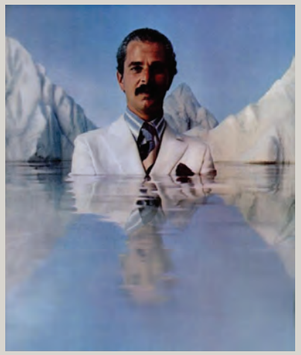
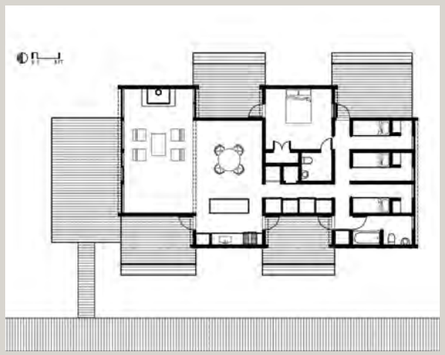
# BOYS IN THE SAND

Chapter Five

***Orgy is where it's all headed, and orgy is a grand old tradition on Fire Island.***

**—*New York* Magazine, 1972**





PAGES 100–101:
**Herbert List, *Water Games*, 1937**

ABOVE:
**Scali House in the *New York Times*, 1967**

LOWER RIGHT:
**Scali House, floor plan**

LOWER LEFT:
**Sam Scali, 1972**

OPPOSITE:
**Scali House, elevation**



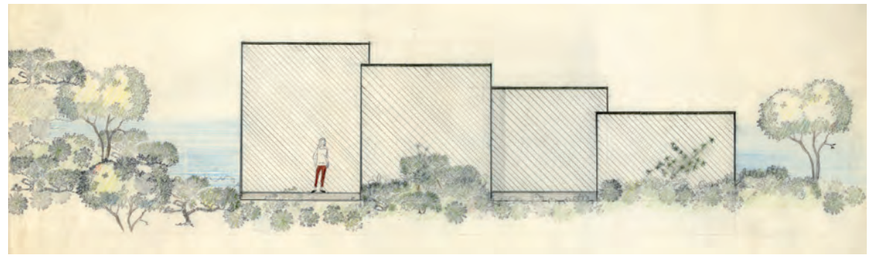
**"It has been** observed many times by his peers that [he] is a very nice, quiet guy who is almost unflappable. Inside that quiet exterior, however, resides a raging fire of creativity that catches people off guard with its simplicity, directness, and brilliance."[66] The author might have been speaking about Horace Gifford, but the compliment was actually directed toward his client. Sam Scali was a quintessential 1960s Mad Man, a creative director of advertising campaigns for Volvo, Maxell, the Herald Tribune, and—most famously—Perdue Farms. Scali's business partner Ed McCabe penned the slogans—in Perdue's case, "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken"[67]—while Scali obsessively crafted the visual presentation. The font he selected for Perdue was "picked for a specific reason. If you look closely at the inside of the O's, they look like eggs."[68] He spent his free time in equally precise hobbies like winemaking, and the appreciation for subtlety and craft he shared with Gifford made Scali and the architect an ideal match.

Scali and his wife, Joan, an artist, combined several lots in Fair Harbor into one parcel, with bay views at the narrow northern edge, a public boardwalk to the west, and Gifford's serene Kauth residence from 1964 to the east. Gifford responded to this expansive but unsecluded site with a cluster of linked cubes. Four principal functions—living, kitchen/dining, master bedroom, and children's rooms—were denoted by staggered forms in descending heights of 16, 14, 12, and 10 feet. Each cube lengthened to approximate the 1:1.618 "golden-mean" proportion and they interpenetrated each other. Floor-to-ceiling windows in the gaps created by staggered wall planes assured that interior spaces received a constant wash of light, brought into relief by diagonally oriented, rough-sawn cedar sheathing. Three shiplike bunk rooms housed the Scalis' young children. All windows faced north or south, leaving a blank but playful tumble of cubes to face the public walkway.

This "house that sits on a sand dune looking like an unpainted primary sculpture,"[69] as the *New York Times* noted, marked a decisive contrast with the Scalis' large and tastefully cluttered pseudo-Tudor home in Queens. "After a summer at the beach, the Scalis are confirmed in their original intention to leave the house 'without anything on the walls or on top of the tables' ."[70] The only concession to tradition was the stained-glass, Tiffany-style shade that illuminated a Eero Saarinen dining table. Even if just for the weekend, Americans were casting off their heavy armoires along with their suits and wingtips. People were more willing to take a chance in a summer home than a primary residence, and it was precisely this margin of adventure that Gifford mined.

The design of the Scali residence—the way it turned its back to the public thoroughfare but opened up inside with spaciousness and a privately enjoyed view—closely resembled the prevailing template for American housing in the postwar period. The front of a house sheltered an automobile, while the back secluded a nuclear family. Front yards, emptied of pedestrians and shorn of front porches, had lost their social function of stitching a community together. But the Pines was developing into a very different version of the American Dream, and Gifford soon began to play a role in this shift.

Many Pines residents hailed from tiny apartments and demanding careers. In a real sense, a beach house was not merely a second home: it was the *only* home in which the urbanite could cook, garden, and entertain. The Pines was a place for people to perform a version of domesticity that their city apartments and city careers denied them. And perform they did. The pedestrian boardwalks of the Pines created spatial intimacy between home dwellers and passers-by that invited socializing, or more. After all, the Pines was a place to meet like-minded people, a place to



marvel, as Albert Goldman put it, at the "remarkable shorting out of the barriers to interpersonal communication. Cruising along at sunset, with a glass in one hand and a modest pitcher of martinis in the other, you find yourself far more socially acceptable than you ever realized."[71]

Cherry Grove had once been the illicit playground for discreet Pines residents. Now, the social life flowed in both directions. While plenty of straight residents remained in the Pines, its majority-gay population set the tone by the late sixties. As pretenses fell away, Gifford began to rotate glass walls into public view, fashioning voyeuristic vistas from within and without.

A year after the completion of the Scali residence, Gifford perfected its composition of nested cubes—and rotated it into public view. He was designing a home for Lawrence Bonaguidi, a prominent international-relations attorney who purchased a large site in the Pines along a well-trafficked boardwalk. Gifford's first impulse, as revealed in an early sketch, ordered its horizontal surfaces in intricate counterpoint with the ground plane. These diagonally staggered planes dodged existing trees or allowed them to pass through the floor. Eddying around each side of the house, they evoked the nearby but unseen waters of the Great South Bay. While echoing the contours of the land, the decks also hovered weightlessly over it, supported by unshorn tree trunks set back from the edges. The architect folded the roofline into a series of cubes like the Scali residence but with a critical difference—the nested planes of clerestory glass faced east and west, bending the sharply angled light in ways unknown to his earlier houses. Gifford's highest ceiling to date imbued the living room with a grandeur complemented by an intimate, bright red conversation pit. A separate guest house, with a raked roofline, anchored the rear edge of the property.

Gifford presented the house to Bonaguidi as a series of "telescopic"[72] spaces in the landscape, and his inspiration hints at the atmosphere in the Pines at this time. A telescope is a device often used for spying; it elongates when engaged in order to capture objects in its gaze. Once the house was completed, the architect commissioned a "peephole" photograph of the interior, an image that seemed to announce an imminent indiscretion. The Bonaguidi residence marked the opening salvo in Gifford's progression toward a form of modernism with a randy undercurrent.

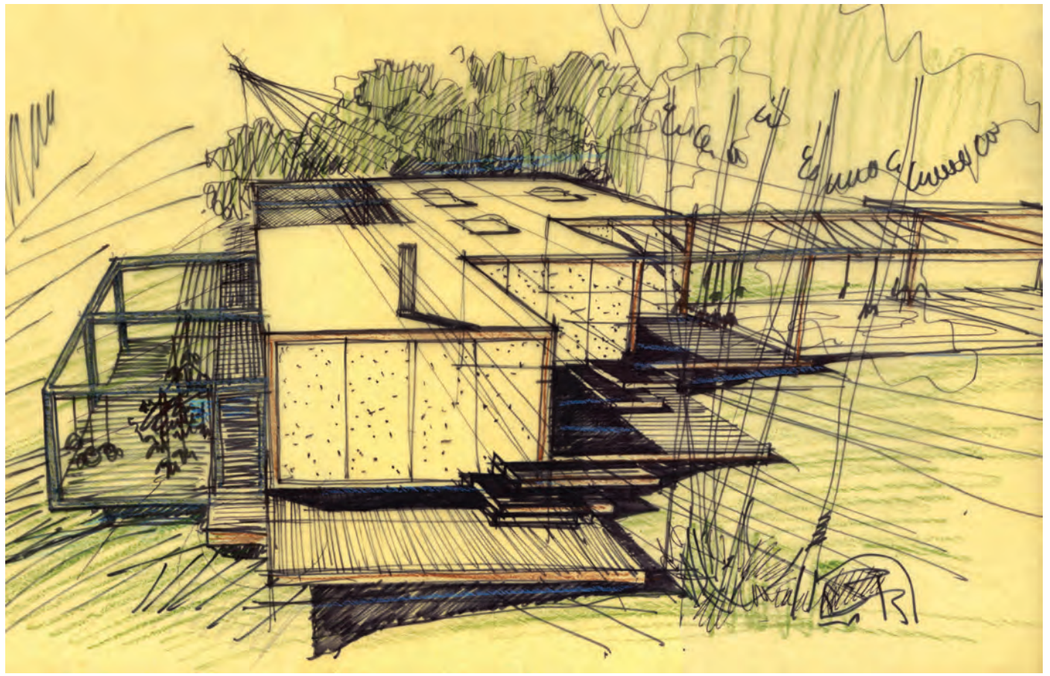
LEFT:
**Bonaguidi House II, Fire Island Pines, NY, 1968, guest house**

OPPOSITE, ABOVE:
**Bonaguidi House, early sketch**

OPPOSITE, BELOW:
**Bonaguidi House, elevation**

PAGE 106, ALL:
**Bonaguidi House**

PAGE 107:
**Bonaguidi House, interior**



The affluence of new clients like the Scalis and the Rolls Royce-driving Bonaguidi also inflected Gifford's architecture. His earlier homes craned their rooflines for views or cloistered around themselves for privacy, making the most of their middling sites. The telescope houses, uncoiling in a single story across the landscape, were suited to wealthier clients who could afford the best properties. But what strikes one today is that the homes themselves are only a touch bigger and a trifle more expensive than his other efforts. Such restraint was central to what made the communities on Fire Island work, because the picturesque combination of vegetation, boardwalks, and ocean did not entirely obscure an almost urban ensemble of cheek-by-jowl houses on small lots. Gifford exercised this insight to create stretches of homes that would be as aesthetically ordered, scaled, and coherent as the best-preserved brownstone streets in Manhattan.

Gifford was increasingly well-heeled himself. During the early 1960s, he virtually gave away his talents for the opportunity to build, charging just 3 percent of a home's construction cost for his fee. Six years later, he charged a respectable 12 percent and invested his profits in oceanfront property. "Now, the bank sends cash first and the paper for his signature later. Gifford is good business,"[73] according to a 1968 newspaper profile. With success came selectivity. By 1970, Gifford refused any commission with a budget of less than $50,000. And he got to choose the builder; clients were contractually obliged to use Gifford's handpicked contractors. This was essential. Gifford's total control of the construction process meant that his homes and his fees remained affordable while his practice remained viable, even lucrative. The blueprints for his increasingly complex Fire Island homes were remarkably simple, in contrast to the more defensive books of drawings for the homes that he created farther afield. At his peak, Gifford realized up to ten homes per year, working out of small home studios with no more than one assistant. By the time Patrick Travis and William Wall sought his services in 1972, the assistant who answered Gifford's phone warned them that he was "very selective" about the sites he took on.[74]

Travis and Wall were hairstylists, and both possessed the gregarious manners this profession rewarded. An increasingly cumbersome permit process for coastal construction along the Great South Bay delayed their house's realization by three highly inflationary years. As the construction cost soared, Travis and Wall pooled their resources with Richard Barry and William Stockmann, investing in what by 1975 was a $72,000 house. They also abandoned an initial design in which all rooms faced the water, instead tucking bedrooms

into a lower level and shrinking the home's footprint. But an echo of the larger home persisted in a disembodied facade reminiscent of the oversized shading devices that distinguished Paul Rudolph's Milam residence. Gifford's north-facing brise-soleil provided minimal shade; its function was entirely aesthetic, framing the view, providing an airy complement to the layered opacity of the entry approach, and serving as the "drop-dead"[75] entry threshold requested by Patrick Travis. A stabilizing truss was hastily added to the facade to ensure that this last request remained metaphorical. Gifford's customary descent from the common boardwalk into mulch wound through a thicket of trees, leading to a three-sided staircase. When Travis and Wall arrived for the first time at their new home, they discovered Gifford busily spreading leaves across the freshly scraped pathways. An elaborate swimming pool extension stretching to the Great South Bay was constructed in 1977.

Travis and Wall bonded with Gifford over a meal at a Japanese restaurant that the architect orchestrated to sell his clients on the notion of a sunken dining pit with a built-in glass table. They encountered a modest man with a cutting sense of humor. When his clients thanked him for their home's distinctive design, Gifford readily conceded his influences, explaining that they should

PAGES 108–09:
**Travis-Wall House, Fire Island Pines, NY, 1972–75, exterior facing Great South Bay**

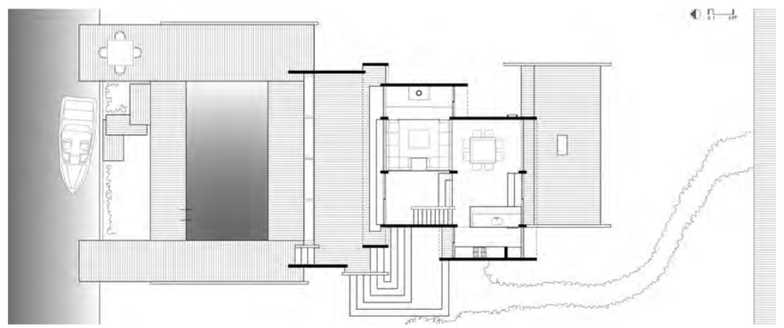
ABOVE:
**Travis-Wall House, stained-glass window, detail**

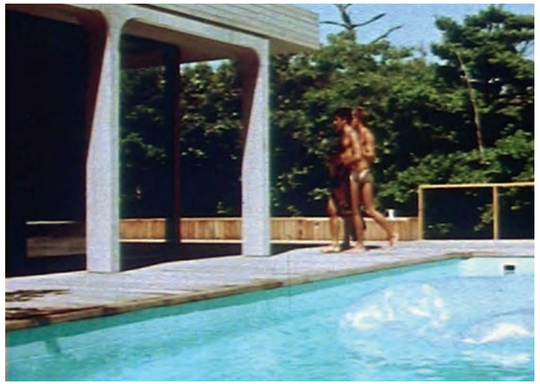
LEFT:
**Travis-Wall House, bedroom**

OPPOSITE, ABOVE:
**Travis-Wall House, interior**

OPPOSITE, BELOW:
**Travis-Wall House, floor plan with swimming pool added in 1977**






also thank a great architect named Paul Rudolph. Gifford's housewarming gift to his new friends was an elegant sliver of abstract stained glass, cut to the same width as the vertical siding, transforming the western light that penetrated the living space.[76] His backhand could be just as strong. Referring to his fellow beach-house architect Harry Bates's alleged tendency to ensnare clients with wildly optimistic budget estimates, Gifford renamed his competitor the "Old Bates and Switch" to anyone within earshot.[77]

In plan, the public spaces consisted of a 27-by-27-foot square that was divided in half and slid apart, with varied floor and ceiling heights differentiating the two spaces. A high deck toward the boardwalk and a low deck toward the bay extended the two interior rooms into an ensemble of indoor/outdoor stages, in a reprise of Gifford's second personal residence from 1965. Sand-colored carpet covered the floors. There was not a straight-backed chair to be found. Everything was built-in, including the dining pit that Gifford charmed out of his clients.

If there was an implicit flirtation embedded into the public glass walls of the Bonaguidi residence, the Travis-Wall residence beckoned with a come-hither stare. The master bath shunned mirrors in favor of plate glass facing the nearby boardwalk. But mirrors abounded everywhere else—as step risers to make objects disappear and as bedroom ceilings to make objects multiply. A multiman shower was illuminated by a large skylight set into the upper deck. All of this tailored informality and frank eroticism reflected a decade of libidinous license, one immortalized in 1971 by Wakefield Poole's *Boys in the Sand*, the first porn film to exploit the sexual energy of Fire Island and the architecture that housed it.

Poole, a former dancer with the *Ballets Russes* and a successful Broadway-musical choreographer, seized an opportunity to elevate a coarse medium. Fellow filmmaker Jerry Walker

UPPER LEFT:
**Poster for *Boys in the Sand*, directed by Wakefield Poole, 1971**

UPPER RIGHT:
***Boys in the Sand***

LOWER RIGHT:
**Gay magazine, summer 1970**

LOWER LEFT:
***Boys in the Sand***

OPPOSITE:
**Tom Bianchi, Untitled, SX-70 Polaroid, 1970s**

marveled that before *Boys in the Sand,* "we were living in an era where we take a camera into a motel room with two guys that don't have time to take their socks off, and shoot them [before you get caught], and run like hell, and sell it to somebody for a dollar and a half."[78] Scored to classical music and brandishing a palette of bronzed skin, stripped-bare facades of cedar and glass, flaxen hair, and shimmering pools, *Boys in the Sand* resituated gay desire in a decidedly upscale, romantic, and aesthetically sophisticated milieu. *Variety* reviewed the first "all-male" film to be promoted in the *New York Times*, declaring: "There are no more closets!"[79]

Filmed in three acts, *Boys* opens with scenes in the Meat Rack before vigorous lovemaking at a modernist home and swimming pool designed by James McCloud. The final act follows a utility worker, who lingers expectantly outside of Gifford's Schultz residence while the nude star cruises him from the window of Andrew Geller's Frank residence. *Boys in the Sand* didn't exactly discover Fire Island, but it heralded its early-seventies transformation from an open secret to the storied destination that it remains today. The film also inaugurated the era of "porno chic," one year before *Deep Throat* mainstreamed the genre for heterosexual audiences. Many other filmmakers would indelibly conjoin sex with the aesthetic of Fire Island's beach houses in the years to come, including the filmmaker Richard Winger and his partner and star Michael Lucas. Winger purchased the Travis-Wall residence, and his architectural chicken hawk makes an occasional star turn as a setting for their erotic films.[80]

Gifford's telescope houses spread across some of the more generous lots in the Pines, but he achieved other voyeuristic vantage points by stretching upward. When the Home Guardian Company rechristened Lone Hill as the Pines in 1952, the name was largely aspirational. The rather barren and scrubby province of nudists venturing from nearby Cherry Grove could have been called "the Pine" in its southern half. By the mid-sixties, enough homes existed to create a windbreak atop the narrow barrier island, while septic tanks enriched the soil below, in an accidental synergy that forever altered the rolling terrain. Gifford responded to the new lushness with a series of "upside-down" floor plans that stacked sunny living areas on top of shaded bedrooms—tree houses that gazed across an increasingly frenetic cultural landscape.

With his customary dry humor, Gifford began his design presentation to the textile designer Murray Fishman by declaring, "You will now have twenty closets to come out of."[81]

OPPOSITE:
**Fishman House, Fire Island Pines, NY, 1965**

ABOVE:
**Fishman House, Fire Island Pines, NY, interior**

OPPOSITE:
**Fishman House, floor plans**

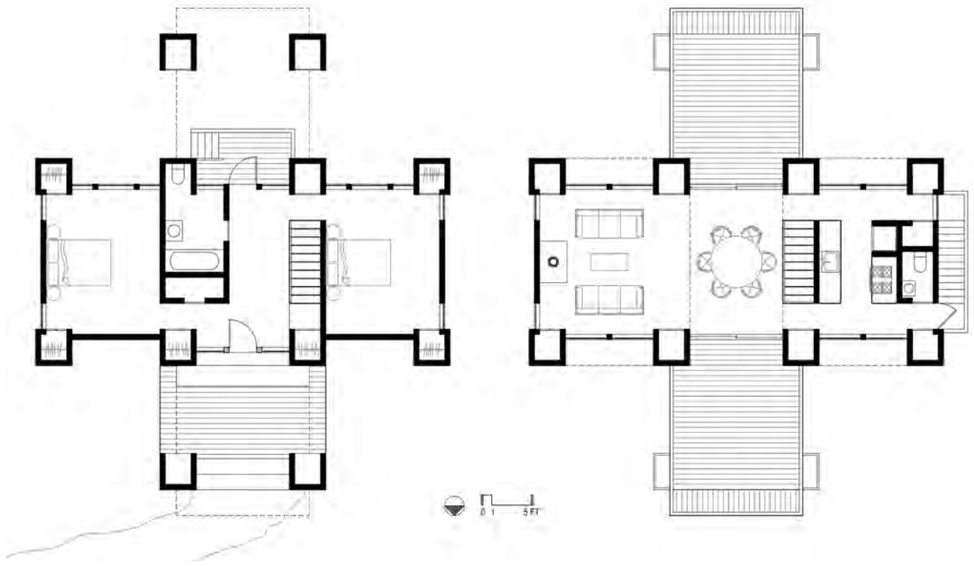


Twelve robust columns, containing closets above and below, lifted the Fishman residence into the air. Early Fire Island cottages squatted akimbo upon skinny pilings, evoking the architectural equivalent of "martini legs." Gifford composed and selectively clad his own version of these posts, realizing a muscular base still in harmony with the surrounding architecture. Gifford was indifferent, hostile even, to having all of these closets in a beach house, *except* when they served his desired formal effect. On that basis, the home was a breakout success that made its way into the pages of several magazines and a traveling exhibition sponsored by the American Institute of Architects.

Health issues caused Murray Fishman to sell his home shortly after its completion. Its next occupants were Marvin and Jo Segal, who called on Gifford to add terraces to the ground level. Marvin Segal would distinguish himself as an attorney for the most notorious of defendants, including Nixon Administration Attorney General John Mitchell and numerous Mafia figures. Perhaps his rough-and-tumble milieu made him feel invulnerable, as he neglected to pay Gifford for his work. Undeterred, the architect got his money after a series of characteristically terse and fearless letters demanding payment. Segal's accomplished wife, a fashion editor for *Women's Wear Daily*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Look*, was part of the Pines's fashion coterie that included John Whyte, Geoffrey Beene, Giorgio di Sant'Angelo, and Diane von Furstenburg. She also became quite a fan of her architect, organizing the first Horace Gifford house tour in 1975.

The Fishman-Segal residence projected an undeniable sculptural presence, with trunklike columns embodying Gifford's belief that "the site usually suggests what the house wants to be as a form in space."[82] But while it presented a masterly composition of forms, its interior betrayed the rough edges of a prototype. The stair alighted upon a tight landing, facing a closet. Living-room views were curtailed, without purpose, by the bulk of the columns. The kitchen was small and closed off from the living and dining areas, and a hall on the south side of the kitchen disconcertingly dead-ended. On a similar passage north of the kitchen, one passed a tiny powder room on the way to a tacked-on and formally unresolved stair to the roof. It might have worked at a larger scale, but there were limits to how much the architect could cram into a tiny footprint.

An opportunity to perfect the gestures of the Fishman-Segal residence arrived in 1969, when Gifford designed a home for James Cashel on a high dune. After a curvaceous design for Cashel's



OPPOSITE:
**Cashel House, Fire Island Pines, NY, 1969, entrance**

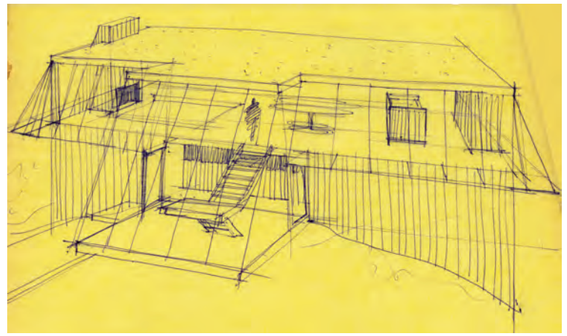
ABOVE:
**Cashel House, dining room**

RIGHT:
**Cashel House, the "divorce room"**

steeply sloping site proved too expensive to build, Gifford countered with a tree house entered by a bridge that pivoted around an existing holly grove. Delicately scaled "fin" walls replaced the hollow columns of the Fishman-Segal House, as minimalist benches and cantilevered planters did away with bulky deck rails. Outstretched decks kissed the hillside to the south and ventured high over the landscape toward the north.

The stair—rotated ninety degrees from that of the Fishman-Segal residence and more refined in its detail—created a tighter entry but liberated the space above, much as a steep ladder would foreshadow a treetop aerie. The stair's rotation also allowed for a small third bedroom with a single bed downstairs, christened the "divorce room."[83] An open kitchen acknowledged the home's diminutive scale, joining a single great room with panoramic bay and ocean views. As in several homes from this period, plate glass took the place of mirrors in the master bath, an intriguing provocation that scorned vanity while inviting prurience and celebrated nature while leading to "unnatural" acts. Cashel, one of Gifford's less flamboyant clients, succumbed to practicality and installed a shaving mirror after Gifford's departure from the construction site.

Lawrence Bonaguidi, a repeat client, commissioned Gifford's most innovative tree house, which clung to a dramatic rock outcropping at the eastern edge of the Pines. A twisting stair scaled the steep site, leading to a perfectly square foyer



with square tiles. A spiral stair passed the tree line, revealing preserved dunes that stretched eastward. In the gaps created between slanted, clifflike glass walls and the suspended floor, trap doors opened up to ventilate the home, which drew air through a large “chimney” skylight at the center of the space. The home’s remove from the ground, combined with the floor’s separation from its glass walls, doubled the gravity-defying excitement of life in the treetops. Two built-in sofas defined a sunken living area, with cushions that slid off their frames to create a fireside love nest. On the north side of the house, the slanted glass careened all the way to the foyer floor. To the south, the sloped glass linked the living area to the master bath below. Its mirror was positioned so that a primping or showering host maintained a visual connection with the public spaces above.

By the late sixties, the larger world began to notice Gifford’s work. So he cast a wider net, undertaking projects in Connecticut, the Hamptons, and Florida. Financial success carved out a calm space from which to create homes for the accelerating pace of summer life. It was a time to sharpen his senses and rethink old certainties. Gifford was in a philosophical mood.

PAGE 120:
**Cashel House, north deck**

PAGE 121:
**Cashel House, master bathroom**

OPPOSITE:
**Bonaguidi House II, Fire Island Pines, NY, 1975**

ABOVE:
**Bonaguidi House II, sketch**

RIGHT:
**Bonaguidi House II, living area**

PAGES 124–25:
**Bonaguidi House II, interior**