

DUJOUR

DUJOUR.COM

homes & estates

FALL 2016





The Wiley House renovation featured a windowless black barn designed to hold the owner's art collection and balance the openness of the glass-walled main house.

Writing on the Walls
Contemporary architect Roger Ferris, celebrated for his iconic Hamptons oeuvre, brings a narrative approach to building design

WRITTEN BY KIM VELSEY

38 DUJOUR CO.

DUJOUR.COM 39

Hamp

tons architecture may call to mind shingle-style mansions and gambrel-roofed monstrosities, but the area also has a strong tradition of experimental design and one of the higher concentra-

tions of contemporary architecture in the Northeast, with homes designed by Norman Jaffe, Charles Gwathmey and Richard Meier.

It's also where many of architect Roger Ferris' most admired projects are located, among them Topping Rose House, The Bridge and the underground library at The Watermill Center.

"There's a tradition of contemporary art in the area, and there's also a concentration of wealth—architecture doesn't necessarily need that, but it's there in abundance," says Ferris, whose new book, *Inventive Minimalism*, features a number of his Hamptons designs. "Also, many of these are



The Bay House project, above and below, reflects Ferris' love of the efficiency and "honesty of one floor stacked on top of another."



second and third homes, and people are more likely to take a chance when it's not their only home or office."

Some might be inclined to push the envelope even further, he adds, were it not for strict local zoning laws that limit height in a way that encourages so many gambrel roofs, the most efficient means of getting maximal space for second-floor bedrooms. By contrast, Ferris' practice tries to embrace what he calls "the honesty of one floor stacked on top of another. You deal with the proportions and heights that you're limited to. There are architects that are just doing

shoeboxes without any effort to reduce scale or to embellish them in a way that makes them interesting."

His inclination, then, is to articulate a sense of craft in the façade. For example, in the Green House, an award-winning home in Sag Harbor, the horizontal joints are "deeply expressed, so they look like they've been attached in a rigorously geometric way," he says. As a result, the size of the house is broken down while highlighting its construction.

While that concept may come off as rather cerebral and possibly a little too cool—which, of course, is the main

An oceanfront space strays from traditional beach house design with a wall of glass and sleek modern interiors.



42 DUJOUR.COM

complaint against modernist and contemporary architecture—cool and cerebral is hardly how Ferris approaches his work. In fact, he likes to write short stories about them. Before ever putting pencil to paper, he conducts a series of interviews with the client and then writes a story about what the project will be about, crafting a fictional narrative, complete with characters, that dictates his design.

“Most architects, their initial response is to put something down, and then say, ‘Oh, this could work. Or this could work.’ But that commits you, and starts to lock down a viewpoint,” he says. “I’d rather keep it in the ether for a while.”

When he was commissioned to renovate and expand on Philip Johnson’s Wiley House in New Canaan, Connecticut, for example, Ferris’ desire to balance the void of the glass house with something solid led him to design a

nearly windowless black barn for the owner’s substantial art collection. “In my fiction, I was imagining [the barn] as being reflective of the extremes of my client’s life and personality,” he explains, adding that a round pool offers a playful counterpoint to the seriousness of the rest of the buildings on the campus.

Unfortunately, the popularity of modernist architecture—a trend that Ferris attributes to shelter magazines’ ongoing romance with the style—has not lessened the charge that it is too cold, serious and dull. Which is what Ferris’ design philosophy argues most strongly against. “Every client that I’ve ever had has usually challenged me with ‘I don’t want it to be cold or just a gallery,’” he says. “You can either accept the minimal restrictions and have this box on top of that box, or you can be inventive in dealing with it.” ■



Clockwise from above: The architect delights in playing with scale, as seen in projects that include a nearly all-glass house on Long Island Sound; Ferris’ process includes creating fictional narratives

that then inform his approach; an example of the experimental design seen in his book, *Inventive Minimalism*. Opposite: A waterfront property plays with standard proportions and heights.



DUJOUR.COM 43

For each project, Ferris crafts a fictional narrative—complete with characters—that dictates his design.



ALL IMAGES, COURTESY