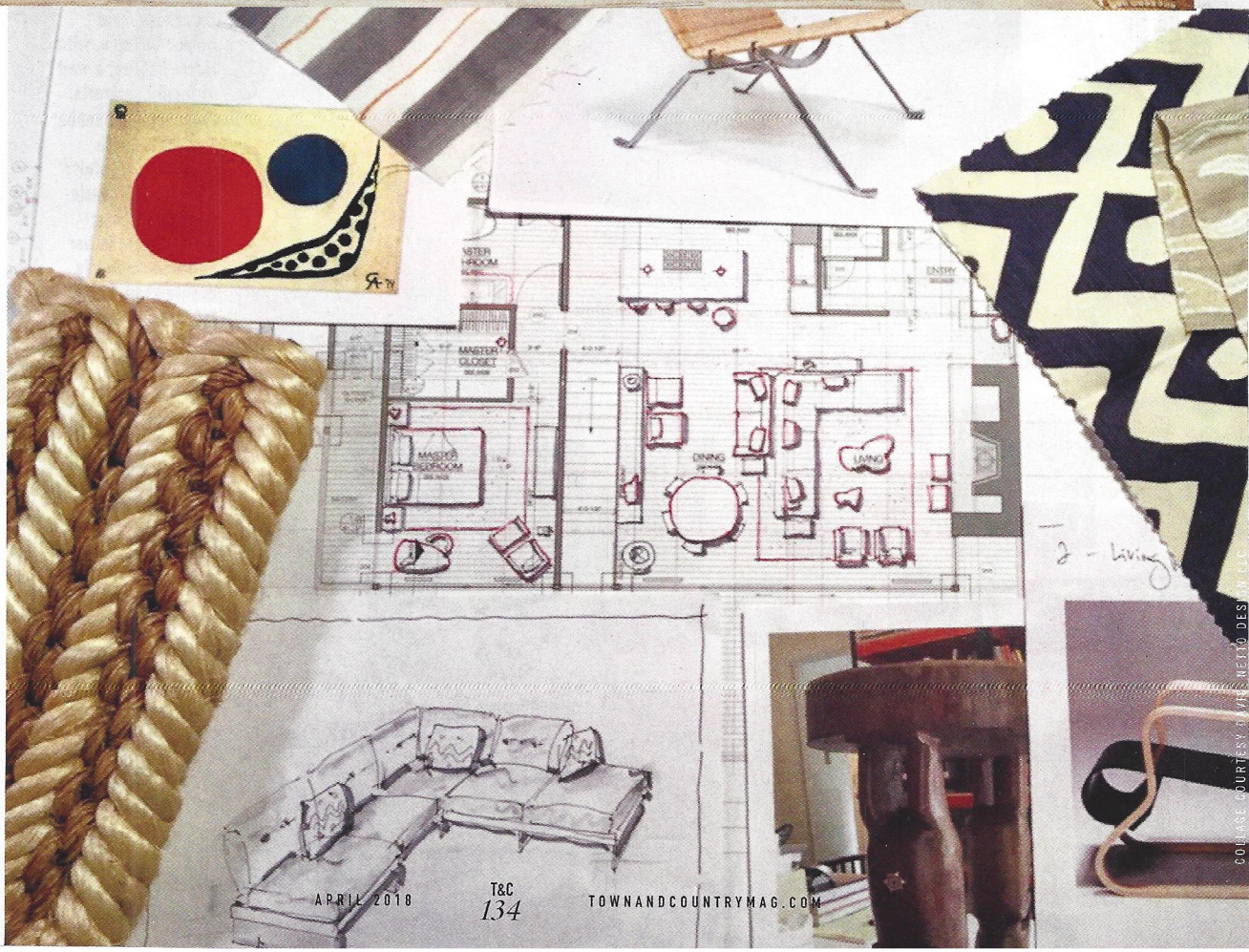




MASTER PLAN

In the upstairs living space, Design Within Reach tractor stools and a leather Le Corbusier sofa by Cassina. The tapestry is by Alexander Calder. *Opposite:* Designer David Netto. The pillows are covered in batik fabric by his godfather Alan Campbell; the coffee table is by Wendell Castle. *Right:* Netto's ideas and swatches.



OPEN DIALOGUE

A MODERN ARCHITECT'S

VISION, A YOUNG COUPLE'S *REALITY*, AND THE DECORATOR IN THE MIDDLE OF IT ALL.



By David Netto

Photographs by Gieves Anderson

To very loosely paraphrase Winston Churchill, this is the lesson: Never, never, never settle for a boring house. Respect the box, but never let modernism harden into a doctrine that stops people from being comfortable or from living the way they want to. It may be the architect's mission to create a crisp, minimal envelope, but it is the decorator's job to find ways to add mood and sensuality, even through illusion. This is because many clients have modern taste, but most of them don't really want to live in an architectural manifesto.

This project came into my life as a house already very beautifully designed by Michael Lomont, of Stelle Lomont Rouhani Architects. Michael is a modernist with a very ➡➡➡



CLEAN LINES
Who doesn't love to shower on plein air? The deck, which has a layout mirroring the living room's, features furniture by Richard Schultz from Design Within Reach. *Left:* The print over the Poul Kjaerholm chair is by Ellsworth Kelly.



➡ sure hand, but like many architects it seemed he sometimes wished that a hole would open up in the floor and swallow the decorator. This is a familiar situation for me, especially when working on modern projects, but it did make for some crisp exchanges, and to this day he has never told me whether he actually likes how the house turned out. I like his house. He may or may not like our house—but I knew the way the owners wanted to live, and, convictions aside, for that to happen it had to become their house.

The client was a soft-spoken young finance executive from Vermont who does not wear his success on his sleeve. His fiancée, who also worked in finance, was from Tennessee. From the first lunch she both enchanted and intimidated me, as she sometimes does him. We also shared the quick connection that people who love the same part of the world enjoy. Our passion for the beauty and quiet of Amagansett was apparent right away, in particular for the stretch along the shore known as Bluff Road, where the tree line goes down and opens up views of the ocean. For years I rented a house here, and now I drive along it several times a day going to

The illusions—the weird, improbable-sounding claims I had made about the power of certain design gestures to transform things—had worked. That is what a good decorator can add to even the strictest minimalist architecture.

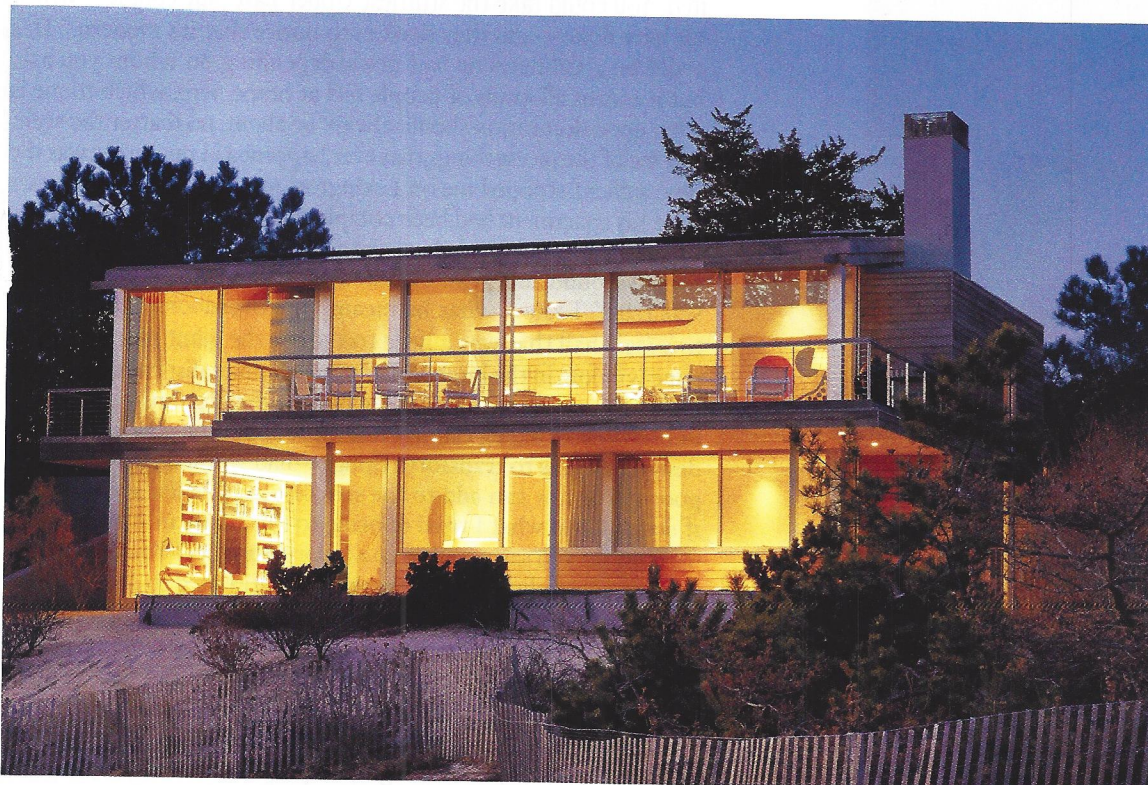
and from my own. The well-known East Hampton builder Ben Krupinski once counseled me, “If you ever get the chance to buy anything on that road, do it.” My client had done what I had not.

Bluff Road has not been McMansioned. It has a ruggedness that was always hard to find in the Hamptons and is now next to impossible. It has a direct view of the beach where, in June 1942, a German submarine disgorged a group of Nazi saboteurs (who then walked to the village train station, caught an early one into New York City, and set about trying, unsuccessfully, to blow up the Hell Gate Bridge). In short: natural beauty, history, water views, and, best of all, that incredible slice of horizon where sea meets sky.

The house was sleek and logical, what we call out here an “upside-down house” (living room and master bedroom upstairs to take advantage of the view). The natural wood exterior blended nicely into the dunescape. (I have often suggested we stain the house black to add a little drama, and everyone politely looks at their shoes.) Architectural tightness and simplicity were in hand, enough so that I felt we should actually go a bit backward.

The first thing needed was some complexity in the furniture plan. The big living room really had to function as three rooms: living room, dining room, and library. You can do this without walls, deploying rugs and islands of furniture to diagram the way a big space is used. You can also do it with lighting. I felt this living room needed a little mystery, the sense that you didn’t understand at a glance all the places you could sit.

Such promises are easy to make on paper—take the “library,” which is really just a low bookshelf with a seating group next to it. But people do treat it like a room. I know this because I asked the owners recently what they liked about the house, and to my delight came this answer: “The library really gets used. When I’m cooking, it’s in between the dining table and the kitchen, and ➡



GOOD AS GOLD
Glass walls make for a dramatic nighttime view, courtesy of architect Michael Lomont and builder John Hummel & Associates.

BELOW DECK

The Zanotta sofa and Beauvais Carpets rug in the media room give way, through sliding barn doors, to the popular bunkroom, capacity four. *Below:* The table and chairs in the dining area are by Poul Kjaerholm. The lamp is by John Boone, and the wood sculpture is by California artist J.B. Blunk.

➡ people love to congregate there.”

The spatial trick that I think adds most to the success of the house was a response to a challenge: how to make the media room downstairs as desirable as the living room upstairs. Let's face it: It has a TV, and a TV is the best way to make anybody go into any room. But it didn't have light. It didn't have a fireplace. It didn't have a sea view. What it could have were books and richer, brighter colors that would distract from its shortcomings. Michael's elegant staircase, with its open risers that transmit light from the top of the house, leads down to it, and I felt that wherever that staircase went had to be no less good than the upstairs. The visual clue that tells you to descend is a big Richard Serra hung halfway between the upper and lower levels.

The other subtle visual trick is the horizontal lines and stripes that occur in almost every room. The rugs, the scoring of the



paneled wall in the master bedroom, the throw pillows are all part of an internal theme that refers to that strong horizon outside—the thing this place is really about. It may not be something you're conscious of, but you do feel it. Which is a very modern gesture, I think. I once lived in a Richard Neutra house in California, and that taught me to find ways of inviting the natural world inside.

“The house is very warm,” the owner tells me. “It feels inhabited. You could take the stuffiest Upper East Side couple—which we have done—and they don't even notice that it's modern.” This could be good news or bad news, depending on whom you ask, but it means all kinds of people feel at home here, which to me is what good decoration should always be about, no matter the style.

One of the nicest things that ever happened in my career was the time a client stopped me on Lexington Avenue to say hello, years after his apartment had been completed. We exchanged greetings, and after we had moved on and were almost out of earshot he turned around and, grinning, shouted, “Everything you said to me was true!” I knew what he meant. The overdoors *did* add scale to a stair hall that was a little too small; the giant modern single pane window in the kitchen *had* made a minimalist canvas out of a view of a brick wall. He was saying that the illusions—the weird, improbable-sounding claims I had made about the power of certain design gestures to transform things—had worked. That is what a good decorator can add to the strictest minimalist architecture, if desired, and what I tried to bring to this house in Amagansett.

How do you say goodbye to a favorite project? You don't really have to, especially if you live nearby. (Neutra used to drop in years later, unannounced, to houses he had designed.) I don't push my luck that far, but sometimes when I come across an image of a black house I'll e-mail it to these clients, with whom I have stayed close. He and his now-wife (the success of the house was not the reason for the marriage, but it didn't hurt) are scrupulously polite and always answer e-mails right away—but never those. «



ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN



SKY BOX
The upstairs master bedroom has a Cassina leather bed, Schweitzer linens, Atelier de Troupe sconces, and a birch veneer wall. More of Netto's materials are below.

