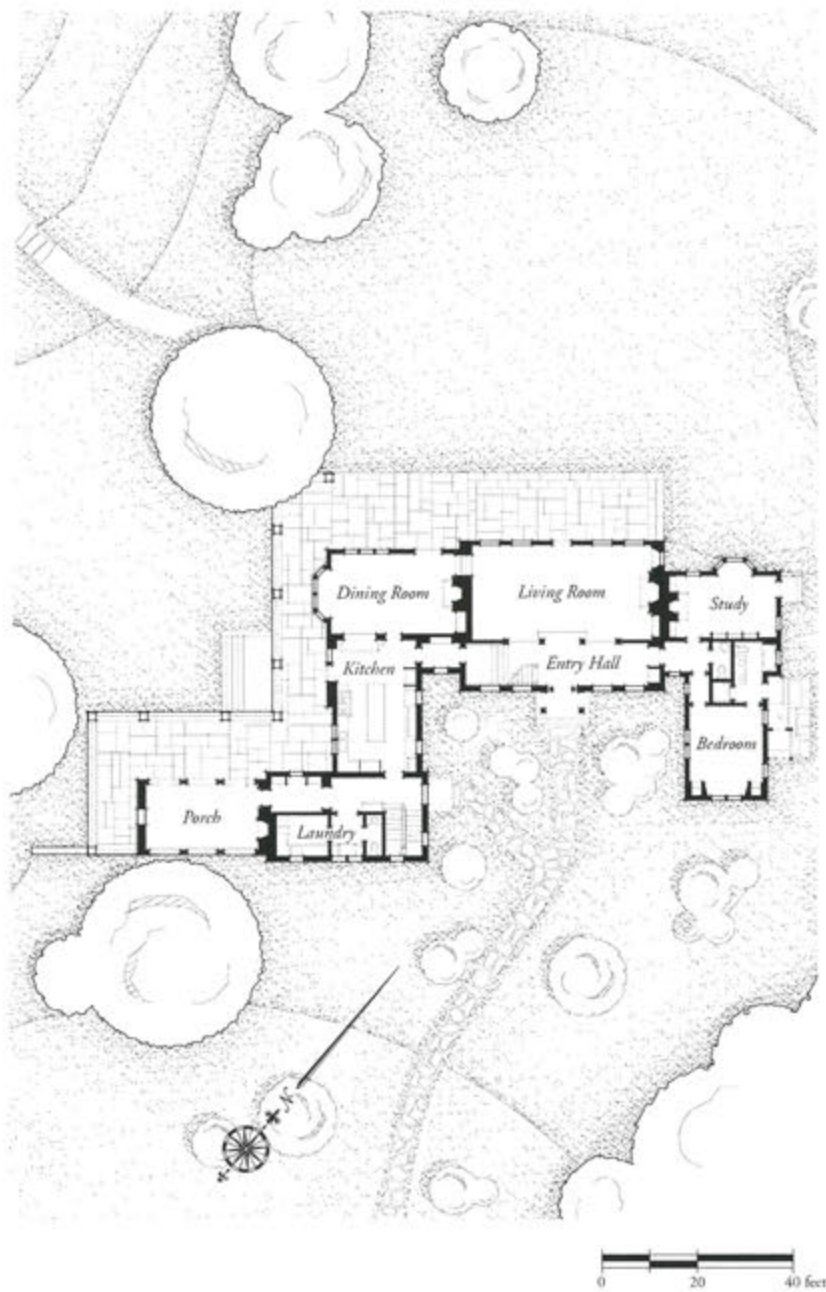




Chilmark, Massachusetts



The commission for a house in a residential enclave of Martha's Vineyard required that the house almost disappear. The community had a set of guidelines that confirmed the architecturally traditional ethos of the island but also imposed additional environmental criteria. Developed in the mid-nineteenth century, the community is dedicated to maintaining the natural order of the wooded landscape overlooking the Vineyard Sound, and the bylaws mandate large parcels of land and small buildings with a low profile that cannot be seen from other parcels.

The architects were replacing a rather dour, flat-roofed 1950s modern house, but on the seven-acre parcel, the new structure could not exceed 5,000 square feet in size and twenty-four feet in height. Owners building a house literally have to stake out the perimeter and the heights of the prospective building to guarantee that it conforms to regulations. In the mid-1800s, when the property was changed from a sheep farm to a residential development, each of the sites had a spike that fixed the position of a house; one spike could not be seen from another.

For a house that should blend in like a chameleon, the architects decided that painted clapboard would stand out on the site, an exposed bluff overlooking the Sound. Shingles and green trim, on the other hand, would merge into the landscape, wood on wood. The modesty of the vernacular, and the limitations imposed by zoning, also suited the program and the clients, who wanted a low-profile house for the low profile they desired. Though stately by historic standards, the 5,000-square-foot house is relatively small given today's tendencies to greater square footages.

The implicit desire of the early Harvard-based American conservationists who set up the 2,000-acre protected development was to obscure the buildings. The value they attached to leaving the landscape undisturbed encourages self-effacing designs with geometries that are pliant rather than rigid. Ferguson & Shamamian decided to break the house down into segments. The massing would be additive and picturesque, as though the house had grown over the decades. Unlike the grander late-nineteenth-century shingle-style houses of New England, with voluminous frames and sweeping porches, this house of modest concatenated segments would relate more in scale and structure to New England saltboxes, their near-architectural cousins.

A five-bay Greek Revival structure was designed as though it might have been the original core structure. Or perhaps the original core structure was the more voluminous barnlike section with the gambrel roof to the left, testifying to an agricultural history. In any event, the two large segments are hyphenated by a minor two-story connection in what finally became a U-shaped configuration when a one-story gabled structure was added on the far side of the Greek Revival core. The architects kept the house down with low eave heights and dormers that allow the low gable roofs to function as bedrooms. The house is really one-and-a-half stories, not a full two. Inside, the architects stepped the living room down from the entry to add height in a house that has a low horizon line because of height restrictions.

Rather than stretching the house grandly across the site, the architects huddled the sections, wrapping them around the yard. Each box in the wagon train around the entry court relates to a room, and the ramble maximizes the perimeter, increasing the exposure of each room to the views. The U-shaped configuration forms a protected microclimate on the lee side of the house, making it into an outdoor room when the more exposed ocean side becomes uncomfortable. The back of the house facing the ocean acts as a windbreaker.

A third-side facade opens to a major, rather hidden asset of the property, a lower lawn that resembles a glade. The L-shaped side facade rests on a base of fieldstone, another material that relates the house to the landscape and to local building traditions. The intent of the design was to lower the house into the landscape rather than to raise it above, and here, again, the architects related the house to the site through the naturalism of the materials and the adaptation of the house to the site's contours. The interior design by Michael Smith further develops the natural ease of the house and the notion that it has existed for generations.

Shingle houses are now so associated with a style that it is easy to forget that historically they have been environmentally sensitive, and that, in the right architectural hands, they confirm a philosophy of organic building. That philosophy fit perfectly into a residential development that has been green for well over one hundred years.



Side yard view to Vineyard Sound over rear terrace



Rear facade



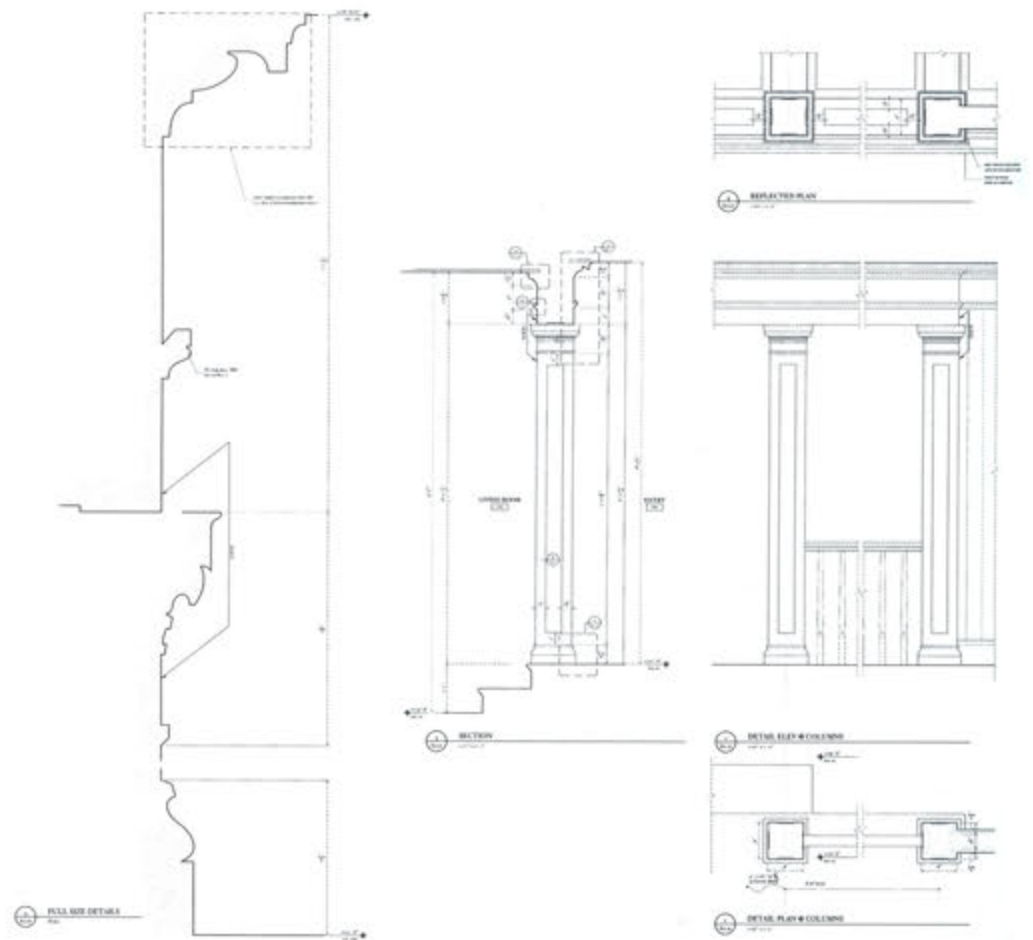
Front porch



Living room

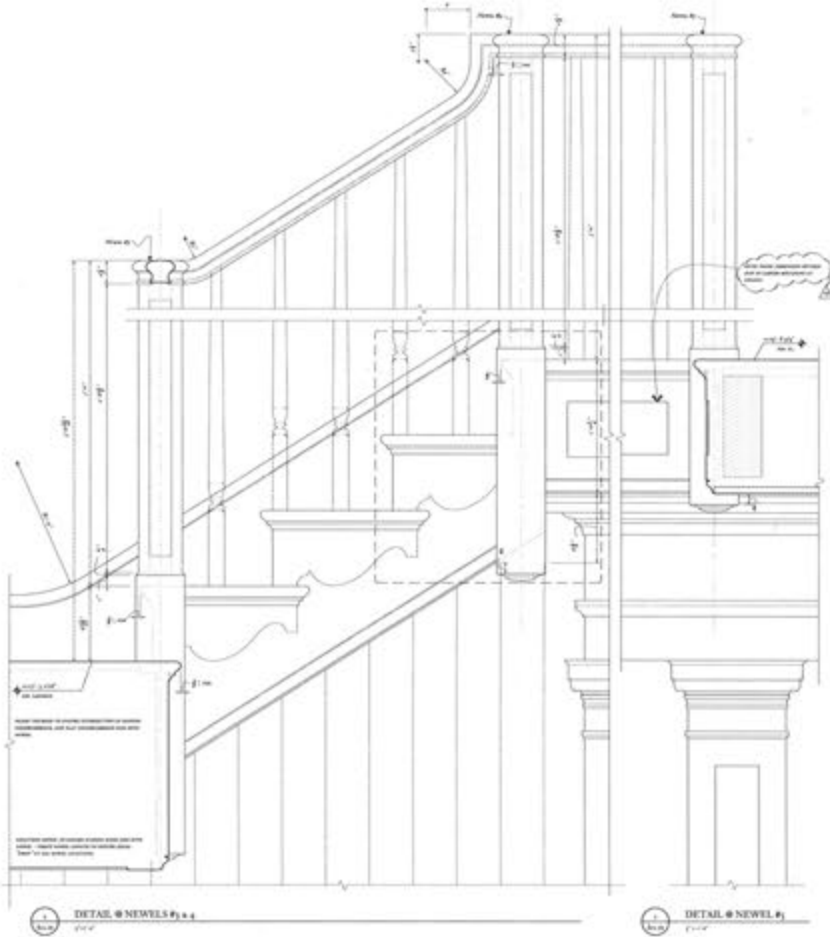


Living room column detail





Entry hall



Stair newel and handrail



Study



Screened porch



Kitchen



Master bedroom



Bedroom