

# RD

RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

FOR ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS  
OF DISTINCTIVE HOMES

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Private Oasis

## Game of Themes



There's a reason why editors choose themes for each issue of their magazines. For our part at RD, we could simply publish beautiful houses each time and call it a day, but I think having a filter to run everything through helps put each house in perspective. As an editor, a theme gives me bearings on what to search for and directs me in what to winnow. If I still really like a project I've had to eliminate, I'll set it aside for a time and see if a new theme emerges for me to develop. The theme for this issue is private oasis, encapsulated perfectly in the cover photograph of Cutler Anderson's House on a Pond.

The themes we pick are broad by intention, because their dynamism comes out of each point of exploration. As you page through the magazine, you'll find most of the features and even our back page follow the theme in direct ways, with large, artfully designed houses on ample parcels of land. It's pretty easy to have a private house when your neighbors are nowhere near you. But it's not impossible to conjure areas of privacy even on tight sites.

One of our featured houses is hard by its neighbors on a busy beach. Yet, its talented architect managed to carve out zones of seclusion and engagement within its small envelope. On the roof deck, there's a sheltered hot tub, immersed in the ocean view but away from prying eyes. This is where the oasis part of our theme plays out. Indeed, an oasis can be something as simple as a bathtub, just out of earshot in a house full of noisy children. It doesn't take much to provide humans with a measure of escape from the worries of the world.

As I write and edit each story, I find waves of our theme continue to wash over me. What about the idea of a private oasis within a private oasis? The Ravine Residence, which begins on page 34, is nearly 9,000 square feet. Its large, bridge-like great room spans a ravine, elevating occupants directly into the best sight lines. Curtain walls everywhere usher the lovely landscape throughout the house. But, guess where the owners' favorite spot is? A small covered deck that backs up to the trees. It's protected and private, but directly dialed into the sounds and sights of nature.

Architect Jill Neubauer, whose firm we profile beginning on page 13, takes the idea of the small sheltered place even further. She designs beautiful new homes and renovations on Cape Cod in Massachusetts, and her projects certainly have many moments of prospect and refuge in their beautiful settings. But she likes to make the experience of the natural world and landscape even more immediate and primal. On her own property and for clients, she's designed something she calls a "glamp"—it's part tent, part cabin, and only lightly protected from the elements. Placed off in the woods or on some quiet corner of the property, it slows life down, redirecting it inward and outward at the same time. A private oasis, indeed.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "S. Claire Conroy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

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# Architecture That Grabs the Heart

JILL NEUBAUER ARCHITECTS  
FALMOUTH, MASS.

Photo: Meredith Hummibel



Above: Jill Neubauer, AIA. Right: Paine's Creek Residence, with gorgeous water views, is in the works.



Rendering: Courtesy Jill Neubauer Architects

**Designing for a living** is different in a small coastal town than it is in the big city, especially if your specialty is residential. There's both more and less of every opportunity. There's a greater variety of smaller jobs, because clients tend to stay with local architects for those; and there's often big-city competition for the marquee vacation home projects. Such is the case in the largely second-home community of Falmouth, Mass., which is also the gateway to Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Jill Neubauer, AIA, has lived and practiced in Cape Cod for more than two decades, and she has a portfolio of smart, problem-solving projects to show for it. However, in the last decade or so, while those city-slicker architects were snooz-

ing, her firm has also added a roster of lustrous new homes to its collection. It's clear those vacation home clients are catching on to the homegrown talent at their doorsteps.

"We're like the town doctor here, and it's an important role," Jill says. "We don't have a singular aesthetic. We're all over the map with what comes in the door—we'll show up for that work and enjoy doing what's important to other people." And that means luxurious second homes for the weekend community and small, life-changing jobs for the resident scientists and everyday folk. It also means lots of renovation work to wonderful, old, troubled houses. No matter what the job, Jill and her firm aim to bring a little heart and

soul into the work, to add the kinds of features and special delights that make a place memorable for years and generations to come.

"Right now, we're working on a new modern, all-white house on a creek that's going to be one of my favorites. It's all glass and simple, with views all around. At the same time, we're working on an old house, trying to fit in a new shelf," she says. "I love the fact that we're doing all of this at the same time." Sometimes that new shelf makes all the difference in someone's enjoyment of a house—the small conveniences, the subtle transformations.

Jill was awakened to the power of small details as a child growing up in Wisconsin. A favorite memory is of

repeated visits to her grandparents' humble lake house over the years. And every day, it informs how she designs for the largely vacation community on the Cape and how she designs for herself and her family. "I'm absolutely driven by the sentiment, and how peo-

"How are we going to make it so... the kids come back year after year?"

—Jill Neubauer, AIA

ple live in these homes," she explains. "My maternal grandparents had this magnificent, tiny log cabin. It was so aesthetic and so beautiful. And I hold that in the cells of my body—what that smelled like, coming back year after year. It was so simple, but so visually rich and warm. And that repetition year after year was an important part of the experience. When I'm helping people on

a second home, I think about, 'where is that richness and how are we going to make it so when the kids come back year after year, they have that sense of anticipation and excitement?' Everything revolves around making it so these houses grab your heart."

This particular kind of heart surgery has nothing to do with imposing stylistic interventions, and everything to do with intentional design. "In every project, I'm trying to build a bench or a nook, like the one in my grandma's house," says Jill. "Those pieces—it doesn't matter if it's a modern space or a traditional space—they're what help make a house a destination."

### Lucky Pines

In Jill's work, place is as important as space, and that's why, when she designed and built her own family's house in the late 1990s, she chose an especially poetic site—4.5 acres of pine woodland on a kettle-hole pond that recalled her grandparents' Wisconsin property. "The land grabbed me because it was

like northern Wisconsin. I already had a story to begin with because of the site I'd chosen," she says. But there were other filters at play as well, including her Masters in Architecture from Harvard Graduate School of Design and her marriage to a landscape architect. "You take that log cabin and run it through architecture school, and what you get is a log cabin crossed with a warehouse," she quips. "I'm still there and I love it, I just wish it were more warehouse than log cabin at this point."

"Growing up in Wisconsin, Frank Lloyd Wright was a huge influence—how his houses reached out into the landscape and made it space," she says. "And, of course having been married to a landscape architect for 25 years." From the start, Lucky Pines took its cues from the vegetation and colors of the site. Its three stories are supported by structural columns made from mature pine trees—their bark peeled, but the imperfections of lost branches left intact. Contrasting modern and rustic elements are everywhere—the shed roof,

Photos: Meredith Hunnibell



Left and below: Although Cataumet Cottage retains the basic footprint and organization of the 1970s existing house, everything about it is refreshed and enlivened. The new boys' bunk room is the heart-grabber.





Above and right: The Buzzards Bay Residence harnesses a handicap of the site (a stand of trees in conservation) and makes them an important leitmotif of the design—on the exterior and interior.

steel beams and other exposed structure inside, smooth plaster walls, metal windows, and a metal garage door that opens the dining room to the garden.

Jill has added on to the project over the years, albeit more lightly and always with a master plan in mind. A barn for the horses has an oak timber frame infilled with pine and cedar, but also polycarbonate, so the animals and those tending them benefit from natural light. There's a chicken coop, a workshop, a tree house, and a storage shed with a guest room above it. Together, they create outdoor rooms and private spaces to enjoy the refuge of the woods or the prospect of the pond.

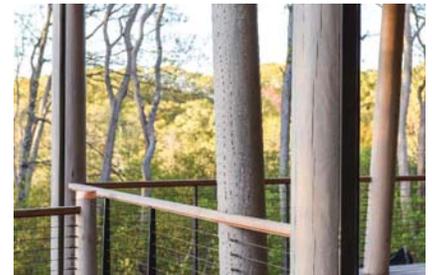
Even 20 years later, Lucky Pines is a nexus of invention for the architect. It's here she developed her particular brand of "glamp"—a structure that's part tent and part cabin. It's the runaway space everyone craves, immersed in nature, permeable to the sights and sounds that quiet and exalt us.

### Ranch Dressing

The small towns of Cape Cod swell to capacity during the summer season, and that puts a burden on housing. It's the time of year everyone thinks about expanding their house to squeeze in extra guests and family. Jill thinks her glamps can help lighten the load, as they did for the Cataumet Cottage Renovation.

The project required all manner of interventions to make it livable and lovable, but none of them could add much square footage. Still, it was the firm's task to make the little '70s box a family's dream come true. "Our client had grown up summering here. Now a young couple, they were very happy to be able to buy a small place, where they and their little boys could be close to family and part of a very wonderful community," she recalls. "But it was a dog of a house—so sad and icky. It was mildewy, with standing water in the basement.

"We went back to the bones of it, and we did a little addition that allowed



us to make a neat bunk room for the boys. The organization is basically the same and the house is still small, but we now have three nice bedrooms, a sitting/sleeping area, and better access to the kitchen. And we suppressed the deck, so the railings aren't blocking the view anymore. There's an openness and easiness to the house, and it isn't hard for them to take care of."

The modesty of her description is readily apparent when you see before and after photos of the house. The renovation is a complete transformation, from a dull and lifeless box to a fresh, lively, and lovely family home. Those small memorable details are there in spades. The boys' bunk room is a spot



Left: Truro Beach House marked a perfect alignment of clients, site, and budget. The house has geothermal heating and cooling, a residential wind turbine, and solar panels. But view, site, and architecture are the memory-makers.

Photo: Durston Saylor

they'll dream of when they're back at their primary house. While half the couple knew Cape Cod intimately, the other half is from the Midwest where a different set of associations spell home. "That's why we grabbed that Nebraska snow fencing and used it on the walls," says Jill.

The boys will also miss their very own glamp when summer comes to a close. Theirs is located in the woods, a stone's throw and a world away from the main house. "We furnish them with bean bags and rugs. They become an outpost room," Jill explains. "We'd like to do even more of these rooms, because they really help take the summer pressure off the house and they do so inexpensively. It can cost \$100,000 to do an extra bedroom here."

The boys' glamp is made of a special canvas the firm sources from

Denver and is free of toxins, an aspect Jill scrutinizes in all the materials she specifies. Healthy materials, energy efficient design, and responsibly sourced products are givens on every project, whether or not the clients ask for them. "I come from a family where we lean into social consciousness. And, for the most part, our clients also want to be leaders in this way," she says. "When you're building a new second home, you can build a better box and you should. Our evolution was in looking at the components. If we're building a better box that conserves energy and is really tight, why are we still putting in these toxins? And why contribute to deforestation, when we can use FSC materials? It became these tiers, and at the center is the sweet spot—and that's the client. I get to bring my clients along on this journey."

### Story Core

What never gets lost on the journey is the story line. The dialogue between story and site was the topic of her Master's thesis, and that conversational thread continues through every project the firm takes on—large job or small, old house or new. The narrative builds from the clients, their history, the place, the community.

For the recently completed Buzzards Bay Residence, what began as a story of anger and angst became an important leitmotif in the design. The clients, who had a longtime vacation home in Falmouth, bought the property next door, planning to build a new modern home for themselves and pass the existing home on to their children. Then, they learned a grove of spindly, crooked trees that blocked a view of the bay for the new house is protected.

“Those trees drove them crazy,” says Jill. “But they’re in conservation. So, I took those trees and abstracted them, and brought them into the new house. Where they’re structural, they’re straight; otherwise, we have them leaning and filtering views within the house, just as they filter the views of the bay. I thought, let’s make the forest their own.” Thus, a source of pain became a pleasure, and a happy ending to that particular story.

There are new chapters ahead in the ongoing story of the firm—a variety of handsome custom homes are in the works, juggled with those small transformative renovations, and added to the mix is an exciting foray into affordable housing. In conjunction with the Housing NOW Partnership, the firm entered a local competition to redevelop a property in the community. “The original building the developer had proposed was cruel to anyone who had to look at it or live in it,” Jill recalls. “It was time to show up and lean in. And that began a journey for me of attending public hearings and speaking up as an advocate for architecture. We can’t subject people to buildings with no internal or external dignity. It’s a matter of aesthetic justice.”

The firm’s design was a finalist, but Jill retained the rights to it and is exploring its development into a viable kit of affordable components—for one-bedroom, two-bedroom, and work-space units, plus add-on accessory dwelling units. The components could expand the space and scope of the dwelling over time as the owners’ needs change, not unlike Jill’s Lucky



Photo: Meredith Hunnibell



Rendering: Jill Neubauer Architects

Top and above left: Jill’s own house, on a 4.5-acre site overlooking a pond, is a laboratory for her evolving ideas about design. Her “glamp” structures are part tent, part cabin, and all immersion in the natural landscape. Above right: Jill is exploring a kit of parts for much-needed affordable housing.

Pines compound, but with less expensive panelized construction, perhaps. She’s exploring the possibilities with Unity Home’s factory-built process. “Working on this has been a nice shift from just doing homes for individuals,” she says.

Also on tap is a possible expansion of the firm’s reach into Vermont. “I just love it up there—I’m really more of a mountains and snow person,” she adds. Currently, her office in Falmouth is an 1800s antique barn. It’s an open, bustling working environment of 12 people. “We all sit in one space together. We work in teams collaboratively based on the size of the project. I do

everything by hand, and I’m involved in the design of every project and client relationship. It’s a friendly but rigorous environment. Still, family and life come first, job comes second. People have flexibility and freedom to show up for their kids’ stuff. I’ve lived that way, and I want them to be able to do it, too.”

You can’t grab other people’s hearts with your work if you don’t allow yours to lead from time to time. Says Jill, “I feel incredibly fortunate to be part of this community—to have their support and to support them. It’s a great place and a great time to be a residential architect.”

—S. Claire Conroy