

# HEDGES

BEHIND THE

INSIDE HAMPTONS REAL ESTATE

June 2016

## *If You Knew Then What You Know Now...*

Looking Back, Looking Ahead in the Hamptons Market

## *The Top 5: Old World Charm on the East End*

Architecture, Art and the Evolving Aesthetic



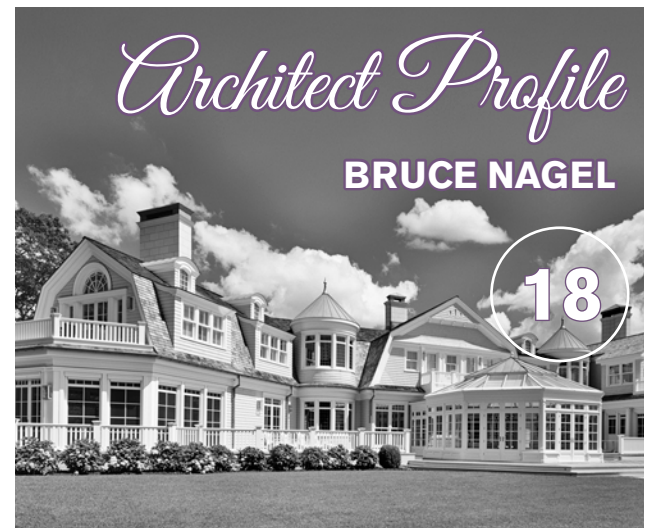
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Home by Architect Bruce Nagel

**BONNIE GRAY HOUSE**  
*Bridgehampton, New York*

The Gray House was designed to fulfill the long-time dream of Jonathan and Bonnie Gray for a special custom home to be built on the property they owned in Bridgehampton. Several years after the untimely death of Jonathan, Bonnie decided to finally undertake the project of building their dream home.

A little smaller than Jonathan's vision, the house was designed for Bonnie and her two 20-something sons. The style is classic Hamptons shingle and maximizes the views of the adjacent water, while also utilizing the neighboring property that the Grays had purchased. The plan is designed in a dog-legged "L" configuration with a rounded tower at the hinge position.

The result is a very picturesque design with a landscape of different roof shapes and garden terraces dictated by the need to conform to FEMA regulations.



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BEHIND THE **HEDGES**

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Manhattan Media, publishers of AVENUE magazine, Dan's Papers, New York Family and producers of The New York and L.A. Baby Show and Dan's Taste of Summer.

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COURTESY BRUCE NAGEL

# Bruce Nagel

## Architect, Artist and the Image Evolving

BY ERIC FEIL

Florence, Italy, gave the world the Renaissance, the brilliance of Michelangelo and Brunelleschi, the legacies of Machiavelli and the Medici. It has not, at least by popular accounts of history, given anything directly to the Hamptons. Until you stroll through architect Bruce Nagel's new door on Main Street in Westhampton Beach and into The Architect's Gallery. And that door, be assured, is always open.

Sitting at the long table that stretches down the center of the space across the street from the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center, Nagel has his back to a series of 16 black-and-white photos of some of the most stunning architectural works the Hamptons has known. Each is unique, there is no cookie-cutter style here, and each is reflective of Nagel's personal approach to architecture, the love of connecting and interacting with people that informs his work. Architecture is, at its heart, not necessarily about boards and beams, or even blueprints. Designs are drafted to realize dreams. There is science to it, but also art and a humanity that, for Nagel, in some sort of variation on a golden mean, tips things in the latter direction.

The sensibility that drove Nagel to open The Architect's Gallery is the same one that makes him ask his clients to write a narrative about the home they envision, how they picture themselves living, down to every possible detail and adjective they can conjure, before he begins its design. Reading these lines, and what's between them, Nagel says, "is trying to learn more about them as people instead of just learning what their needs are. Because needs are one thing, feelings and comfort and attitude are better, because I want to add a color or a flavor to what they are trying to achieve.

"I do houses, I don't do office buildings," he continues. Those photos behind him certainly don't argue the assertion. "People live in their houses, so it has to be very personal. And if they're not personal with me, then I can't be personal back to them and give them what is really the way to solve their needs on a personal level."

Sometimes, of course, we don't know we are in need of something until it's right in front of us, placed by fate or whatever force put it there and, we might find, gave us a little nudge in the right direction.

In the mid 1970s, having just graduated from Harvard, Nagel headed off

to Europe "for an extended period of time, four or five months—I thought I would travel and see all of Europe," he recounts. "Halfway through my trip, I wound up in Italy, and I spent the rest of my trip never leaving Italy." From the tone in his voice, he still hasn't fully left.

"In that extended time I was traveling in Italy, I kept coming back to Florence. It just felt, the city had a certain scale, and it's just jam-packed full of architectural treasures. There's not a lot of cities where you can walk around and see angels on the sides of buildings."

A larger influence than any of the structures, however, were the people he met. "That was kind of the beginning for me of realizing how much I like people," he says. "When I was in Italy, people were so friendly, open, warm. When they go to Europe, plenty of Americans feel Europeans are cold or hard to get to know, but I think it's just because they don't really open themselves up. If you become available, people respond."

Over the ensuing decades, Nagel went back on short visits, but about six or seven years ago, with New York winters finally getting to be enough for the boy from San Antonio, he and his wife, Darlene, decided to take an extended trip. One year followed the next, and Nagel discovered that he could not only work in Florence for a month or so while ice covered the East End, but that he wanted to bring back an intangible piece of the culture, one naturally connected to the people.

"When you're in Florence, there's such a social interaction between people who are on the street and, in many cases, in stores—clothing or whatever. People go into those places and they don't feel like they have to be taken out of that space because they didn't buy anything. People are talking, asking questions, it's social. It's a social interaction, it's not just a commercial venture."

Upon returning home from one of these trips a few years ago, he and Darlene determined that the Hamptons was in need of a space where "the people on the street have the ability to just walk into a place and not feel pressured by 'how can I help you' or 'what do you want to buy,' and so we fostered this idea, about doing an architectural office that made people feel like that." They chose Westhampton Beach for its particular culture, the nighttime strollers with ice cream cones *(Continued on page 20)*



Inside The Architect's Gallery in Westhampton Beach

COURTESY BRUCE NAGEL

(Continued from page 18)

or concert tickets in hand, the couples and the families enjoying the street musicians and gazing in the shop windows.

As for the gallery location itself, it's one that Nagel had contemplated for some time, a destination that just needed the right point in his journey. "I started thinking, what do I really want this space to be? Do I want it to be an architect's office with a desk and a secretary? I always feel that's kind of off-putting to the public. The only reason you are going into that office is to meet and do business. And I didn't want it to feel like to come in here you had to do business.

"So we then kind of evolved into this idea that it was a gallery rather than an office, and I could be more receptive to people coming in. I'm here to talk to people, to interact with people, and for the first time let the gallery be a showplace."

For his architecture, surely, but also for a side that not many have been introduced to yet: Bruce Nagel, Photographer. Nagel is looking forward to sharing that side of himself, to the feedback—good or bad—to his work.

"I'm an advanced amateur, but it's a passion I have. One of the things many architects have in their repertoire, is many architects are artists. They don't just do architecture, or maybe they were brought to architecture because they were really interested in painting or sculpting or something like that and realized they couldn't make a living doing that, so they thought they'd be an architect, because it's a profession that allows you to be an artist."

On the wall opposite the shots of his architecture is a set of 16 photos made by Nagel himself. Each a moment, a vision, a feeling from a point in time between right now and when he began shooting at age 18. They range in subject from birch trees to a box of old tools, European architectural details to the expanse of Death Valley, an eclectic mix that Nagel's wife selected from the tens of thousands of photos he's done over the years, each a glimpse at the world not only through Nagel's lens, but through his eyes. Individually and taken together, they evoke the soul of one of his true inspirations, Ansel Adams. "You don't make a photograph just with a camera," Adams said. "You bring to the act of photography all the pictures you have seen, the books you have read, the music you have heard, the people you have loved."

By design, the photos are all black-and-white—both Nagel's and those of his architecture, which he never shoots, being too close to the subject. It's common, particularly here in the Hamptons, to see photos of homes and estates in opulent color, but the essence of the works on display is precisely that they are not that.

"I started to think how perfect it would be to have the combination, with my photography being black-and-white, to have the architecture become

more what I would say is elemental, more basic," Nagel points out. "That it's not color, it's not about seeing the green grass, it's about seeing the elements of the architecture. And what better way to do that, to get it to kind of its purest form, than to eliminate color and just show it in black-and-white. Because then you're just looking at objects, you're not looking at the pretty blue sky and the white fluffy clouds—they're there, and people's minds can think that it's blue, but it makes people think a little bit more about the objects."

Nagel has spent a career orchestrating meaning within spaces, so in defining this new home for the photos, for himself to work, for guests, strangers and friends alike to enter, he has created a venue that naturally sparks reflection, contemplation, interaction.

"When I was thinking about making the space—as an architect now, creating an environment—I wanted it to feel very welcoming, that people felt when they came in they weren't feeling as if they were interrupting, and that visually it had a soothing quality, that it was not visually disturbing or confusing. I just wanted to make it really simple, and," he pauses oh so briefly and chuckles, "it's really simple. And sometimes simple is very, very useful in terms of, you don't want the space to overpower, you want the objects you are trying to present to be the focus of people's attention.

"Now, it's very funny, because that's what I was thinking, but every person who walks in here, the only thing they really talk about—I mean, they love the work, but they are talking about the space. How this is so beautiful, the light is so great, they love the floor, even the paint color. I said to my wife, this is too bizarre. I wanted them to notice this," he says, gesturing toward the photos on the walls, then giving a flourish of his arms as if grabbing and embracing all the space around them, "and they're noticing this."

Exactly what they are noticing is almost secondary to the experience. As long as they are there, engaging with Nagel's vision and one another, creating community and enlivening a public space in the truest sense of the term.

"One of the wonderful things that happens in Florence is, because people live in such tight quarters, the streets and the piazzas of the city become people's living rooms," Nagel says. "And people get out of their apartments at night, whole families, husbands, wives, children, grandparents, all together, sitting in the piazza, talking, seeing their friends. Consequently, that's one of the things that attracted us about trying to do the gallery. We can't build a piazza right outside of our space, but we can open the door and say everybody is welcome to come in." ▲

*The Architect's Gallery, located at 69 Main Street in Westhampton Beach.*