



HAMPTONS **PURIST**

AN ADVENTURE
IN WELLNESS

**CAROLYN
MURPHY**
THE FACE
OF BEAUTY

CONTRIBUTING
WELLNESS WARRIORS
MICHAEL STRAHAN
JENNIFER ESPOSITO
ALEC BALDWIN
NAOMI WATTS
JOHN VARVATOS

CONNECT 4:
PURIST'S IDEAS FESTIVAL

ARCHITECTURE

When avant-garde director **Robert Wilson** needed an architect to design new structures for The Watermill Center, his interdisciplinary performance laboratory, he called upon **Roger Ferris**. Here, the duo talk about their long-running creative partnership. BY JIM SERVIN



The clubhouse of the Bridge golf course, designed by Roger Ferris.

Jim Servin: How did you come to work together on new structures for The Watermill Center?

Robert Wilson: I first saw the main building of the Center in 1989. It was a laboratory for scientists experimenting in telecommunications, a building that had been vacant for 30 years, and it was a ruin. Probably we should have destroyed the building, but I kept pretty much the same footprint that had been left behind. The building is rather cold and metallic in its appearance, with many windows and an industrial feel. I liked very much the work Roger had done, especially his barn-like structure in Connecticut (Red Barn).

We were thinking of about a residence that would be a counterpoint to the main building—we didn't want to build a traditional barn. That would be fake. We're in the 21st century, but we can still look back to the barn structure of the 17th century and be inspired.

Roger Ferris: Because Bob is so artistic, every time you think you have a good idea, there is another one around the corner with him. The Watermill Center has a number of design projects that are on our master plan. In addition to the artist's residence—I prefer to call it Bob's House, because it is his house when he is in residence—the other structures are an underground library, a black box performance space,

and other above-ground pieces. The artist's residence will be completed by the end of the year. Its north and south exteriors are wrapped in white cedar shingle, which will turn silvery-gray. The east and west facades are all glass. The inside is open and loft-like, with posts and beams clad in recycled barn wood. Depending upon fundraising, the rest of the structures should be built within five years.

The library consists of books and 40,000 artifacts, ranging from primal fertility dolls to all kinds of tokens, prehistoric art and contemporary art. It's everything Bob has assembled throughout his travels. He's a nomad. The only time he really settles down is the eight weeks that he's here in the Hamptons, in July and August. If you understand all that Bob Wilson is, all that he's done, how prolific he's been in so many respects, and all the collections he has, all the artifacts, it would fill museums.

JS: What drew each of you to Long Island?

RW: I first went to Long Island in the late 1960s; my main attraction to it was the light, the incredible light, because it is this long island out in the ocean, and all seasons it's beautiful, especially in the winter. I think that I was very fortunate as a freshman student at Pratt to hear a lecture by (architect) Louis Kahn. He said, Start with light, and that had an impact

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Dune Road home by Ferris, between Mecox Bay and the Atlantic.

on my entire thinking.

People sometimes find it strange when I say, in directing an opera or play, the first thing I do is to light it, because light will create the space, and without light there's no space.

Greece is wonderful and special because of the light, and Belgium is very special because of the light. As a student, I was in Belgium, at evening, in twilight—oh my God, it was that Greek light! San Francisco has a special light. Long Island also has a unique light.

Someone told me once that it's in the air, it's in the ions, but I think it's also because it's in the middle of this ocean. That's why so many artists have worked and lived on Long Island—that light. Paris has a beautiful light.

RF: I've been going out to the Hamptons for close to 20 years; I've lived in Wainscott, Water Mill and Bridgehampton. It was nearly 10 years before I did any work out here, because I used to come out to relax, and I was reluctant to contaminate the experience.

When I think about the landscape of the Hamptons, it's not just the ocean. The villages are interesting. The scale of the towns, whether it's Sag Harbor, Bridgehampton or Southampton, has a kind of coherence. I'm inspired by the history that has taken place, artists like Jackson Pollock who had studios here, and artists like Eric Fischl who live here today. I'm inspired by The Watermill Center. How unusual, this laboratory of creativity, art, dance, performance and sculpture.

JS: What is the secret of your successful teamwork?

RF: The common thread between the two of us is that we look at design inclusively and not exclusively; one thing informs another. I'm inspired by productions that Bob does, his art installations, dance, music, sculpture. All that stuff is inclusive, and enormous inspiration to the architecture we do. Because of Bob's background in architecture, I see architecture in everything he does.

RW: Roger has a great collection of art. He and I share a similar aesthetic. It's easy for us to talk—I also think in terms of space and time, lines, structures. There is something physical in Roger's architecture, there's a thing that comes out of his body: his sense of materials, his sense of light, his sense of color, of line, his precision.

JS: Any ideas in the planning stages?

RW: I sent Roger a drawing yesterday about something I've been thinking about for The Watermill Center, a different kind of space, and that is an elevator that's soundproof and dark. It would go above ground and below ground, and between descent and ascent take maybe a half an hour, or an hour each way.

RF: It will be in the woods. You'd get in it, and you'd journey in this black box surrounded by sound. It won't be a quick descent, it will be subtle. It's a great idea.

RW: It's a different kind of space, you know? A different way of seeing. There is no such thing as complete darkness. If you're directing *King Lear*, Shakespeare's great tragedy, it will never be a great tragedy until you put light in the darkness. I think there are all different kinds of spaces—spaces that are flooded with light, spaces that are darker. The dark space makes you appreciate the light.

JS: As friends, how do you have fun in the Hamptons—do you see movies together, or go on field trips for inspiration?

RF: We like to work together. It's always work, but the work is, in a sense, a kind of artistic pleasure.

RW: You won't believe this, but I've seen about 10 movies in my entire life. Twenty years ago, I went to a movie. I like them when I see them, but I'm working all the time.

RF: Even when we're having dinner together, we're talking. It's a constant exchange of creative thoughts. The first time we had dinner was on the porch at the American Hotel. I think we got there at dusk, and we closed the place. 🌅