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New Business Models for Custom Builders

Design Spotlight: Standout Detailing



Paul Masi,
Principal, Bates
Masi + Architects

SHARP SHOOTER

An architect who photographs his own work explains how and why

Bates Masi + Architects, in East Hampton, N.Y., is known for award-winning modernist homes that range in size but consistently pay homage to the coastal structures of their environs. The firm promotes its work with alluring photographs, most of which are shot by principal Paul Masi, who worked with renowned architect Richard Meier before setting up shop with Harry Bates. Both of Masi's parents are artists and teachers; he and his sisters grew up making their own cameras and developing film in their mother's darkroom. Recently we talked with Masi about how photography makes him a better designer, film versus digital, and what he thinks about shooting with an iPhone. —Amy Albert

You're a busy guy. Why not just hire someone to shoot for you?

I really enjoy shooting, and it's the chance to experience the house when it's done. If we start at sunrise and end at sunset, we see how the house is performing and understand the implications of what we've built. But I have to tell you, it's always a challenge photographing our own work.

Why?

When you're that close to something, you may have greater insight. But you also might have blinders on and can miss important perspectives. I try to pull myself out of the project a little bit to see it from different perspectives. I may be focused on a particular detail because a lot of energy was spent on designing and executing it, but it may not tell the story of the house. I like to have the staff look at the photos, and I like for them to give their input.

We do work with one other photographer to get his fresh perspective; if we shoot three houses a year,

maybe he'll shoot one of them. You have no control over how someone else experiences a home, so I try to see what he picks up on and how he's reading the building.

Are there architectural photographers who have influenced you?

For sure. Michael Moran—the one photographer that we work with—who is amazing, personally and professionally.

Your shots combine precision, ease, and a deft use of natural light. They make us want to be in the spaces.

My feeling is that sometimes the technology gets the best of the photos. You can shoot the same project on different days and it can read completely differently. We once shot a project in the fog and there was so much mystery around it; then, on a crystal-clear day—just very different moods and emotions. I can't say that one was better than the other. On humid days, the pictures just look different. You have to go with it, rather than fight it. I pack lights in the car for every shoot on the chance that I'll need them. But I never end up using them.

What's most important when shooting exteriors?

Figuring out how someone experiences the project. Where does that journey begin? As an architect, you have an advantage in shooting your own work—you're already setting the stage and establishing how you were trying to reveal the spaces and the ideas.

At the same time, you're trying not to be rigid. There can be times when you're set on something but the sun is moving at its own rate. So, you see other things, and you try to look at what's active and interesting in that moment. Exteriors are hard because I find myself trying to get too much. You end up including everything, and then the shot becomes about nothing.