

RD

RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

FOR ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS
OF DISTINCTIVE HOMES

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Higher Order





Beinfeld Residence

ROWAYTON, CONN.
BEINFELD ARCHITECTURE

One of the realities of living in an affluent coastal community is that people fiercely protect their view of the water. If you're a good neighbor, as architect Bruce Beinfeld is, you bend over backward to keep the peace. Built in 2016, his slip of a house on a tidal estuary called Farm Creek became a reality after two years in political limbo. Not only is it a fine case study in compromise, it's a model for how to build an attractive house that absorbs the impact of major weather events.

Bruce had been a resident of Rowayton, a section of Norwalk, for decades when the half-acre lot on a 500-foot-

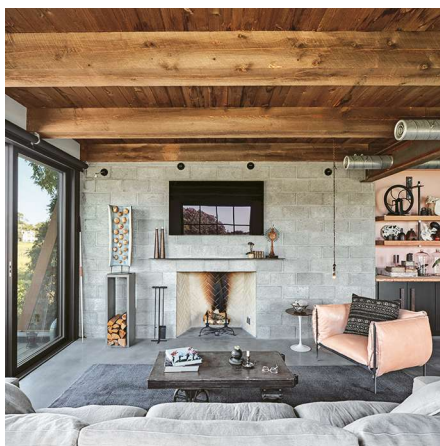


long peninsula came up for sale in 2013. The buildings he designed in the town's commercial center between 1985 and 2010 were well-received, including a market, barber shop, hardware store, several condos along the river, and the building that houses both banks. His role in revitalizing the town helped earn him entry into the AIA College of Fellows in 2010.

This spit of land had a 1949 cottage at the tip and was part of a trolley line that carried passengers over a trestle bridge to an amusement park at Roton Point. Bruce proposed a two-and-a-half-story house on stilts, 17 feet wide, that would sit toward the far end of peninsula, which itself is just fifty feet at its widest point. The backlash was swift and unexpected—driven, Bruce says, by people who did not want to see a house where none had been before, but primarily by a neighbor couple who had adopted the property as part of their backyard. “As far as they were concerned, it was their yard,” he says. “They were very successful in convincing other people that it constituted a major environmental crisis. That was far from the truth, but it was



Opposite: The house, which is 75 feet long, is organized into five 15-foot zones. The ipe X-bracing isn't critical but, says Bruce, the house feels good with it there. Just 12.5 feet wide, the footprint preserves the public's views of the estuary from the road.



This page: Ductwork and structure is revealed and employed to define rooms and functions. “There is no applied detail to the house,” says Bruce.

a way of getting people to come out and stop something they and a few others didn’t want to see happen.”

Things got ugly, and long story short, Bruce backed down, offering to sell the land to the Norwalk Land Trust, which owns preserved land around Farm Creek. But then that deal fell through, the neighbor moved to California, and he won approval in 2015 by moving the proposed house as close to the road as setback would allow, preserving the views for others.

It was a relief, of course, but a chapter he’d just as soon forget. “I didn’t like being vilified at all, whether for legitimate reasons or not,” he says. “I thought I’d go out of my way to do as sensitive a design as possible.”

Paying Homage

If sensitivity to the neighbors drove the house’s design, so did its vulnerable perch in a flood zone. Assuming the area will be subject to rising sea levels and worsening storms, Bruce raised the main part of the house 15 feet above sea level on concrete piers—two feet higher than FEMA requires. The attached ground-level garage was built with reinforced concrete up to the base flood elevation. Vents in the concrete allow floodwaters to enter the garage, equalizing the water pressure so it doesn’t crush the structure from the outside.

Thinking about those neighbors, Bruce devised a tall and slightly whimsical, barn-like house whose narrow front facade—just 12.5 feet across—



maintains cherished views of the estuary from the road. In fact, his substitution of low-growing tidal grasses for an existing tall hedge further opened up the vista.

Seventy-five feet long, the house is organized into five 15-foot-long zones with a 9-by-7.5-foot window centered on each section. The expansive windows should be able to ride out any storms, thanks to roll-up storm shutters hidden behind the cross-bracing that allow the house to be closed up like a box. The oversized ipe X's between the bays play a minor role in bracing for the house and echo the old trolley trestle over the channel (the pilings are all that remain).

“The diagonal braces are sources of wonder because they make everyone think about what they do—people do ask,” he says. “Architecturally, they change the scale of the exterior. I studied a number of different options. Every time I drew the X’s, they felt good.” Intrigued by the apparatuses of old industrial buildings, he also designed the metal connectors that read as decorative accents.

This page: Bruce chose materials that would show wear and change over time—copper, salvaged barn woods, weathered steel—to add warmth and character to the house.





Inside, the five zones define a richly layered series of spaces: foyer/stair hall, fir-plywood-wrapped service pod (laundry, powder room, mechanicals, pantry), kitchen, dining room, and living room. Bruce left the structural system of wood framing and mechanical ductwork exposed “to define major rooms rather than using walls and applied molding. There is no applied detail in the house; everything is integral to the base elements that make the house,” he says.

Bruce might be a modernist, but his house is no machine for living. Recycled materials and live finishes lend an organic warmth to the space, his way of infusing it with character. “One of the things people respond to negatively in modern houses is that far too often they have a certain rigidity and lack warmth,” Bruce says. The radiant-heated concrete floors feel warm underfoot, and



This page: The master bedroom captures a sweeping view of the water; its reflection echoes in the mirrors of the master vanity.

copper was used liberally on counters and backsplashes. “Every time you put a glass down on the copper it changes, so the finish is constantly evolving and almost has its own moods,” he says.

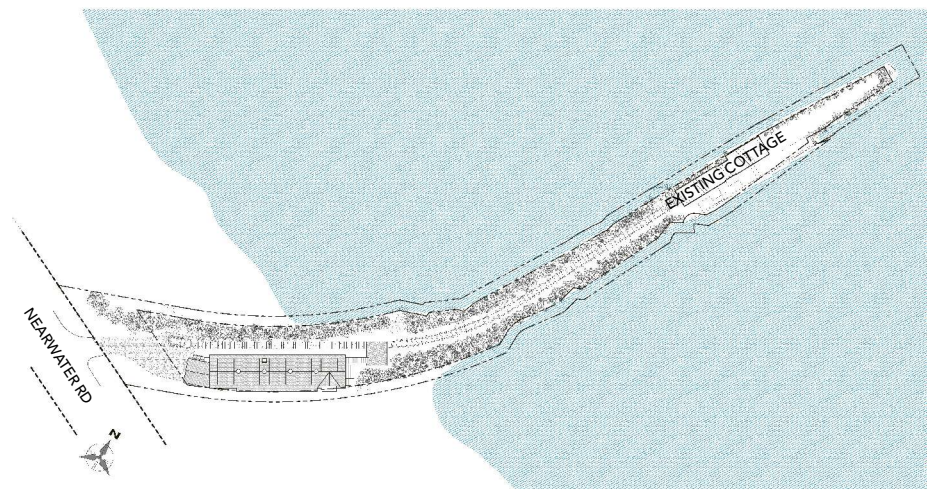
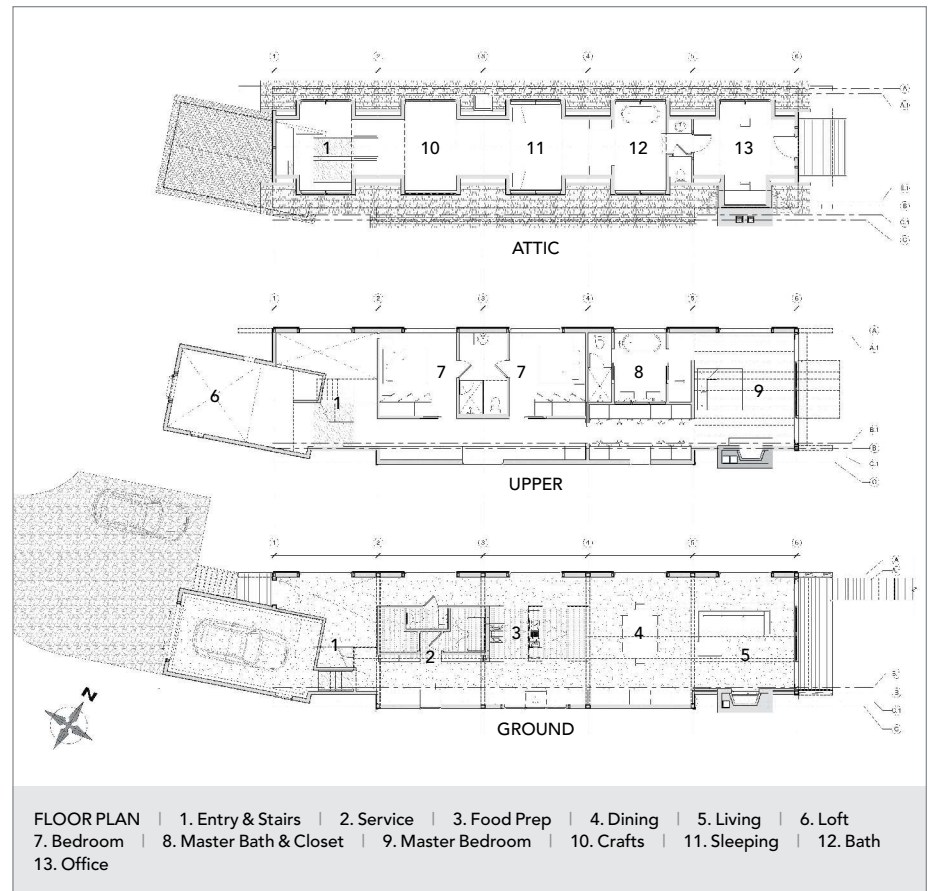
The second story contains three bedrooms, two baths, and an inviting library over garage, while the attic is a cozy studio for his wife, who is a watercolorist, collage artist, and avid collector.

“I thought I’d go out of my way to do as sensitive a design as possible.”

—Bruce Beinfeld

“Attics are always places you want to explore; they contain the mystery of former lives,” the architect says. “That’s where everyone puts stuff they don’t want to throw away but have no place for in their homes and it collects there, year after year. We wanted this space to be endowed with that kind of emotional content.” The flooring is Hungarian wagon board—a highly weathered oak, and on the walls is “brown board,” wood from the interior of old barns. “New England attics are often unfinished spaces, and the old recycled wood evokes those feelings,” he says.

From the outside, the house looks like it could have predated the residential community around it. True to its agrarian form, the exterior is clad in wood from an old Pennsylvania barn, and the front façade retains some of the red paint that’s more than 100 years old. The property’s remnant trolley track was cleverly repurposed, too, as a path from the house to the old cottage, now used as a studio and guest room. The back patio and walkway along the side of the house are made from slabs of salvaged granite curbing from Olde New England Granite.



SITE PLAN





Natural Resilience

Bruce had a lot of fun with the landscape, too, inspired by a picture of Dutch landscape architect Piet Oudolf's Nantucket garden and design for New York City's High Line. With their salt and drought tolerance and deep root systems, native grasses such as Northwind switchback, big bluestem, and feather reed grass stabilize the creek bank and filter out pollutants such as lawn fertilizers. And each plant variety supports different birds and animals with its seeds, nuts, fruits, and shelter—which makes for lively entertainment.

"One of the great attributes of living on a tidal estuary is that the bird life is very rich," Bruce says. "There are always ducks and osprey, seagulls and egrets, and a great blue heron is out there. They're almost part of the family because you start to recognize specific birds and get to watch them going through their daily rituals of fishing."

Perhaps most important, now that the house is built, the comments have been only positive. "I think a lot of people are very pleased that the house didn't protrude any further into the tidal estuary than it needed to," he says. "I think the house is well-loved in the community."
—Cheryl Weber



Opposite: Bruce was inspired by New York City's High Line for the landscaping around the house. Top left and above: Interiors are rich and layered, no more so than the studio for Bruce's wife, which evokes an attic full of family curios and collections.

Beinfeld Residence

Rowayton, Conn.

ARCHITECT: Bruce Beinfeld, FAIA, Beinfeld Architecture, Rowayton, Conn.

BUILDER: Art Ruffles & Ray Donohue, RDC Construction, Stamford, Conn.

INTERIOR DESIGNER: Carol Beinfeld

LANDSCAPE DESIGNER: Bruce Beinfeld

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Jacobson Structures, Deep River, Conn.

PROJECT SIZE: 3,500 square feet

SITE SIZE: .54 acre

PHOTOGRAPHY: Robert Benson

KEY PRODUCTS

CABINERY: Ultra Craft

RANGE: Wolf

DISHWASHER: Asko

REFRIGERATOR: Sub-Zero

KITCHEN FAUCETS: Vola and Watermarks

TOILETS: DXV

FRONT DOOR HARDWARE: Tom Kundig collection

DOOR HARDWARE: Emtek

WOOD STOVE: Wittus

WINDOW WALL SYSTEMS: LaCantina Doors