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A Most Unusual Beach House

Stonewater Architecture + Interiors masterfully maximizes space
in this new home construction in Neponsit, New York

Story by Anastasia Storer | Photography by Raquel Langworthy



Stonewater's unique home design maximizes the space on this lot by building up, not out. The garage is tucked beneath the home as part of its basement, with two stories plus finished attic space, giving this home plenty of square footage.



Most people don't think of New York City when they hear the words "beach home." So when these clients came to Stonewater Architecture + Interiors and said they had a lot in Queens where they wanted to build a beach house, principal Michael Moritz did a bit of a double-take. "It's not something you hear every day," Michael says. "A beach house in Queens?"

Rockaway Peninsula: New York City's Beachfront

The clients' lot turned out to be located in the beautiful Neponsit neighborhood on the southwestern portion of Rockaway peninsula, the thin strip of land that forms the southern border of Jamaica Bay. The west side of Neponsit borders Jacob Riis Park, which only adds to the neighborhood's feeling of tranquility and the sensation of having left the city behind.

Despite its proximity to some of New York's most urban areas as well as to both LaGuardia and JFK airports, the neighborhood has a relaxed, mellow vibe—exactly what you'd expect from a beach community. Neponsit is where New Yorkers come when they desire a more serene, quiet home life, away from the 24-hour bustle of the city. Indeed, Neponsit is zoned solely residential, and the locals cherish its peacefulness and privacy; a ban on street parking exists throughout the summer months, preventing the neighborhood and public beach from becoming crowded by beach lovers visiting from outside Rockaway.

The Neponsit lot was not without some interesting challenges. Fortunately, the clients chose Stonewater as their architect, and Michael was more than up for the job, excited by the possibilities he saw in the property.

From Building Blocks to Building Homes

Michael has been building homes since he was a boy. "I've always had an interest in and love for architecture. My preschool teacher told my parents I was always monopolizing the building blocks, and it just kept on going from there. I started watching *This Old House* in the third grade. I'll never forget—my mother made me do my spelling homework before I could watch the show. I still can't spell, but I know everything there is to know about building architecture," he says with a laugh.

Stonewater began at Michael's kitchen table. "I



started the business eight years ago. I'd worked for other firms, but was ready to strike out on my own," he explains. "I did my first project's design sketches while watching my infant son, since my wife was a teacher. My son even came with me to jobsites in the early days of the business."

Stonewater has come a long way since then, growing into a firm that has won awards, including an AIA Silver Medal for one of Michael's custom home designs. Through it all, Michael has always chosen his clients and projects with an eye towards creating unique, beautiful homes. "I don't take on work just to be busy," he says. "I only go after clients who want to do great architecture with a modern, distinctive style that is unique. I start with the idea our clients bring with them, and from there I create that sense of space that I love so much about architecture."

Michael's design focus is always on shaping space, using his expertise to create that special, undeniable sense of "home" for his clients. "The right client for me is the one who wants a home, not a showcase house," he says. "If the client sits in a house I've designed and it feels like home and not cold and lonely, I call it a success."

The Art of Beautiful Deception

Michael's inspiration for a project often comes in his early design sketches, which he does on paper—perhaps unusual in these days of high-tech software that generates computer drawings. "I strongly believe in sketching as I'm thinking about a design," explains Michael. "I'm unusual in

that my mind is easily able to envision three-dimensional space from drawings. I don't need a computer model to see what the home will look like, so I can play with floor plans and space very quickly with just a simple sketch."

For this home, the clients wanted the classical feel of the Cape Cod shingle style, and also asked for something less sought-after these days with the open floor plan becoming more popular—a clearer separation of space. With these requirements in mind, Michael got to work. "When I design, I start with the clients' ideas and go from there," he says. "I think not just about space, but about the flow of the home, what sight lines I want, the direction of the sun as it moves across the property, and how the light will come through the windows. Here, the clients really wanted their living spaces separate. They wanted a lot of natural light and to be able to see through the spaces without having an open floor plan with no walls. So I designed the living room and dining room to be back-to-back, and then tucked the kitchen off to the side of the dining room."

Perhaps the greatest challenge of this project was the fact that the lot is situated on a floodplain. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, new regulations were enacted that made it trickier to design the new home for the property. "I was designing the house as they were changing all the rules," explains Michael. "It definitely made the design process interesting, as we had to make sure we were meeting all the new guidelines as they came out."



The home office space has its own bathroom and, when not needed for work, can be opened up to become part of the living room, providing a quiet and more intimate conversation area in front of the fireplace.



Plate-glass windows bring natural light into the living room. Architectural beams add subtle visual interest without distracting the eye from the views outside. The small office space can be closed off from the main living room by a sliding glass-paned door.



Michael decided to elevate the house to protect it against future flooding, and that space isn't wasted: the bottom level of the home contains the garage and basement. But elevating the home did present aesthetic issues that had to be contended with. "We had to make sure the house didn't look like it was sitting on a pedestal and detract from the neighborhood appeal," Michael says. "We wanted to make sure the house fit with the existing homes surrounding it."

The solution was the clever use of landscaping to mask the elevation. Artful placement of large shrubs and trees hide the lower wall as well as the exterior stairs that lead up from the ground level to the front door. It

The dining area has a small wet bar and wine storage area that can also act as a coffee or serving station when entertaining.



The master bedroom overlooks the front yard, with vaulted ceilings and a covered balcony perfect for enjoying an evening glass of wine and quiet contemplation.





The backyard has both an open deck and a covered patio area beneath. The upper deck provides a lovely space for entertaining, while the covered patio is a more casual space that also offers storage for bicycles and beach gear.

The arched covered balcony above is shared by the two smaller bedrooms of the home, each with its own entrance to the space. The finished attic space is used as a game room.



works beautifully: the garage almost vanishes unless one is standing directly in front of the property, and the choice of cable railing means no undue attention is drawn to the patio area at the front of the home. The house seems to almost float above the ground. And elevating the home didn't just make it flood-safe; it also allowed Michael to create a design that gave the house views it wouldn't have had otherwise. Both the back and front of the home are designed to "peek" around the house next door to provide views of the ocean.

Another interesting aspect of this project was that the land parcel was an infill lot, so it was slightly smaller than the more typical lots found in the neighborhood. What do you do when your clients want to fit a large home on a small lot? You build up. What is astonishing is that this home is much larger than it seems. From all outward appearances, it's two-and-a-half stories, but in reality the home has four floors: the basement garage, two main floors and a fully finished attic space that contains a TV/game room for the clients' two daughters.

Michael's mastery over space is almost magical: the master bedroom suite features a small covered balcony and a master bath that boasts two walk-in closets and an extra-large shower; the second floor's two additional bedrooms each have their own walk-in closets and individual full baths (thus preventing any arguments between the daughters about whose turn it is to use the bathroom!); and the floor plan enables the two bedrooms to share the covered balcony area that overlooks the backyard. These are just some of the beautiful, unique touches Michael added to the design to make the home truly unique.

Inside and out, space is maximized to its fullest extent. The backyard features a deck area and a fully covered space beneath the deck, perfect for relaxing in the shade on a hot day, and with plenty of room to store bicycles and beach gear.

Michael's expert touch can be seen in the many little details in the home: the small balconies of the second floor in both front and back, the graceful curves added to the roofline and along the attic window, the copper gutters and downspouts, and the choice of rich, warm mahogany for the front entrance. Instead of a simple concrete patio in the backyard, he created a patio space with visually intriguing angular pavers that fit like puzzle pieces with the grass. To echo the feeling of the beach at the front of the home, he chose an acid-washed driveway with round stones to provide a sandy, pebbled look. In addition, all the wood flooring in the home was milled from reclaimed beams from another project.

Every aspect of the home received the same exquisite attention to detail in Michael's design, something the clients appreciate when they sit on their front porch with their morning coffee to watch the sun rise over the ocean. Stonewater Architecture + Interiors has given the homeowners a beach house where treasured family memories will be made for years to come.

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