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Jacket front: Roeder House, Fire Island Pines, NY (1969)
Jacket back: photo by George Whitely
Author photo: Megan Greenlee

www.HoraceGifford.org

Praise for *Fire Island Modernist: Horace Gifford and the Architecture of Seduction*:

“The injustice of Horace Gifford’s early death was compounded by the fact that his important contribution to American domestic architecture of the 1960s and ’70s has been overlooked by history. No one can bring Gifford back, but Rawlins emphatically corrects the second injustice by telling Gifford’s story in this important book, at once a work of architectural and social history.”

— Paul Goldberger, architecture critic, *Vanity Fair*, and author, *Why Architecture Matters*

“Rawlins deftly melds biography, architectural criticism, and social history to provide a rich portrait of Horace Gifford and a vivid explanation of how the architect’s design aesthetic contributed to the formation of modern gay culture. This is a meticulously researched and lavishly illustrated volume that deserves a very wide audience.”

— Charles Kaiser, author, *The Gay Metropolis*

“Finally, a treatise on one of the most important, if overlooked, voices in modern domestic architecture. It is thoughtful and provocative, balancing Gifford’s formal proclivities with his social ones. And it couldn’t be better timed. Gifford’s architecture is simple yet rich. In short, it is a model for the future: sustainable, aspirational, and fun.”

— Charles Renfro, Diller Scofidio + Renfro

“The sophistication, spaciousness, and graciousness of Gifford’s houses of the 1960s and ’70s are a revelation.”

— Terence Riley, architect and curator

“Rawlins’s excellent book follows Gifford’s exploration of modernism’s possibilities, a journey that was both deeply personal and a reflection of his times. He is proof that American modernism wasn’t a single austere style after all; it gave a public voice to a surprising range of communities and ideas.”

— Alan Hess, author, *Julius Shulman: Palm Springs* and *Oscar Niemeyer Houses*

“Horace Gifford, the subject of this gorgeous book, was taken by the plague, like so many. But Rawlins’s detailed research and beautiful writing resurrect the remarkable life and immense talent of an architect who once told a client, ‘You will now have twenty closets to come out of.’ A great read, beautifully published.”

— Sean Strub, activist and founder, *POZ* magazine

“Tracing Horace Gifford’s path from the beaches of Florida to those of Fire Island, juxtaposing gay sexual liberation with ecological sensibilities, this book is a wide-ranging cultural history. Rawlins conveys the poignancy of Gifford’s life and the exuberant yet simple delight of his architecture.”

— Gwendolyn Wright, professor of architecture, Columbia University;
author, *USA: Modern Architectures in History*; and co-host, *History Detectives*

Rawlins

Fire Island Modernist

SHORELINE BOOKS

G_{de}

FIRE ISLAND MODERNIST



Horace Gifford and the Architecture of Seduction

Christopher Bascom Rawlins

Foreword by Alastair Gordon

Fire Island Modernist is the first book to highlight the seductive seaside houses of Horace Gifford, a largely forgotten architect who died of AIDS in 1992. After years of research, author Christopher Rawlins has managed to piece together the life and career of this elusive and complex figure—a charismatic charmer who suffered from depression and liked to attend business meetings wearing a Speedo bathing suit. As the 1960s became the “sixties,” Gifford executed a remarkable series of beach houses that transformed the terrain and culture of New York’s Fire Island from a sleepy bohemian backwater into a wildly permissive “oasis of free love.”

Growing up on the beaches of Florida, Gifford forged a deep connection with coastal landscapes. Pairing this sensitivity with jazzy improvisations on modernist themes, he perfected a sustainable yet sensuous architecture in cedar and glass, as attuned to our animal natures as to the natural landscape. “The site suggests what the house wants to be as a form in space,” wrote Gifford, who followed this maxim throughout his career, taking cues from the sea and sky, inventing new forms while respecting the fragile ecosystem of New York’s barrier islands. His playful, wood-framed escape pods echoed the environment and culture of the place. Everything was “free and natural,” as one homeowner put it, and Gifford improvised on a basic plan with a multitude of variations: saw-toothed roofs hovered over the windblown dunes like paper kites; horizontal slabs and cedar-sided boxes nestled together like Russian dolls, rotating around open-air sun courts.

His serene 1960s pavilions provided refuge from a hostile world, while his exuberant post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS masterpieces orchestrated bacchanals of liberation. Montgomery Clift, Marilyn Monroe, and Elizabeth Taylor once spurned Hollywood limos for the rustic charm of Fire Island’s boardwalks. Truman Capote wrote *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* there. Diane von Furstenburg showed off her latest wrap dresses to an audience that included Geoffrey Beene, Halston, Calvin Klein, and Giorgio Sant’Angelo. Today, such a roster evokes the aloof, gated compounds of the Hamptons or Malibu, but these celebrities lived in modestly scaled homes alongside middle-class vacationers, all with equal access to Fire Island’s natural beauty. Blending cultural and architectural history, *Fire Island Modernist* ponders a fascinating era through the story of an architect whose life, work, and colorful milieu trace the arc of a lost generation and still resonate with artistic and historical import.

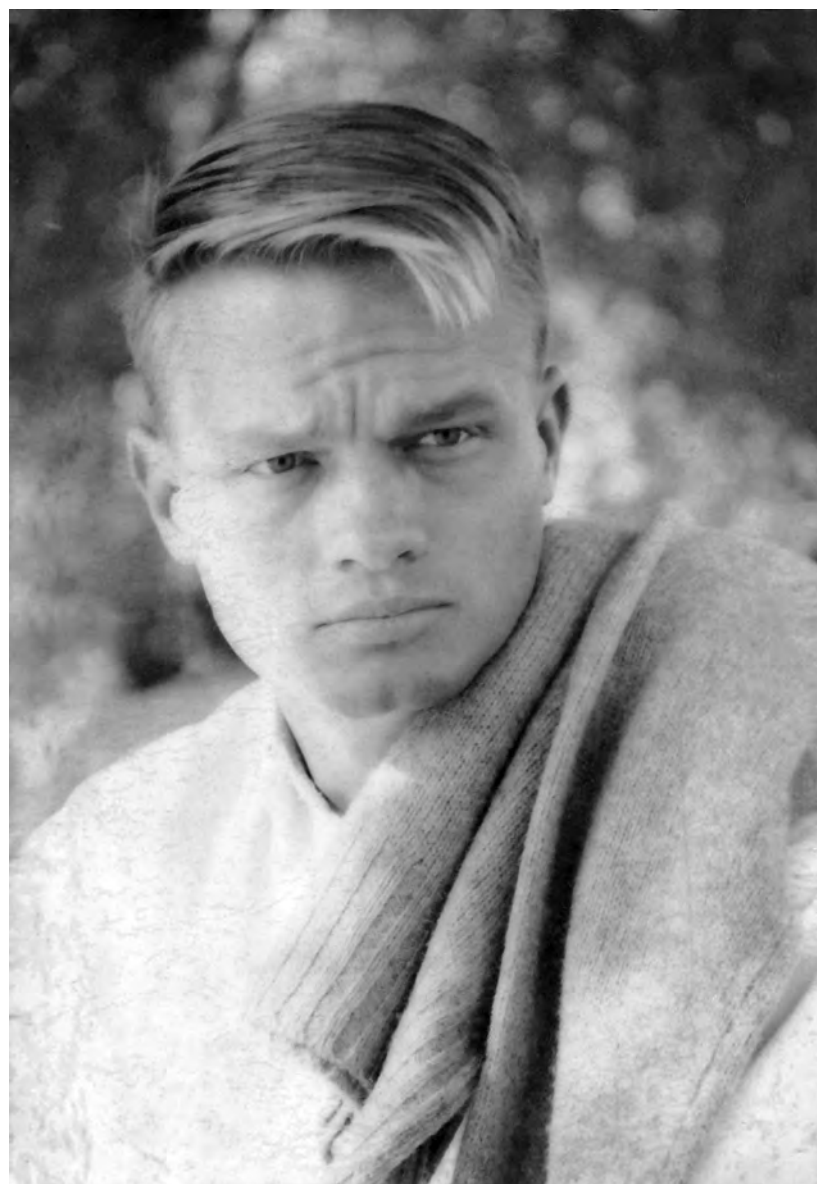






For Tad

You will now have twenty closets to come out of.
—Horace Gifford, 1965



FIRE ISLAND MODERNIST

Horace Gifford and the Architecture of Seduction

Christopher Bascom Rawlins

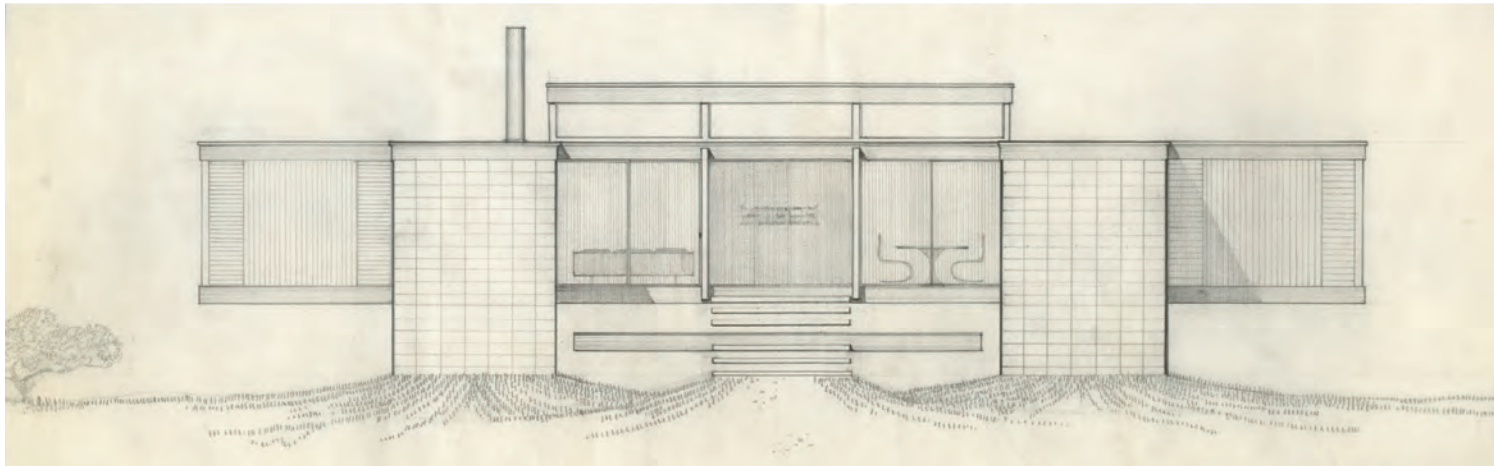
Foreword by Alastair Gordon

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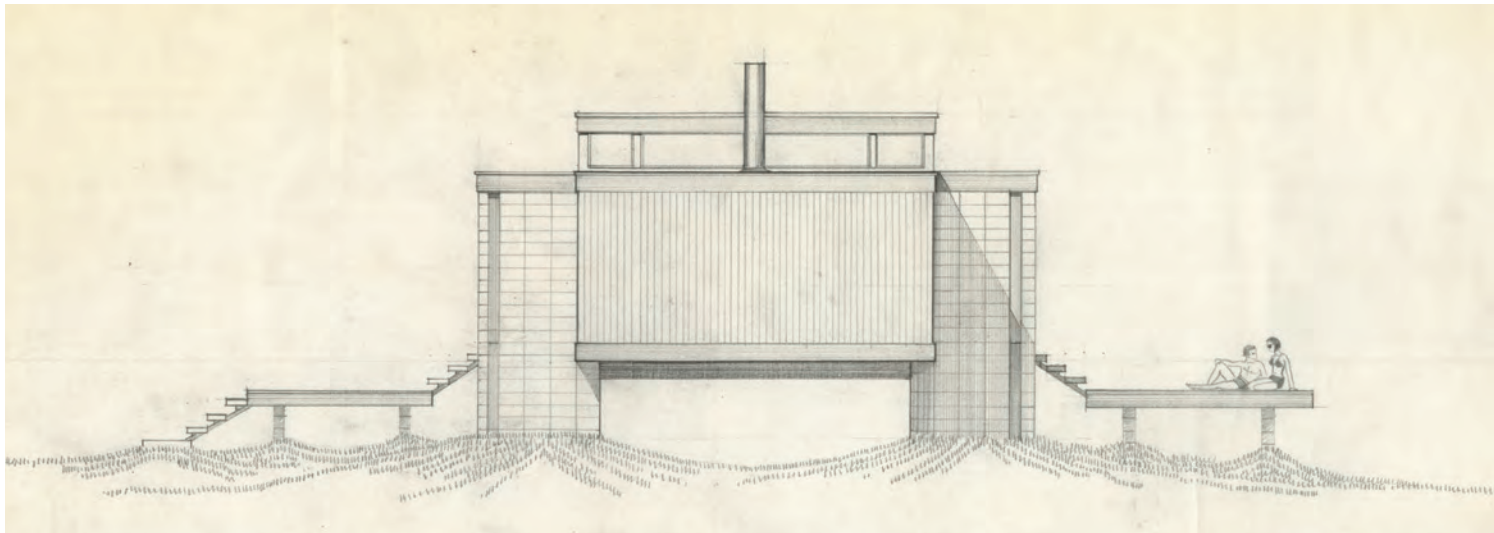
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Foreword by Alastair Gordon

Everything, everything is free and natural.
—Marlo Sloan, owner of a Gifford House



PAGE 4:
Horace Gifford,
ca. 1960

PAGE 6:
Photo by Paul
Cadmus. Portrait
of George Platt
Lynes and Jonathan
Tichenor, Cherry
Grove, NY, 1940

OPPOSITE:
Luck House,
Bridgehampton, NY,
1967

Back in the 1990s, when I was driving all over Long Island conducting research for *Weekend Utopia*, I stumbled upon a small modernist dwelling, little more than a shack by today’s standards, and it perched, ever so lightly, on a wetlands site in Bridgehampton, just off Job’s Lane, near a little bridge where Sam’s Creek drains into Mecox Bay. Boarded over for the season, or maybe forever, it was overgrown with bayberry and an orange vine that crept up the walls and made it feel like a poignant ruin of summers lost.

I wanted to include it in my book, but no one seemed to know anything about it. A local historian guessed that it might be by Peter Blake, since Blake had designed the neighboring house (his own), but that didn’t make sense. This house lacked the hovering, “barely there” illusion that made Blake’s work so distinctive and instead had its own kind of earthy integrity. Indeed, there was something almost stoic about the way it clung to its site with twin piers of concrete block, as if it had been abandoned there, like a shipwreck, and taken root.

When I asked Blake himself, he scoffed and made some dismissive remark about “forgeries.” An East End realtor told me it was a spec house by an unknown architect, a failed Blake imitation, but this turned out to be hearsay, more local mythology, and the authorship remained a mystery for several more years. Then, Christopher Rawlins, a young architect (and author of this revelatory study), called me up and told me about Horace Gifford. The name sounded vaguely familiar. I’d seen it mentioned in some of the architecture magazines that I’d combed through during my

research. Most of his beach-house designs from the 1960s and 1970s had been built on Fire Island, but a few were in the Hamptons, including one that Rawlins thought was on or near Mecox Bay. Some months later, Sarah Medford asked me to write a story about the rescue of an early-modern beach house for *Town & Country*, and it turned out to be the mystery dwelling. A trend-setting couple—art consultant Kim Heirston and her husband, the entertainment lawyer, Richard Evans—had just bought the property and were restoring it and furnishing it with contemporary art and vintage pieces by Charlotte Perriand and Arne Jacobsen.

“My immediate impression was that this was a real modernist gem, and I wanted to preserve it as it was,” said Evans, who’d managed to uncover more information about the house and its provenance. He’d even found the original plans and some correspondence between architect and client confirming that, indeed, it was designed by Horace Gifford and built in 1967 for Dr. David Luck, a cell biologist at Rockefeller University. Luck died in 1998 and the house was bought by Charles Urstadt, chairman of the Battery Park City Authority, who then sold it to Heirston and Evans in 2006.

They invited me over for lunch and allowed me to snoop around without feeling like an intruder. The roadside facade still seemed pretty dour, with hardly any windows, just vertical slits, and a small entry court designed by Ward Bennett that had been added in the 1970s. Unlike the overblown ego statements of the past twenty years, the architecture was understated, almost

mute: a simple wood-framed box, stretched and cantilevered at either end with glassed-in overhangs resting on steel I-beams. There were hints of Marcel Breuer and Louis Kahn and a breezy echo of Paul Rudolph's iconic beach houses from the 1950s. (As I would later learn, Gifford grew up in Florida and fell under Rudolph's spell at an early age.) As soon as I walked inside, the rhythms changed and I could see the plan's originality. The modest dimensions and materials were part of a staged illusion that deferred generously to nature. After such a narrow entryway, the living room ballooned into an effervescent well of light that expanded through a wall of glass to the bay beyond, and a narrow boardwalk that turned into a dock. Interior walls were made from vertical, V-joint, cedar siding, and the floor was pale oak. There was a simple open kitchen with a concrete counter and behind it a small guest room; the master bedroom was at the opposite end. The layout couldn't have been simpler. It was all about the sea-flecked light that flooded through windows and skylights, almost blindingly, through the pop-up roof and wrap-around clerestory that saturated the interior with a liquid glow and gave everyday objects a spectral sense of otherness. The owners really didn't need anything more. "We get up in the morning and watch the swans glide up to our deck," said Heirston. "It's my dose of sunshine: happy, open, and nature driven." The light served as a constant reminder, a companion and guide to living in the natural moment. The light was the real art and furniture—the primary reason for being there.

Gifford's simple plan turned prosaic summer architecture into a poetic experience: an odd out-of-body sensation that made one feel as if the house had slipped its moorings and drifted out among the plovers and overlapping reflections of the bay.

As I gradually learned more about Gifford, I was intrigued by the number of houses he'd designed in such a relatively short amount of time: more than sixty on Fire Island alone, and about a dozen in the Hamptons, yet he remained virtually unknown. (As Rawlins points out in his text here, so many of his clients, so many of his champions, died prematurely and couldn't promote his legacy.) There'd been a brief flash of recognition in 1968 with a six-page spread in *Progressive Architecture* that presented his work as a kind of pattern book for modern beach-house living, with playful variations on a basic plan. Some of the houses featured saw-toothed roofs. Others were horizontal slabs, cedar-sided boxes and towers, or shingled blocks tucked into other blocks like Russian dolls, twisting and turning around central sun courts, some with flat roofs

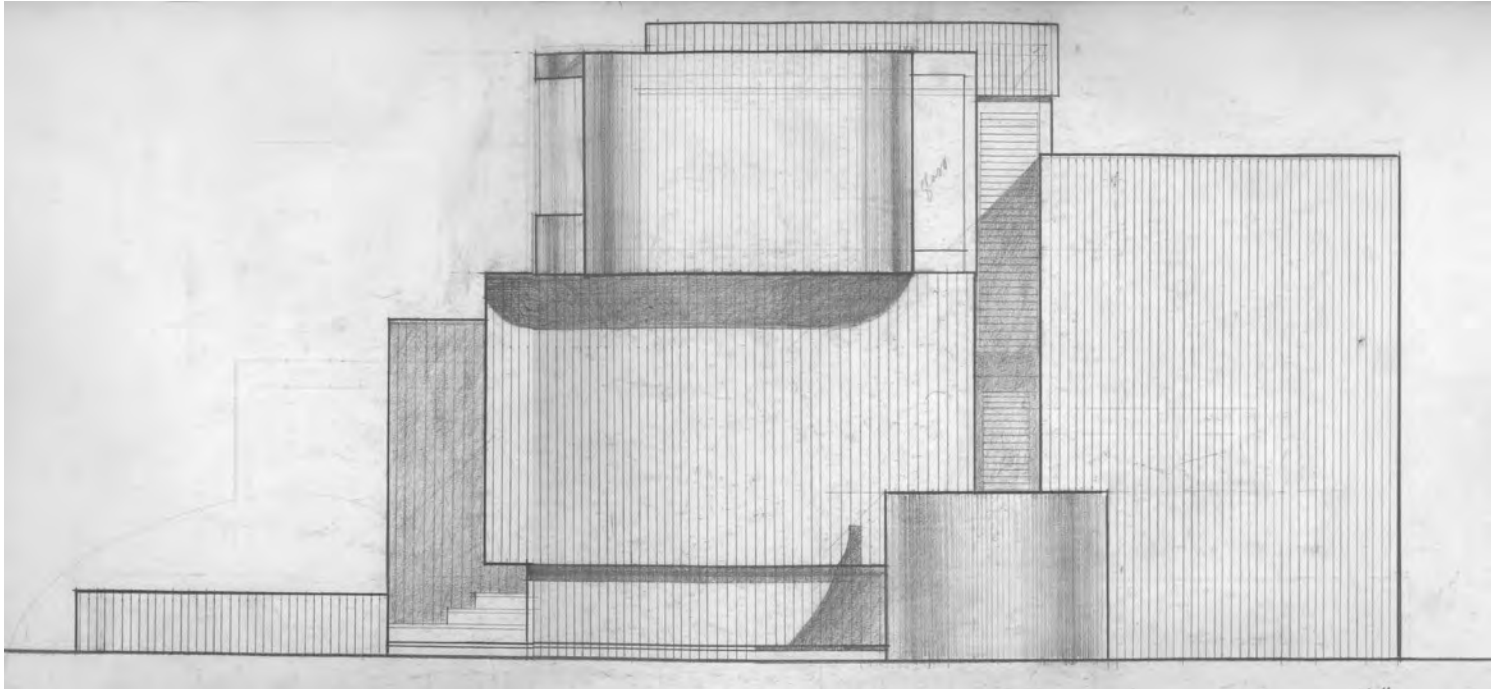
(like the Luck House), some shed-roofed, others floating on the dunes, stepped down, or nestled among clumps of wind-blown pines.

"The site usually suggests what the house wants to be as a form in space," said Gifford, who followed this maxim throughout his career, taking his cue from the beach, inventing new forms while honoring the fragile ecosystem of Fire Island, the slender sandbar that straddles the south shore of Long Island, only 20 miles west of the frenetic, social-climbing Hamptons. His wood-framed architecture echoed the landscape and the culture of the place: simple and low-maintenance, designed for easy weekend living. "The house is like summer to us," said one happy owner. "Everything, everything is free and natural."²

But while, on first glance, Gifford's work appears to fit neatly into the same weekend utopia school as Blake, Andrew Geller, George Nelson, and Robert Rosenberg, there was a cultural twist, an alternate narrative that was slightly skewed from the Hamptons version of postwar leisure. As Gifford warned a prospective client: "I'm gay and I'm manic-depressive," and these were aspects of the man's personality that shaped his work: houses that expressed the longings of a culture that had transformed Fire Island into a free-fire zone of social and sexual discovery, especially along the beaches of the Pines.

A protected part of the National Seashore Preserve had become known as the "Meat Rack," an all-night, back-to-nature bacchanal. The handy Pines Phone Directory listed residents by first name. *Boys in the Sand*, a famous gay porn film of 1971, was shot there, and some of the intimate scenes were staged in the Frank House, a modernist glass-and-wood cube by Andrew Geller. "Orgy is a grand old tradition on Fire Island," wrote journalist Albert Goldman in 1972. Fittingly, Rawlins titled one of his chapters "Form Follows Foreplay," and here he describes the lavish parties and characters, and how Gifford's architecture echoed their liberated lifestyle.

Gifford, the architect, was also quiet and withdrawn. He suffered blinding bouts of self-doubt, followed by uplifts of giddy well-being and would walk to meetings in a bathing suit. His best work was more pathological than those simple, one-stroke pavilions of the 1950s and 1960s. While this was due in part to rising real estate values, lack of privacy, and an extended season that saw homeowners investing more money and wanting less Spartan, more comfortable escape pods with full kitchens, bathrooms, and extra guest rooms, it was also due to a shift in the whole idea of weekend leisure, both gay and straight, and how it was growing more fraught with urban angst and personal entanglements.



OPPOSITE, ABOVE:
Globus House,
Corneille Estates,
NY, 1966. Elevation
depicting curved
additions, 1971

OPPOSITE RIGHT:
Bonaguidi House,
interior

OPPOSITE, LOWER LEFT:
Aerial photograph
of Fire Island Pines,
1950s

OPPOSITE, MIDDLE LEFT:
Bonaguidi House,
Fire Island Pines,
NY, 1968, peephole
perspective

Seismic social changes were reflected in the architecture of the moment, both by Gifford and other architects. The simple, mid-century box pushed out into odd angles and flaring floor plans that shielded, revealed, twisted, and turned programmatic elements to fit tiny building lots while still providing a degree of privacy amidst cheek-by-jowl dunescapes and bigger sundecks, eccentrically shaped overhangs, telescoping canopies, and cedar-clad towers that rose higher to capture increasingly elusive ocean views. The mid-1970s saw an even more complex play of geometric configurations, almost puzzlelike, as in Gifford's designs for the Lipkins, Pilson, and Sloan houses, with broader expanses of opaque surfaces and bulky forms with rounded corners, elliptical openings, and lozenge-shaped decks to hide the Jacuzzis.

It was an architecture of seduction, with hide-and-seek expanses of glass, skylights, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, prurient lines of sight, sunken living rooms and lurid conversation pits—not to mention the exposed outdoor showers and ironic lack of closets—that turned Gifford's houses into Kabukiesque stage sets for concealment and exposure, light and shadow, inviting voyeuristic tendencies, while indulging a taste for flamboyance within the limits of an informal modernist vocabulary and a tight budget. His domestic interiors erased spatial hierarchies and eased them open with loosely flowing spaces that nurtured a wildly divergent array of experimentation. Indeed, some of the houses were so saturated and transparent that they seem, in retrospect, to be like overexposed Polaroids, blurred and buckling around the edges.

A house that Gifford designed for Stuart Roeder in 1969 was a masterwork of narcissistic modernism as it stretched the notion of “functionalism” to a new extreme. Sensually bulging forms and knotty wood siding concealed a soaring den of iniquity with a brightly upholstered maxicouch conversation pit circling a central fireplace and affording views, upward, of Roeder's infamous “make-out loft” that hung suspended overhead, draped with shaggy flokati rugs and reached by a spiral staircase. “A fur-lined loft? Sure, for this is a beach house with an owner who's enormously *gregarious*,” read the understated feature in *House Beautiful* from July 1972. A ring of portholes in the roof created a speckled pattern of sunlight splashing across the rough-hewn interior, further

enhancing the otherworldly ambience of Roeder's lair. The free-spirited, out-of-the-closet era would ultimately end with the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, claiming Gifford himself as one of its victims. (He died of complications from the disease in 1992.)

Chris Rawlins's admirable and doggedly persistent research on a man who sometimes seems to have preferred obscurity has brought to light one of the missing links in mid-century modern architecture. His legacy seems more important today than ever, and it's a revelation to see these photographs and drawings pulled together for the first time and presented as a complete body of work. Suddenly, Gifford's imprint seems not only substantial but also significant and timely, in the deferential scale and proportions of his dwellings, in his doing less with more (as in Buckminster Fuller's sense of “ephemeralization”), and in the innovative, almost manic engineering of minimal spaces to suit maximal needs.

Gifford relied on a certain amount of intuition and an intimate, one-to-one relationship with nature that he forged through an understanding of the ever-shifting sandscape of Fire Island. Though tiny by today's standards—an average Gifford beach house was about 1,000 square feet—they expanded outward through oversized windows, decks, sun courts, and walkways, and seemed more spacious than they really were, all part of the forgotten art of “entasis,” a kind of sleight of hand, dating from antiquity, that Gifford introduced into his practice.

With all the flash and extravagance of the Gay Renaissance and Gifford's part in it, this unlicensed architect was also something of a recluse, a quiet outsider who seemed to be searching for a sense of completion and personal resolution through more subtle undertones of social choreography and craftsmanship. He pursued the mysteries of light, shadow, and space as a poet might, and he would continue to struggle with light, shadow, and space—practically and metaphorically—throughout his sadly truncated career. The more lyrical side of Gifford's character might have been lost in the glare of a gratuitous exhibitionism, but Rawlins made every effort to seek out the private and vulnerable man through correspondence and interviews, giving us a more human view of this architect and his considerable achievement.



OPPOSITE:
Roeder House, Fire
Island Pines, NY, 1969



Refracting Prism

Introduction by Christopher Rawlins

There are two things you should know about me. I'm gay, and I'm manic-depressive.
—Horace Gifford

Something kept drawing my eye through that particular tangle of holly trees. A meandering wooden bridge, suspended high above a hillside, threaded its way to a house seemingly floating among the treetops. By night, attenuated slivers of illuminated glass confirmed that the place was inhabited. Other odd and seductive homes invited exploration with the hook of a soaring roofline, a breezeway cut through the middle, or a dance of platforms artfully dodging the trees. None looked alike but all seemed to be part of an extended architectural family. I began knocking on doors.

“Who designed this place?”
“Horace Gifford.”
“Who?”

I was a student of modern architects. Why didn't I know this one? In every case, homeowners offered alternately poetic and salacious accounts of the young, handsome, and fiercely talented architect who once had the run of this island.

I was exploring the Pines, one of eighteen coastal communities dotted along the narrow slip of land known as Fire Island, which protects the south shore of Long Island from the Atlantic Ocean, forming the Great South Bay. It is thirty-one miles long, barely a quarter of a mile wide, and rewards the effort of reaching it with car-free boardwalks and expanses of protected dunes. Fire Island Pines—often just called the Pines—is accessible only by ferry or seaplane, and it is hard to imagine a setting more removed from the skyscrapers of Manhattan that loom fifty miles

to the west.⁴ Yet the Pines is very much an urban invention, possessing a rustic-chic aesthetic that only a city dweller could conjure. In fact, the entire island is a place where urbanites of every conceivable stripe have perfected very particular takes on the weekend getaway. As journalist Albert Goldman put it in 1972:

Fire Island appears to be designed by the cunning hand of nature to allow New Yorkers to escape the Melting Pot...Hot Jewish girls rub shoulders with coy gentile fags. Hot faggot queens bump up against chilly Jewish matrons. It's always Forbearance Week in New York City...Like a refracting prism, Fire Island takes your glaring white New York light and bends it into eighteen neatly demarcated bands, ranging from the bright pink of Cherry Grove and the lovely lavender of the Pines to the suburban Dutch Boy of Seaview and Ocean Ridge to the grungy shades of Ocean Beach and Fair Harbor, until the spectrum ends in the sterling-silver, goyim-gray of Saltaire and Point O'Woods.⁵

Soon, I found myself renting a Horace Gifford home in the Pines, a slightly rundown affair that still managed to delight with its clutch of cedar towers that spun around a glass-walled living room. A drafting table and a monogrammed T-square revealed this to have been Gifford's

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

own residence. Yet no one outside of the Pines seemed to know anything about him. How could an architect of such evident appeal have vanished from the collective consciousness? I was feeling rather overlooked myself at the time, and fussing over someone else’s career proved to be an agreeable distraction. Many months of snooping delivered me to the snowy driveway of Edward DiGuardia, a Long Island artist who befriended Horace Gifford in his final years. Edward led me to a garage packed with thousands of drawings, magazine clippings, and slides. Here sat a life’s work, hastily rescued from the bloodless ministrations of estate liquidators during the chaotic nadir of the AIDS epidemic.⁶ That evening, under the flicker of an old-fashioned slide projector, dozens of ingenious homes flashed before me, tucked into lightly settled, utopian dunescapes. I was smitten, and determined to introduce this work to a broader public.

Horace Gifford built his first Fire Island beach house in 1961. As the 1960s became the “sixties,” a remarkable series of beach houses performed a transformation of terrain and culture. Growing up on the beaches of Florida, Gifford forged a deep connection with coastal landscapes. Pairing this well of sensitivity with jazzy improvisations on modernist themes, he perfected a sustainable modernism in cedar and glass, as attuned to natural landscapes as our animal natures. His biography and that of his clients are essential to decoding the work. In rediscovering Gifford’s architecture, I also found a portal to a lost generation, truncated by AIDS and winnowed by the passage of time, but still resonant with artistic and cultural significance.

I learned that Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Diahann Carroll, and Montgomery Clift once spurned Hollywood limos for the rustic charm of Fire Island’s boardwalks. Truman Capote wrote *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* here. Diane von Furstenburg showed off her latest wrap dresses for an audience that included Halston, Giorgio Sant’Angelo, Calvin Klein, and Geoffrey Beene. Jerry Herman’s piano reverberated with the crashing surf. Composer Ned Rorem was moved by the staccato rhythms of the new, modern beach houses “architected by Horace Gifford so that you live simultaneously indoors and out.”⁷ Today, an equivalent talent roster evokes the aloof, gated compounds of the Hamptons or Malibu. But these celebrities lived in modestly scaled homes alongside middle-class vacationers, all with equal access to Fire Island’s natural beauty. For both the famous and the obscure, Gifford turned heads as he strode down the beach from meeting to meeting “wearing a Speedo and carrying an attaché case,” an amused client recalled.⁸

The beach house might seem an unlikely vehicle for social change, but Gifford’s little homes exerted a considerable influence upon their inhabitants. His architecture resisted the creeping acquisitiveness of mid-century America, and his injunctions to clients reflected Gifford’s respect for the inherent fragility of America’s coastlines. Unlike many architects, Gifford attempted to *reduce* the size of his structures. “Sometimes the client’s ideas must be challenged...Usually they can be reduced in cost and size, and still satisfy them.”⁹ In the car-free milieu of Fire Island, he choreographed a ritual of stepping down off of the public boardwalk, physically reconnecting with the landscape, and proceeding through a winding path before entering a home. He resisted fences. He left doors off closets to limit the stockpiling of possessions. He discouraged washers and dryers. He urged clients to tote little baskets of toiletries to the bathroom. He loathed painted surfaces, clipped lawns, and all of the brute force involved in tending a typical suburban home. There was a conspicuous lack of accommodation for televisions. Bedrooms remained small to focus activity within the public spaces. Life in a Gifford home prescribed an artful form of camping.

Some clients balked at Gifford’s enforced simplicity. Others reveled in the generosity of his liberated and libertine spaces. Graciously appointed, open-plan kitchens invited group participation. Interior space passed almost imperceptibly into, or cantilevered thrillingly over, the dunes. Soaring ceilings extracted grandeur out of the smallest footprints. Sleek “piano” hinges eliminated lumpen displays of hardware while keeping doors exceptionally stable in houses that drifted with the sands. Light switches positioned knee-high on the walls minimized their visibility. Grooves between horizontal and vertical surfaces created shadow lines that allowed each plane to float in space. Exposed ceiling joists spun precise and elaborate trceries.

Over time, an element of seduction entered into his work. The majority of his clients were homosexual men, a demographic that came into full visibility for the first time during Gifford’s twenty-year reign as a prolific beach-house architect. These two decades were roughly bisected by the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, the Greenwich Village revolt against pervasive police harassment at gay establishments. Out of this watershed moment, the Gay Pride Movement ascended and social constraints fell away. Gifford’s serene 1960s pavilions provided refuge from a hostile world, while his exuberant post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS masterpieces orchestrated bacchanals of liberation. Sculpted outdoor shower stalls evoked cedar orgasmatrons. Cushions on Gifford’s built-in sofas



OPPOSITE, UPPER LEFT:
Evans-DePass House,
Fire Island Pines, NY,
1965

OPPOSITE, UPPER RIGHT:
Cashel House, Fire
Island Pines, NY, 1969

OPPOSITE, BELOW:
Wittstein-Miller House
II, Fire Island Pines,
NY, 1963

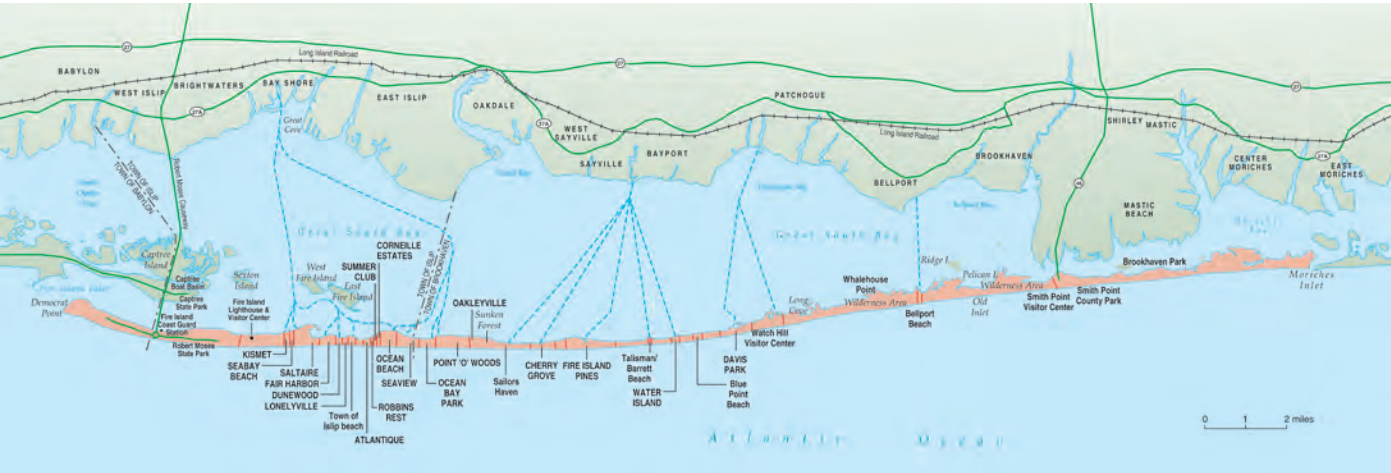
sidled into their adjacent conversation pits to create tailored love nests. In the early 1970s, Gifford carved a sheepskin-lined pit into his own 1965 residence, a fitting surface for a wolf on the prowl. The make-out loft entered the architectural lexicon via Horace Gifford. Such embellishments were of a piece with the broader countercultural currents that ran through his work. Bathrooms that traded mirrors for glass walls invited prurience on occasion, but they also drew the inhabitant's gaze away from himself toward an increasingly threatened nature.

Gifford's grounding in both the natural world and the art of construction buffered him against the more bombastic tendencies of his field. A series of revolutions in taste marked the history of architecture in the twentieth century, and each revolution required the abandonment of all that the previous generation had wrought. Gifford practiced in an evolutionary spirit, transcending an earlier beach-shack vernacular while maintaining the virtue of simplicity. He did not fetishize the notion of originality, and freely borrowed from mentors, colleagues, and the local vernacular on his journey to realizing a unique body of work. Of his beach houses, he required only that "They must excite me" and "Let them look undated in twenty years."¹⁰ It was the agenda of a man with sufficient confidence to be modest.

Living in a Gifford home, as I did, invites certain psychological assumptions about the man who invented it: a light-flooded interior; a

thoughtfully conceived plan; a symbiotic connection to all around it; everything in its place. But the resemblance of the man to his architecture is illusory. Horace Gifford was haunted by specters personal and political. His life followed the operatic arc of repression, liberation, and despair that befell a lost generation. Through it all, he responded with optimistic, forward-looking dwellings that "reach out and grab for light."¹¹ The seventy-eight modern homes that he created between 1961 and 1981, for an audience that would perish before properly recognizing his achievements, constitute a unique contribution to twentieth-century domestic architecture.

Gifford's beach houses are revealing artifacts of their time and place. But they also speak to the perennial notion—dating back to Hadrian's Villa and perhaps before—that crafting a more direct relationship with the natural world will lead to a restorative existence. The fact that this notion, and this architecture, is often sustained by the artificial and acquisitive life of the city remains one of its many paradoxes. But the longing for Eden persists, and the work in these pages bears the mark of a restless search for that illusory place. So perhaps the architecture reveals the man after all. Gifford liked to say that "someday we will learn to live *with* nature instead of living *on* nature."¹² In their simplicity, sustainability, and sensual delight, the beach houses of Horace Gifford ennoble that wish and speak to us today with renewed power and purpose.



BELOW:
Map of Fire Island

OPPOSITE, ABOVE:
Men of the Pines, ca. 1973

OPPOSITE, BELOW:
Men of the Pines, ca. 1977





BEST LOOKING BOY

Chapter One

*Horace affected a quiet vulnerability,
but he was ferociously narcissistic.*
—Robert Berlin



PAGES 20–21:
Horace Gifford at Gifford House under construction, Fire Island Pines, 1961

ABOVE:
Great-grandfather Henry T. Gifford and grandfather Friend Gifford light the channel markers of Vero, FL, ca. 1889, to help steamboats navigate at night.

CENTER:
Nellie Mae Gifford, Horace Gifford's great-aunt, greets her family from Vermont as they arrive, November 1888. The family lived in a self-built log cabin.

BELOW:
Grandfather Friend Gifford helped to lay Vero's nascent railroad.

OPPOSITE, LEFT:
Gifford and younger brother J. Charles, ca. 1935

OPPOSITE, RIGHT:
Gifford as an adolescent, ca. 1946

There is a photograph of Horace Gifford during the construction of his first beach house that, like the man himself, is both revealing and enigmatic. Striding from house to house along the boardwalks of Fire Island, he took hundreds of slides of his projects and the people that built them. Only once did he pause to train the camera on himself. In the background, partially obscured by tree branches, he stands casually dressed, hands in pockets, looking proud but diffident: the young architect staking his claim. As a roofer toils overhead, he appears to gaze straight into the camera. The exact contours of his expression are too far in the distance to be in focus. In this photograph, as in Gifford's work, nature occupies the foreground. Like a lens, the architecture in the middle serves chiefly as a frame of the view beyond. Its upturned roof inscribes the space below with a perfect square. Unshorn tree trunks bear the weight of his creation. A sapling—today a towering presence but then just a trifle—wriggles through the decking, as if to remind us that nature eventually reclaims all that man creates. Leaves blur the top of the frame. Gifford was only twenty-eight years old when he drove his first piling into the lightly settled sands of Fire Island, yet his work already possessed clarity and conviction. How a young man could emerge so fully formed remains somewhat mysterious, but his early life provides some clues.

A child of the Great Depression, Horace Henry Gifford II was born on August 7, 1932, in Vero Beach, Florida, to a family of middling means

but high social standing. His great-grandfather, Henry T. Gifford was a founder of the hamlet of Vero in 1887, having made the trip south from his native Vermont, leaving his wife to join him later. Henry served as Vero's first postmaster, and also illuminated the Beacon Lights, channel markers that enabled steamboats to navigate the shoals by night. These were constructed of three angled pilings, twelve to fourteen feet high, with a lantern set on top that had to be refreshed every other day. Henry's wife, Sara, arrived the next year after a grueling journey that entailed riding a covered wagon to New London, Connecticut, followed by three steamer boats, two trains, and a sailboat. Sara is credited with naming the frontier settlement "Vero," Latin for "to speak the truth."

Henry's son (and Gifford's paternal grandfather, Friend Gifford) carried on the role of postmaster and helped build the nascent railroad before becoming a citrus farmer. He lived long enough to see his grandchildren become adults. It was a self-reliant clan: they hunted their own game, grew their own crops, and built their own homes. "People were rough and one didn't ask too many questions as to why they came here,"¹³ Friend recalled of his fellow pioneers who ventured south to take advantage of affordable land offered by the federal Homestead Act of 1862. Friend married a teacher named Fannie, whose father, N. N. Penny, had distinguished himself as a sea captain and Florida pioneer of ferocious repute. In 1903, Friend and Fannie's son Horace became the first male child born in Vero.





LEFT:
Horace Gifford Sr., right, poses
with friends in front of his sporting
goods store after a duck hunt,
1950s.

RIGHT:
Gifford in a high school yearbook
spread that declared him "Best
Looking Boy"



By the time Horace Junior was born, in 1932, the newly named Vero Beach was no longer a frontier, but it remained a small town of 2,500 people,¹⁴ sprinkled with low-rise wooden structures in a smattering of vernacular styles. On narrower lots, one found "shotgun" houses, so named because they were one-room wide and a gunshot could pass through each room from front to back. Horace had an older half-sister, Jean, who remained his lifelong confidante. His younger brother, J. Charles, was born in 1934. Bookish, quiet, and almost strikingly handsome, Horace was an unlikely namesake for his father. The elder Gifford was an avid sportsman, local politician, and "simple steak and potatoes man,"¹⁵ as his son described him. For twenty years, Horace Senior owned a filling station before becoming a partial owner of the Florida Sporting Goods Company, which supplied the professional baseball teams that practiced nearby in the winter. Young Horace worked in the store, affecting nonchalance in the presence of the celebrity athletes who patronized it. Both parents were educated, however, and encouraged their son to pursue his studies. Sometime in his childhood—perhaps to distinguish him from his father—people began calling Horace Junior "Giff," and the nickname stuck for his entire life.

As a teenager, Giff developed a love of music and theater, acquiring a sizable trove of albums that would rival the book collection in all of his subsequent dwellings. In high school, Giff was an overachiever—class president, coeditor of the yearbook, band officer, president of the student Kiwanis Club, and such a thespian that, according to the yearbook, he could navigate the school theater with his eyes closed. Fellow classmates



voted him “Best Looking Boy.”¹⁶ His uncle Fred Gifford, a respected physician, influenced Giff’s decision to enter the University of Florida at Gainesville as a premed student, but he soon switched to architecture. Younger brother J. Charles resembled Giff in appearance, but the boys shared little else in common and maintained a distant relationship as adults. A football star in high school, Charles became an undertaker and still resides in Vero Beach.¹⁷ The Gifford’s home life was outwardly conventional but strained by the periodic depressions of both parents, a trait passed on to at least two of their three children.¹⁸ Giff found solace in the beautiful beaches and thrilling swamps all around him, where he once stepped on an alligator. His favorite activity was swimming, and he was occasionally joined by porpoises on his long dips in the ocean. He was, as one friend described, “addicted to water,” and an increasingly impressive physique betrayed his passion.¹⁹ During college, he swam laps every day in the Olympic-size pool.

Although Gifford’s undergraduate work has not survived, a classmate recalled an “intense, dedicated, and sensitive student” in thrall to the kinetic facades and minimalist means of the young Paul Rudolph.²⁰ Beginning in the late 1940s, the Kentucky-born Rudolph attracted a following as the author of modernist winter homes along the

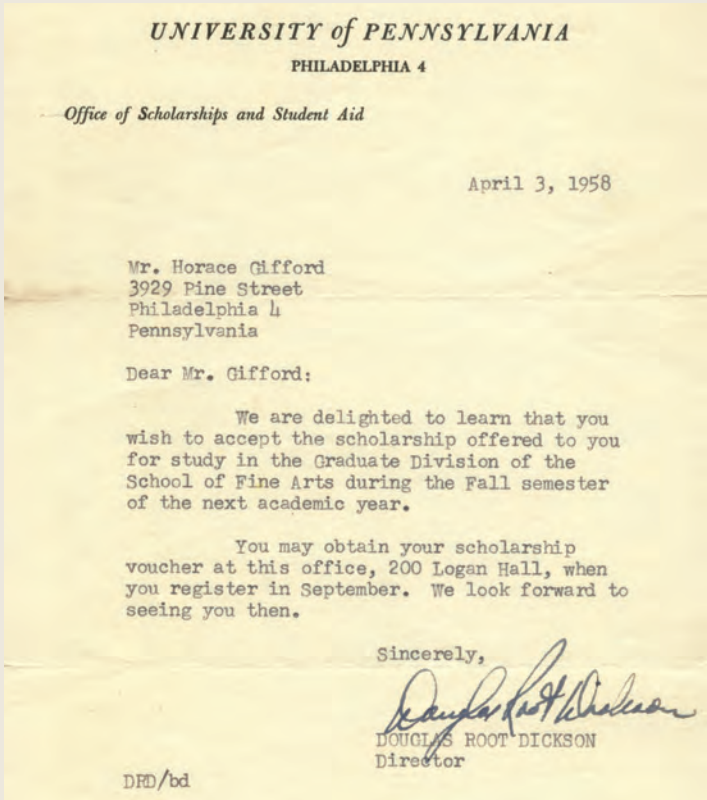
coast of Sarasota, Florida. These homes shared much in common with other International Style dwellings, such as the Case Study Homes in California: modularity and prefabrication, a fluidity between indoor and outdoor spaces, and open floor plans. Rudolph’s designs staked out new ground with movable shading devices and louvered “jalousie” windows that imbued the homes with a climatic dexterity appropriate to the hot and humid coastline. He further distinguished them with innovative materials that he discovered while serving in the U.S. Navy. These theatrical interior spaces were a departure from the sober functionalism of his Harvard training, incorporating sybaritic touches that would later be associated with the bachelor pads that coincided with the sexual revolution. Early in his career, in Florida, Rudolph had realized a compelling, regionally inflected modernism. These light and seemingly impermanent pavilions, set amidst an exotic and unsullied landscape, resonated with the optimistic postwar aspiration for carefree outdoor leisure. Both Rudolph and his business partner Ralph Twitchell lectured at the University of Florida while Horace was a student there. In his Fire Island summer houses, Gifford would effect a plausible transplantation, across the latitudes, of many ideas that informed Sarasota’s winter homes.



ABOVE:
Paul Rudolph and Ralph Twitchell, Finney Guest House, Siesta Key, FL, 1950

LOWER LEFT:
Paul Rudolph and Ralph Twitchell, Cocoon House, Siesta Key, FL, 1950

LOWER RIGHT:
Paul Rudolph, ca. 1950



OPPOSITE, UPPER LEFT:
Louis Kahn, ca. 1965

OPPOSITE, UPPER RIGHT:
**Louis Kahn, Richards Medical Research Building,
Philadelphia, PA, 1957–65**

OPPOSITE, LOWER RIGHT:
**Gifford in a 1955 University of Florida yearbook
portrait**

OPPOSITE, LOWER LEFT:
**Letter to Horace Gifford from the University of
Pennsylvania granting him a scholarship for his
second semester, 1958**

RIGHT:
**Frank Lloyd Wright, Unity Temple, Oak Park, IL,
1905–08**



The university’s free thinkers in matters sexual and otherwise were routed by a McCarthyesque investigation in 1958, and the same political winds soon brought Sarasota’s architectural renaissance to a close. To live his life, and to realize his ambitions, Horace Gifford completed his degree in 1955 and moved to Manhattan. He struggled at first to fulfill his talents, writing to his friend that, “I’m working for a dull architect, making a good salary, but I don’t know for how long.”²⁴ For a time he even flirted with a modeling career. But a new architectural hero reignited Gifford’s single-minded focus. His name was Louis Kahn.

Kahn’s buildings crystallized into mysterious clusters of forms with a hierarchy of “served” and “servant” spaces, one type dedicated to artful inhabitation and the other reserved for services and transitions. Shimmering glass and steel, the twentieth century’s architectural totems, receded in Kahn’s work in favor of stone, concrete, and brick, all powerfully composed with monumentality, geometric rigor, and structural clarity to evoke abstracted ruins. Kahn distinguished himself as a conjurer of poetic and literal gravitas, and students flocked to his lectures and studios at Yale University. In 1957, Paul Rudolph was appointed director of the Yale School of Architecture. As if to mark his territory, one of Rudolph’s first official acts was the “renovation” of Kahn’s celebrated Yale Art Gallery, obscuring its carefully exposed construction details with drywall. Then he forced the resignation of Kahn’s close colleague Josef Albers.²⁵ Yale proved too small to contain the two giants, and Kahn decamped for the University of Pennsylvania. This transpired just as Horace Gifford was accepted for graduate studies at Yale,

and now he had a decision to make. He chose to follow Kahn, and began a one-year master's program at the University of Pennsylvania in the spring of 1958.

Gifford's choice of Kahn over Rudolph marked the first of his catholic oscillations between the sensibilities of two very different icons of modern architecture. Whereas Kahn embraced gravity, Rudolph, and his cantilevers, defied it. If the plan was essential to understanding a Kahn building, the cross-section was the key to understanding a Rudolph. But while having significant differences, they shared a common architectural forebear in Frank Lloyd Wright. Kahn sometimes incorporated the exact dimensions of Wright's interior spaces within his own projects. Rudolph recognized Wright's superiority in matters of interior space and siting. Wright's Larkin Administrative Building and Unity Temple in particular exercised a profound influence upon both Kahn and Rudolph. And this trio of formative figures would situate Gifford's own work within a particularly American strain of modern architecture.

For reasons he never explained, Gifford dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania with a single semester remaining and a scholarship in hand. Kahn exerted a cultish influence over his students, yet Gifford was never a "joiner." It would not be the last time that he made a life-altering decision on impulse. Gifford returned to New York, re-establishing the employment with architect J. Gordon Carr that began shortly after his arrival from Florida. Carr had worked for both Raymond Hood and Raymond Loewy before distinguishing himself as a partner with William Lescaze. Together, he and Lescaze designed high-profile projects such as the Aviation Building at the 1939 World's Fair. By the 1950s, though, the firm was best known for its corporate interiors. Gifford rarely mentioned his employment with Carr. It was a "day job" that afforded him the opportunity to experiment with his own projects and engage in a prolific nightlife that traded on his confidence and his passions for architecture, music, and the theater. Soon, his social wanderings took him fifty miles east to Fire Island Pines, where talent, cunning, and excellent timing conspired to set a career in motion.



ABOVE:
**Aerial photograph of Fire Island,
NY, 1990s**

OPPOSITE:
Horace Gifford, ca. 1960

