships with their surroundings.

The house's material palette purposefully reinforces the intimacy of the relationship between the architecture and its context. The original hope was to use sand excavated from the site to form a cast-concrete building, but budgetary considerations eventually ruled out this approach in favour of a stucco skin with the corresponding texture and colour of the surrounding dunes. Following extensive experimentation to achieve the desired visual and tactile character, the result is as though the sand has gathered itself into pristine geometric forms, whose surfaces become a medium for the ceaseless play of light and shadow. A walk taken along the beach during the first site visit produced a collection of scavenged driftwood, the appeal of whose sensuously worn appearance led to the selection of lpe for the timber elements of the house, for the way in which it quickly weathers to silver. The final defining component of the purposefully elemental palette is Corten steel.

'The coast is an edgy place ...', the conservationist and writer Carl Safina has observed. It is a powerful choice to conceive something so sharply articulated in graphic juxtaposition to this shifting threshold territory, but the impression is not one of dissociation or detachment. On the one hand, there is the practical reality that this is not architecture you can ever step back from to see in uninterrupted isolation, as it is fragmented by planting from every angle of view — which also contributes to the way in which the perception of scale is constantly changing: heroic one moment, intimate the next. On the other hand, once one has spent time on the roof terraces observing the way in which the house layers a series of horizons — lines of texture, tone, mass, light and shadow — across the junction between sea and sky, the intensity of engagement that these rigorously pared-back gestures represent can never be forgotten or disregarded. 'Now coarse, now carven and delicate', to borrow the words of the American poet John Hall Wheelock in his *Afternoon: Amagansett Beach*, the Montauk House is a composition of contradictions: at once delicate and refined, rugged and massive.

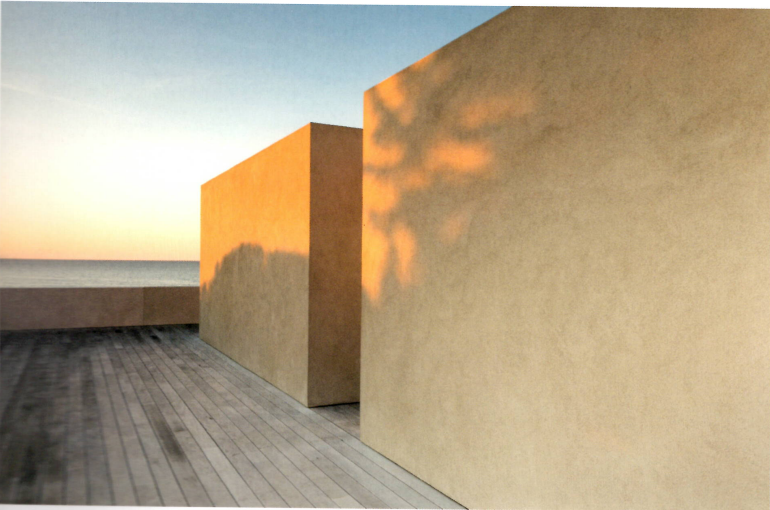
This early study model shows the design before the idea of incorporating a tower at the knuckle of the building was abandoned.

Extensive earthworks created the foundations and retaining walls required to allow the lower deck to engage naturally with the topography of the dunes.





The drama of the form derives from the scale of play between horizontal and vertical gestures, with the expansive territory of the roof unfolding like a piece of landscape.

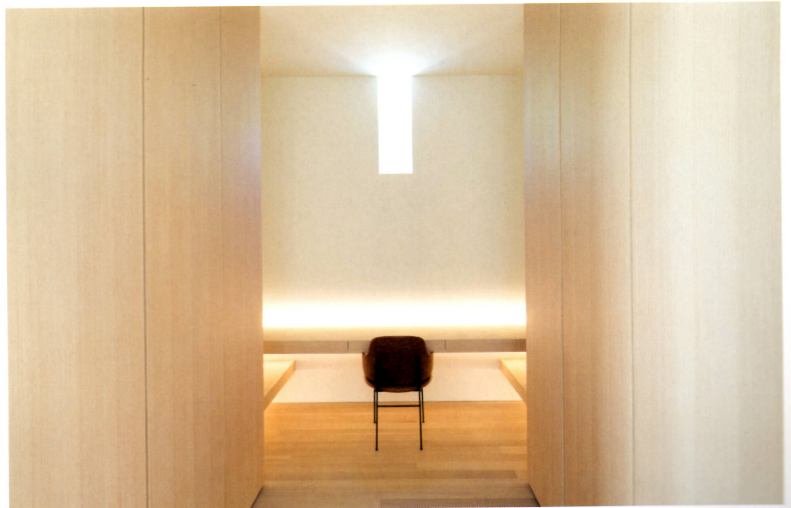




Precision in the details of light, surface, geometry and proportion generates a charged sense of place inside the house — with a marked contrast between the character of the lower ground-floor sitting room, which opens as an eye on to the

ocean, and the secluded intimacy of the east courtyard and a nearby dressing room.



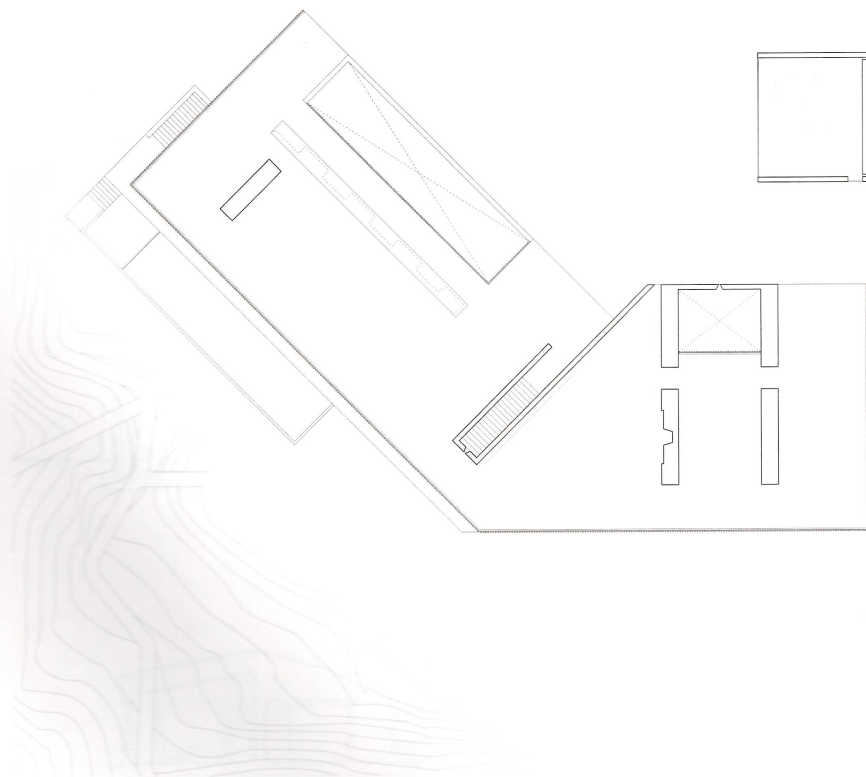


When a prospect is wide, as it is from the perspective of the roof terraces, the tendency of the eye is to keep moving. Overlay a section of the view with architecture, however, and you compress what was previously diffuse, giving the

eye a place to rest and allowing previously unregistered details to come into focus.







10/11/2011
10/11/2011
10/11/2011

2

