





H F O R H A V E N

On The Pines, facing Long Island's south shore, the curious 'H' footprint of architect Horace Gifford's 1965 glass and cedar-clad house – four pavilions connected by an open-air living area – was designed to showcase the pristine beaches and wild greenery of this strip of sandbar. All a mere two hours from New York City, marvels Miles Redd. Photography: Ricardo Labougle

Opposite: a typical boardwalk in Fire Island. This is the route to the bay from Carlos and Larry's house. This page: the 1960s Modernist exterior clearly shows the four "wings". The butterfly chair on the dock offers a view of the swimming pool that Carlos installed in place of the dusty front yard.



The living room attests to Carlo's understanding of the concept that less is more. It features a freestanding Swedish fireplace, a black-and-white chevron-patterned Moroccan rug and two low, deep banquettes in rough black linen that are original built-in details from Gifford's 1960s design



A view of the dining area on the sunlit back terrace. Carlos describes the movement of light through the house as 'a testament to Gifford's sense of invention'. The glass doors on both sides of the central living area slide back, making it as easy for guests to seamlessly wander inside and out





Opposite: decorative ceramics made by Carlos sit alongside a lamp on a low sideboard in the entrance hall. This page: a view of the interior looking out towards the swimming pool. The living room becomes an open-air pavilion that birds fly through when the doors are thrown open in the sunset.



This page: the metal mobile hanging in the master bathroom is by Carlos's friend, the New York artist Jim Hunter. Opposite: the adjustable lights next to the windows are from Chinatown. The geometric cotton bed cover was bought at a market in Bangkok





FIRE ISLAND is a delicious strip of a sandbar that lies parallel to the south shore of Long Island. A myriad of communities exist on this curious spit of land, ranging from the clubby and exclusive Point O'Woods (really more like Nantucket) to the rough and tumble Ocean Beach. Then there is The Pines. Sandwiched between Cherry Grove and Water Island, it is often referred to by its pet name, Fantasy Island, because it is just that: pure fantasy. A mere two hours from bustling New York City, here is a tropical island with pristine beaches, a landscape of scrubby pines and grasses devoid of motor vehicles (cars are verboten) and a population of (almost exclusively) gay men. It is unique, and so is its architecture.

Set against this extraordinary backdrop are about 600 mostly Modernist glass and cedar-clad houses dating from the 1960s and 1970s. Their rigorous yet restrained architecture works well with the natural landscape; they are often camouflaged behind a grove of bamboo or sit like pieces of sculpture above the rolling dunes. Horace Gifford (1932-92) was a celebrated architect responsible for some 63 commissions of this kind in The Pines. In 1965, he devised for himself a curious H-shaped plan of four pavilions connected by a terraced living area on a plot with no real views of sea or bay. The results are stunning.

Neglected by renters and owners over the years and clogged with vegetation, the house had fallen into rack and ruin when Carlos Otero and Laurence Isaacson stumbled upon it one Saturday afternoon. It was hot and muggy and they decided to kill some time with idle real-estate shopping. They were deeply surprised to encounter this sleeping beauty.

Carlos and Larry had enjoyed sharing rental properties with friends for years, but the time had come for a place of their own. Carlos, an architect and designer, says he 'felt a certain obligation to restore the house'. But there were obstacles to overcome: the first, a default mortgage of the previous owner (fortunately, Larry's father, a property lawyer, took charge of the long, untangling process);

second, the couple had agreed to move to Hong Kong for the next two years. It was hardly an opportune time to be buying and renovating a house. But they understood extensive work had to be done and that its execution, with the help of an excellent contractor, could take place while they were away.

They spent one summer in the house prior to restoration, drawing, planning, consulting original sources and finding a builder. 'It felt like a luxury to live in a house while working on its design,' Carlos recalls. It was easy for him to see beyond the existing quirks: the freestanding plastic 1980s hot tub, a front yard choked with bamboo, the convertible leather sofas and other conventions of modern technology designed for renters past (flat-screen TVs in every room). What was important was that the original shell was intact and required only restoration and updating. So began the labour-intensive process of re-siding the clear cedar, replacing the windows and refurbishing the foundation. Carlos, mindful of original details, kept things essentially as Gifford had designed them, only replacing bits when permissible.

First to go was the dusty and over-grown front yard. Now in its place are grasses and indigenous holly trees and sand. An addition of a pristine swimming pool gives a new focal point of sparkling water whose reflections dance on the ceiling of the living room at night. Carlos, in his humble and charming way, says he wanted to keep it a 'simple beach house'. He succeeded.

And yet, this very simplicity reveals a complex understanding of the notion that elegance is refusal. The living room has just a free-standing Swedish fireplace, a chevron-patterned Moroccan rug and two low, deep banquettes in rough black linen. Guests quickly realise that this is all you need *sur la plage*. Indoors is a low sideboard with a decorative ceramic sculpture, redolent of a futuristic/pre-historic scuba helmet, made by Carlos himself.

The bathrooms, kitchen and bedrooms are also exercises in restraint. Worktops are coated in silky, black honed granite. Curious light-capturing windows, resting above mirrors in bathrooms or, in the case of the kitchen, meeting the counter and soaring to the ceiling, offer vistas of sun, trees, sky and the occasional shirtless torso. 'You experience light moving through the house all day long, which is a testament to Gifford's sense of invention,' says Carlos. An air of voyeurism pervades that can feel sometimes subtle, sometimes overt, almost inviting an audience. Larry and Carlos fill the house with friends and family. Both say it is an easy place to have guests. One can seamlessly slip in and out of the open-air living room, allowing for moments of company and privacy. Gifford, famous for showing up to site meetings in his Speedos, did instill a certain sexiness in his work. Perhaps it was a sublimation of the repression he felt in his everyday life. As much of the architect's work has been bastardised today, it is a relief to see his own house brought back to life in a way that would make him smile.

The Pines was and is a place where gay men can be themselves, and this architecture reflects and celebrates that freedom. The magnitude of the Aids crisis took its toll here, and for a while it was a ghost town. The world is changing for the better, but The Pines is a unique reminder that not so long ago gay men took refuge on a sandbar in the middle of the Atlantic, and these houses are a memorial to the talents and visionaries lost too soon. I find it comforting to see the baton passed and a new generation protecting this singular place. Now that the renovation is complete and the garden is growing in, people say it feels like a house that has always been well preserved. Hopefully, it will set an example for others renovating similar mid-century gems that populate the island ■

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Opposite: a passage to a secluded guest bedroom. Grasses and modular decking were installed by Carlos. This page: the worktops in the kitchen are coated in honed granite. The pendant lights above are designed by Alvar Aalto and manufactured by Artek.