

RD

RESIDENTIAL DESIGN



FOR ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS
OF DISTINCTIVE HOMES

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No Barriers

Cattle Ranch Remix

Montauk's centuries-old, rambling stone walls are reimaged at Signal Hill House.

BY CHERYL WEBER

ARCHITECT: BATES MASI + ARCHITECTS

BUILDER: MERIT BUILDERS

LOCATION: MONTAUK, NEW YORK

From the approach, Signal Hill's pair of low gabled "cottages" creates a picture of breezy simplicity befitting a rural marine environment. But they belie the program packed into this 6,000-square-foot family house at the east end of New York's Long Island peninsula. Paul Masi's sleights of hand allow the house to unfold into the terrain from its perch atop a rise, facing Lake Montauk in one direction and the Atlantic Ocean in another.

That dynamic setting is what attracted the New York City-based clients to this 5-acre property, originally part of the oldest cattle ranch in the U.S. In the early 1990s, the land was subdivided and individual parcels were sold off. One of the highest points in Montauk at an elevation of about 70 feet, this lot's 365-degree panorama takes in sunsets over the lake and sunrises toward the ocean. The location has a special resonance for Paul, too, because it is







close to the first house he designed in 1995 with the firm's founder, Harry Bates, who died last year at age 95.

Like most of the homes Bates Masi has designed in these parts, Signal Hill emphasizes a connection not only to the outdoors but to the indigenous landscape. Using Montauk's glacial deposits as a local character reference—remnant livestock pens built from glacial rubble are still seen in the fields—Paul organized the house around view corridors. The first floor is sunk into the sloping meadow, its central living space bracketed by stone retaining walls that extend east and west into the landscape. “To not be overbearing on the site, because the beauty was the



To temper the large home's impact on the prominent site, the architects burrowed the common spaces into the meadow. Above them, a shared deck divides the children's wing from the parents' realm.



site, we took the idea of burrowing into the hill,” says Paul, AIA. Because the first floor is largely concealed, “on approach it looks like a one-story house hovering above the tops of the grasses; as you get closer you see the expanse of the project and how it’s interacting with the landscape.”

The story line reveals itself gradually. From the entry on the east, the retaining walls direct visitors on a path through billowy grasses to a front deck and a vista straight through the glass-enclosed living volume, which reads as a void in the hill. The stone walls continue through the house, carving out space for the kitchen, living area, and dining room before extending into the backyard and tapering into the ground. There, a second deck connects to a lawn that drops down to the pool on the southwest. The wall extensions not only frame the lake view but also provide much-needed shelter from the wind. “We used weather data to map the wind direction,” Paul says. “The people living there previously said it was so windy you couldn’t even sit outside.”



Light woods complement the soft grays and earth tones of the stone walls and help keep the focus on the 365-degree views.

The glassy living area is bracketed on the north by a powder room, mudroom, and two guest bedrooms, and on the south by a den and deck canted toward the pool. The two cedar-shingled volumes hover atop the stone walls, breaking down the scale. Each wing has its own stairway to the second floor. Directly above the living area, a sweeping ipe roof deck connects the volumes, whose vaulted ceilings update the traditional structures they recall. The second story of the north pavilion aligns east-west to overlook the lake and Long

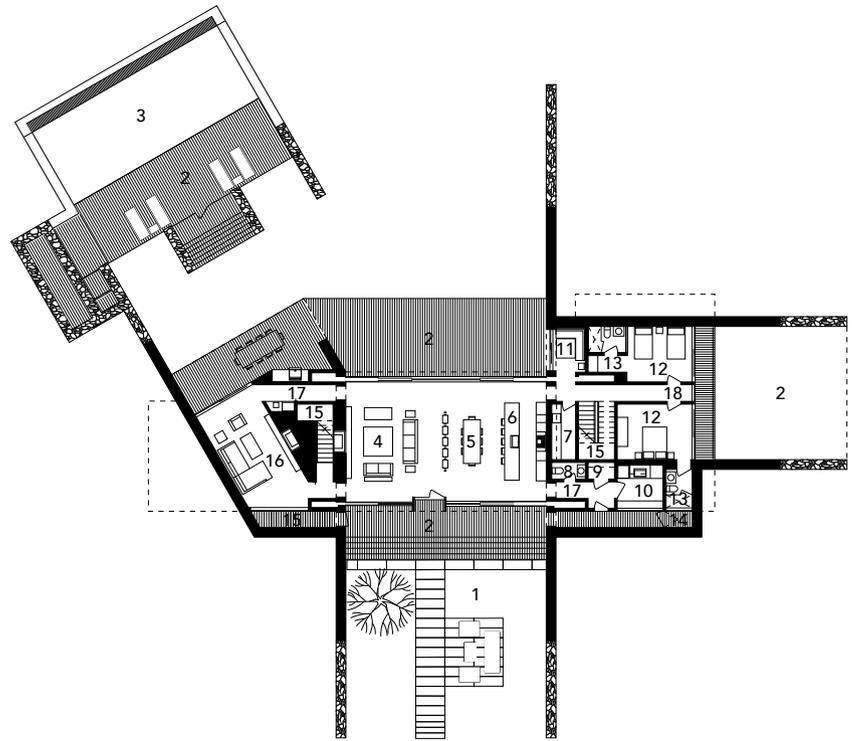
Island Sound. It houses three en-suite children’s bedrooms and a lounge and outdoor shower. In the south pavilion, the cantilevered primary suite, office, and private deck offer expansive views of the nature preserves, ocean, and lake.

“Up on top, the bedroom volumes are separated because their kids are older—there’s one volume for the three kids and another for the parents,” Paul says. “The deck unites them in the middle, and the land slopes up. You can walk right out to the landscape from the upper deck.”

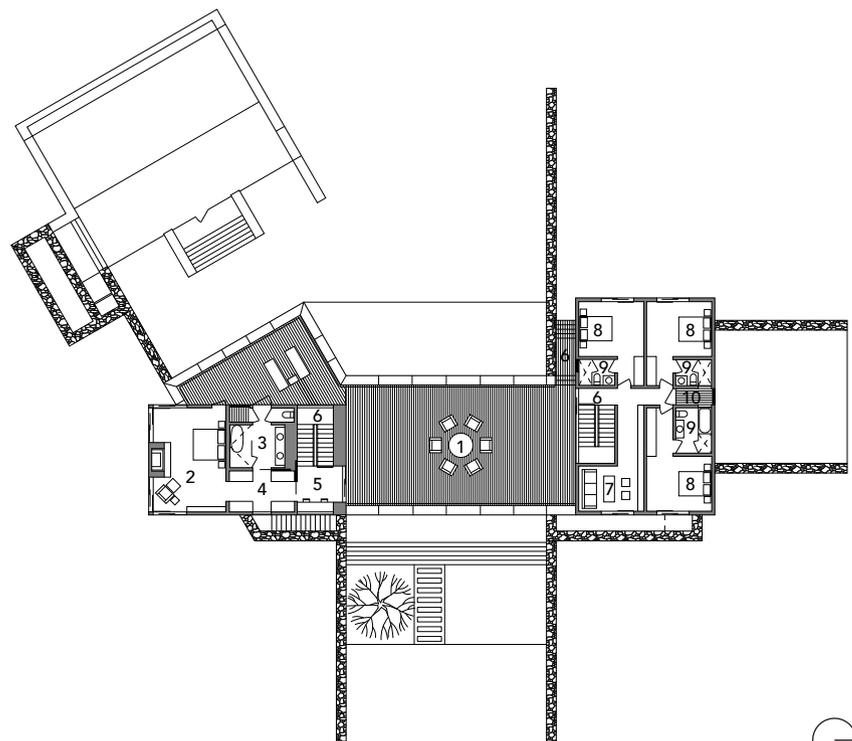
Open Minded

Slicing through the first floor, the stone retaining walls became an anchoring point whose grays and tans echo the colors of the beach and boulders. But as is often the case, achieving their artless look took careful deliberation. “We wanted a random-stacked stone wall, something truly organic and not thought about, which was very difficult for the masons to do,” Paul recalls. “They kept repeating big, small, big. It took a lot of trial and error to get the effect we wanted. They started rotating crews, which helped a lot.”

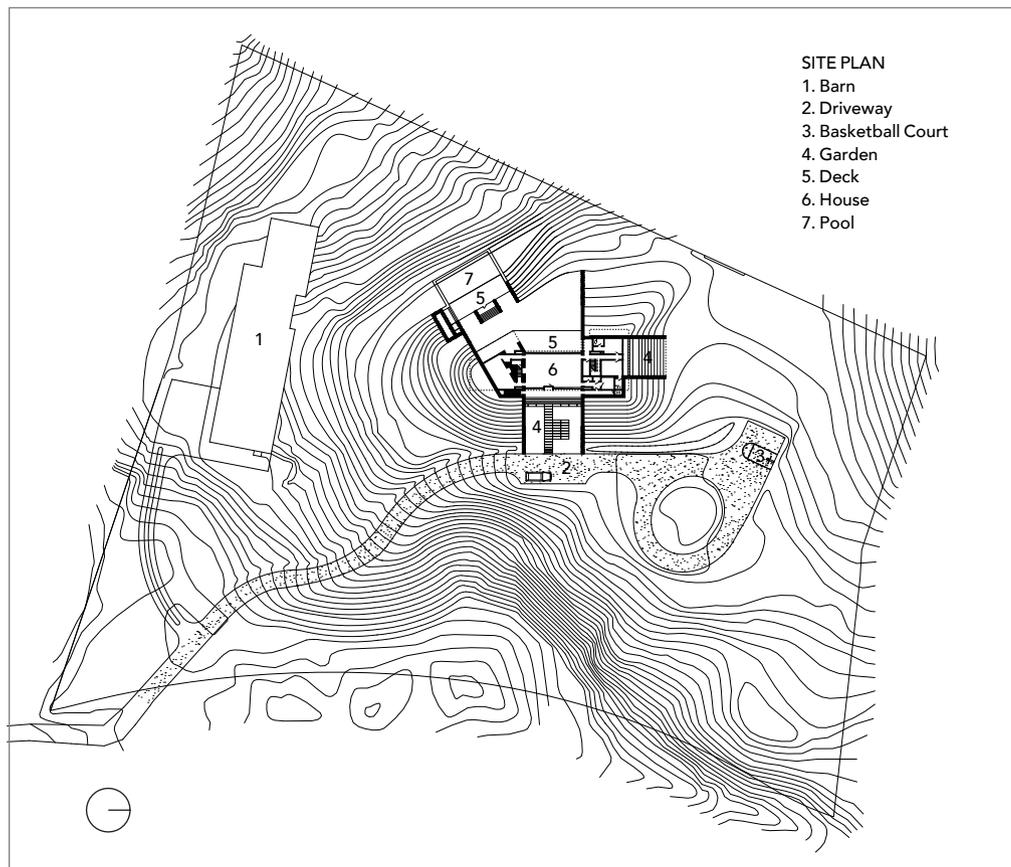
Those walls set the tone for the interior’s design and material palette. White oak cabinetry, floors, and ceilings integrate with the architecture rather than calling attention to themselves, while keeping the focus on the outdoors. Likewise, lighting, switch plates, and registers are designed to disappear. Button electrical outlets above the kitchen counters, for example, read as simple circles drilled into the stone wall. Against it, the whitewashed oak cabinets appear almost as freestanding furniture. Here too, a row of structural columns holds up the second-floor deck, doubling as a see-through divider between the cooking/dining zone and living room. Fitted with open shelving, they create a place to display candles and family pictures.



GROUND-LEVEL PLAN | 1. Garden | 2. Deck | 3. Pool | 4. Living | 5. Dining | 6. Kitchen
7. Pantry | 8. Powder Room | 9. Closet | 10. Mudroom | 11. Breakfast | 12. Bedroom
13. Bath | 14. Outdoor Shower | 15. Stair | 16. Den | 17. Hall



UPPER-LEVEL PLAN | 1. Roof Deck | 2. Primary Bedroom | 3. Primary Bath | 4. Closet | 5. Office
6. Stair | 7. Lounge | 8. Bedroom | 9. Bath | 10. Outdoor Shower



Signal Hill

Montauk, New York

ARCHITECT: Paul Masi, AIA, principal in charge; Aaron Zalneraitis, AIA, project architect; James Willis, project team, Bates Masi + Architects

BUILDER: Scott Armusewicz, Merit Builders, Southampton, New York

INTERIOR DESIGNER: Jenna Chused, CHUSED & Co., New York, New York

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Christopher LaGuardia, LaGuardia Design Group, East Hampton, New York

PROJECT SIZE: 6,325 square feet

SITE SIZE: 4.8 acres

CONSTRUCTION COST: Withheld

PHOTOGRAPHY: Bates Masi + Architects

KEY PRODUCTS

CABINETS: Custom by Bates Masi + Architects

COUNTERTOPS: Stone Source

DECKING: Mahogany

DISHWASHER: Gaggenau

FAUCETS: Watermark

FIREPLACE: Stuv

FLOORING: Hakwood

OUTDOOR GRILL: Wolf

OUTDOOR REFRIGERATOR: Sub-Zero

OUTDOOR SHOWER: Outdoor Shower Company

RANGE: Wolf

REFRIGERATOR: Gaggenau

SINKS: Custom, Elkay

TOILETS: TOTO

TUB: Signature Hardware

WINDOWS: Arcadia



Generous deployment of stone walls protects occupants from strong winds and allows full enjoyment of outdoor areas on the stunning site.

A sense of transparency infuses every room. “They are a family that really enjoys the outdoors,” Paul says. “Being able to have outdoor elements that connected through the house was important. The doors fully pocket on both sides of the living room, the dog runs in and out; the experience of living expands out to the landscape, and the living area becomes a covered pavilion between the two bedroom volumes.” Around the corner from the kitchen, the breakfast nook’s doors also pocket into the wall, opening it fully to the deck and backyard. The south portion of the deck is angled toward the pool, which was pushed to the side to keep it out of the living area’s sight

line. Partially built into a hill, the stone pool cabana is outfitted with pocketing glass doors, a sink and refrigerator, and a stone countertop that complements the landscape rubble.

A subtler touch is the baths’ black-framed shower enclosures that echo the house’s black-framed windows, further diminishing the distinction between inside and out. No doubt one of the delights in the children’s pavilion is the outdoor shower on the north side, where a roof cutaway opens it to the sky. Directly below, a deck extends out from the guest suites, and a pair of stone walls cuts down into the landscape, bringing natural light to a basement gym.



Living in the Landscape

For all the character the stone offered, building on glacial till presented some challenges. “The excavation would expose a boulder the size of a car,” Paul says. “We had to make a decision right there whether to pull it, leave it, or roll it down the hill.” The clay soil was another hurdle. Although two 75-foot-deep soil borings failed to reveal any problems, the excavator hit a large vein of clay about 8 feet down, between the two test spots. “Building a house on top of clay that is holding water is risky because the soil can liquify, especially on top of a hill,” Paul says. “The engineer was worried that we were adding all this weight, with the stone walls, that would settle over time.” Although they considered putting the house on pilings, the solution was to use larger footings to disperse the load and add lightweight fill for drainage around the house. The structure is wood framed, with a bit of steel inserted for the 15-foot cantilever.

Signal Hill embodies the architect’s understanding of the setting and the history of the land. The house carves into the

natural hill but also frames the views in multiple directions, including across Long Island Sound to Connecticut. “The owners do a lot of entertaining and local fundraising, and the hilltop spot provides an ideal place for guests to experience the sunset,” Paul says. “One of the owner’s parents is a surfer; I see him in the ocean at 6 or 7 in the morning when the sun is rising. It was nice for us to design this architecture around this particular place for their lifestyle. It doesn’t overpower the landscape, but it’s impactful when you’re there.”

Bespoke but not self-conscious, the house is a convivial fit for this family’s daily life. “When we go by there, the doors are open and everyone is running in and out of the house, some with surfboards,” Paul adds. “It seems like it felt natural for them when they moved in. We’ve had clients who said they were nervous about damaging things or moving something out of place, but these clients didn’t skip a beat. To me, it seemed like they’d always lived there.” RD