

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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Collaborating with François de Menil on Toad Hall, his residence in the Hamptons, Charles Gwathmey and Robert Siegel, with Bruce Nagel, designed a house that captures the vast scale of the dunes, the horizon and the ocean. TOP LEFT: An aerial perspective dramatizes the entrance axis. Lined with linden trees, the cobblestone drive leads from the entry gate and pond, past a tennis court, guesthouse and lawn, finally arriving at the main house. ABOVE RIGHT: Mr. Gwathmey describes the entrance to the house as a "two-story erosion." Here, on the north façade, the translucent greenhouse is the major volume of the residence. ABOVE LEFT: Seen in aerial view from the beach, layered architectural sequences, from main house to entry wall, create a total environment.



Architecture: Gwathmey Siegel and Associates

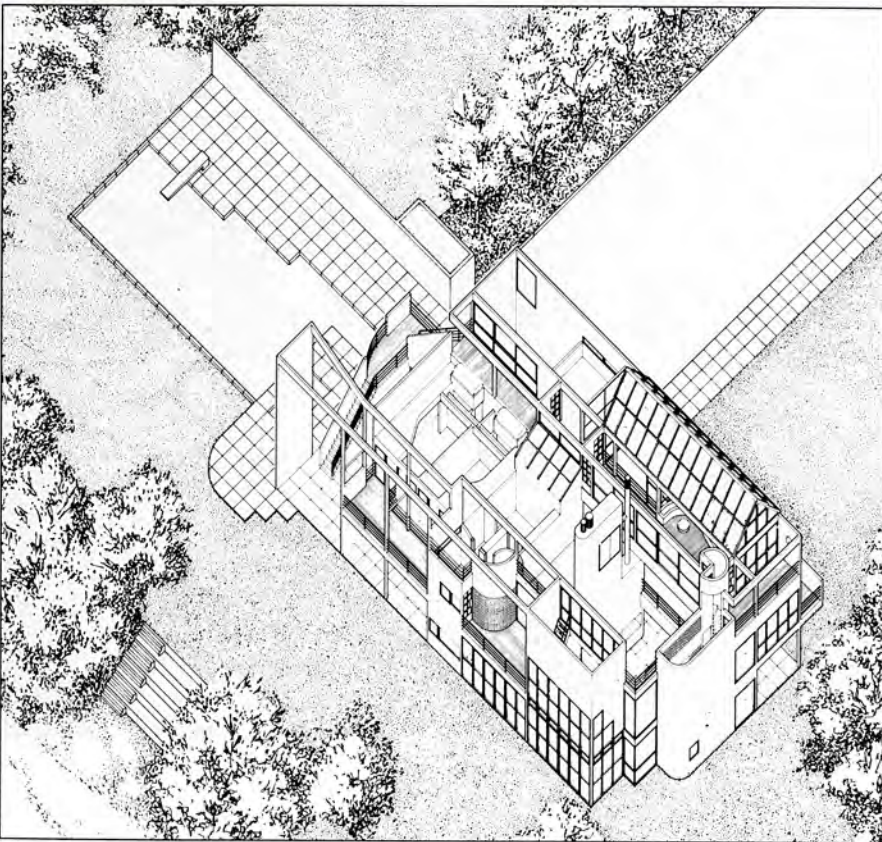
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NORMAN MCGRATH TEXT BY VINCENT SCULLY



THE HAMPTONS form their own island on the far southeastern shore of Long Island. The place recalls Nantucket, in many ways, especially in its traditional, gabled architecture of weathered shingles and white trim. A distinguished resort architecture was built out of these materials in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and some of the most attractive work being done today has revived this vernacular style.

Between these two phases of the vernacular, however, another kind of architecture intervened, that of the International Style, to whose practitioners it would never have occurred to employ the vernacular forms or ways of building. These architects were seeking freedom from tradition, indeed from connection with all urbanistic constraints and norms. For that reason, among others, they tended to look for sites outside the village, preferably on the dunes that fringe the incomparable beaches. That landscape offered the abstraction of form they were looking for, and which they hoped to achieve in their houses. Therefore, everybody wanted to get away from everybody else, to be alone with his private musings by the ocean. Where there wasn't enough money for that, paranoid groupings of cottages sprouted among the dunes, made up of intolerant, warring shapes. Each house really needed to be alone. So it is appropriate that now, at the very end of the International Style, and probably marking its close, a house has been built that tries very hard to control the whole of that vast, abstract, oceanic scale, which had been the true object of everyone's desire.

It is Charles Gwathmey's and Robert Siegel's elaborate, beautifully crafted setting for François de Menil, which the owner calls *Toad Hall*. There is another appropriate symmetry here, because it was Mr. Gwathmey who, in 1965, designed for his father almost the first, and perhaps the best, of all the earlier International Style houses in the area. Mr. Gwathmey was only three years



GWATHMEY SEGEL & ASSOCIATES ARCHITECTS/HERSEY & NYRK

TOP: From the dunes, the house appears like an assemblage of geometric shapes, unified on the south façade by the rectilinear frame of the sunscreen, which frames both solids and voids of the building. OPPOSITE: Interior and exterior spaces are layered and interwoven: Here, the terrace of the Master Bedroom is treated as an outside room, and the screen doors of the first floor open the Breakfast Room to the out-of-doors. ABOVE: An axonometric drawing displays the dynamic complexity of the house in both vertical and horizontal dimensions.



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TOP: At the southwest corner of the house, the sunscreen becomes a significant formal element. ABOVE: The east façade displays a view of the gable-roofed greenhouse contained in the overall context of the house. OPPOSITE: A glimpse into the screened porch reveals examples of the Vienna Secessionist furniture assembled for the house—table and chairs by Josef Hoffmann.

out of architecture school at the time, but he already seemed to show a fully formed style of his own. His buildings were geometric objects, like those of Le Corbusier, small active objects with a special kind of optimistic American bounce. Now, in Toad Hall, Mr. Gwathmey wanted something else, not objects, but a wholly shaped environment, perhaps a processional axis, most of all, that would run from the land to the water.

The entrance to the property is by a quiet lane that curves around through a forest. Then the scale changes. A large pond appears. It is flanked by a couple of pink stucco slabs, recalling those of Luis Barragán, which define a cobblestone avenue leaping straight for the horizon, at the end of which a tight window-view of the sea is framed.

Farther up the avenue, and just as the main mass of the house begins to be visible, the low block of a garage/guesthouse appears on the left. It is of the same rather Mediterranean style as the entrance slabs and contrasts with the style of the house, which, as the visitor swings left and parks, now stands dominant on the right. The first reaction to it is that it is much smaller than it looks in photographs, where the scale seems excessive. From here, it is seen simply as one wall in two parts—one of bleached cedar, the other of glass. The glass wall is bound into the volume of the house by a horizontal cedar coping and a flying bridge, but its own discrete vertical volume is suggested by a glass gable that projects at the top. It does, in fact, shape a greenhouse, placed at the edge of a plane of lawn that is as green and smooth as (so the saying goes) a billiard table. This is defined on the side toward the garage by a low arbor, beyond which a gentle formal garden and a tennis court deploy. So there are two axial volumes suggested: that of the entrance road and that, wider, which climaxes in the greenhouse. The two are divided by a smoothly paved pedestrian pathway of green slate, which leads to the deep void in the







OPPOSITE: At the pool terrace, Mr. Gwathmey identifies the sequence of structural sections that correspond to the four internal zones of the house, left to right: entry greenhouse; circulation and living areas; and sunscreen. TOP LEFT: The entrance axis is encountered once again through a void on the south façade. TOP RIGHT: From the stair landing, an ocean view is framed by the sunscreen. ABOVE: The roof deck climaxes the structure's vertical organization.



cedar wall that announces the entrance to the house.

Once inside, the processional axis crosses the circulatory axis of the house. While this visual cross axis somehow does not invite movement, so polished are the granite slabs of the flooring that the effect is of walking on water, full of moving depths. To the right is a serene, protectively scaled library and a guest suite, while to the left, where the larger spaces open, the dining area is simply layered between two planes, and the vertical volume of the greenhouse is interrupted by a free-form study at the second level. This is slightly disturbing, at first, because of what the exterior views of the greenhouse seem to promise. From a point of vantage outside, such as the public beach of Amagansett, the greenhouse looks like a clear, symmetrical, traditional shape, at once classical and vernacular, gabled, and recalling the work of Aldo Rossi in particular. The rest of the house seems totally separate from it in this view—which is spectacular at night, as of a gambling ship breaking up among the dunes. But, inside, the expected volume of the greenhouse is not there. It is not a garden room, like a nineteenth-century *ombra*. The effect is that of a screen of trees, not of a glade, but it forms a spectacular wall for the living room.

The effect of the living room is so old-fashioned in terms of the iconography of the International Style, so down-the-line precisely what Le Corbusier said he was after, so perfectly right and immutable in terms of what it all may be presumed to mean anyway, that it takes at least the art historian's breath away. It is a ship. More precisely, it is the lounge of the *Île de France*, though others might say the *Normandie*. That effect is created not by means of the Art Déco forms of those lounges, but through more complex maritime allusions. The utter absence of all traditional architectural detail, the appearance instead of metal railings and of enormous walls of glass that bring the anxious

continued on page 178

TOP: The circulation axis links the Entrance Hall to the dining area and the living room. ABOVE: The interiors are layered: A view into the Living Room shows multiple transparencies—from living room to screened porch to the ocean. Sofa and leather chair by Ruhlmann. OPPOSITE TOP: Dining room chairs by Fritz Nagl. Painting by Magritte. OPPOSITE: The Library has leather chairs by Ruhlmann; rug, wood table, and chairs by Hoffmann. FOLLOWING PAGES AND COVER: Lighted at night, the greenhouse becomes the dominant feature of the entrance façade.



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