



Contributors

William Morgan: Martha's Vineyard a showplace for new domestic architecture

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MARTHA'S VINEYARD is one of the great places in New England. Besides glorious beaches and picturesque towns, this 100-square-mile island packs in a lot of varied and dramatic scenery. Its moorlands are as hauntingly beautiful as anything this side of Scotland.

The island landscape supported small farms for most of the 18th and 19th centuries, although whaling fortunes built mansions in Vineyard Haven and Edgartown. The Methodist camp meetings at Oak Bluffs brought summer visitors, but not resort development. In the 1960s modern architects sought out the remote parts of the island to build modest houses that echoed the local vernacular, but they respected the wildness of the land.

Conservation and zoning restrictions have limited development and protected much of the island's special topography (although the Wampanoags dream of their own casino). Yet the Vineyard's romantic allure and restricted nature makes it more desirable, contributing to its celebrity status.

Exclusivity and lots of money, however, can be good for high-end domestic architecture. It is difficult to build on the Vineyard, it is incredibly expensive, and there's a competitiveness to create the very best. So new houses here merit national attention.

The Houses of Martha's Vineyard, a book by Boston architect Keith Moskow (Monacelli Press), presents two-dozen recent houses that have "creatively responded to the Vineyard's varied landscape." This sumptuous look at some very private second homes for the very rich or the very creative comes with a thoughtful review of outstanding contemporary vacation architecture.

The current generation of architects -- some famous, some not, from New York, Boston, Chicago, and the Vineyard itself-- have built "a concentration of distinctive houses" rivaled only by the Hamptons, Moskow argues.

And unlike the conspicuous consumption found on eastern Long Island, the Vineyard has elicited a special stewardship about its landscape. Even so, there is quite a range between Yale architecture dean Robert A.M. Stern's Shingle Style exercise of 1983 and Moskow's own house for his parents completed last year, both in rural Chilmark.

Given the socio-economic level of most of the patrons, it is not surprising that some of these vacation getaways are over the top. The largest, Pond House, is 15,000 square feet of mannered and fussy details borrowed in part from the Gothic cottages of Oak Bluffs. Centerbrook, the firm that designed the award-winning addition to the Unitarian Church on Benefit Street in Providence, offers the only vulgar house in Moskow's survey.

The board-and-batten style of the Methodist campground pops up in several other houses, including Jeremiah Eck's too-cute garage-sized knock-off. Yet the Gothic arches and modest cottage idea serves a number of local architects well, while Chicago architect Margaret McCurry's attached a whimsical lighthouse to her design.

Martha's Vineyard's history permeates the best new design. The usual response to the past is to clothe buildings in cedar shingles, a humble but extremely flexible building material. Shingles give larger houses like that by R.M. Kliment and Frances Halsband (Brown University's new master planner) a cozier, more domestic feel. James Polshek, another New York architect and designer of the Clinton Presidential Library, creates a compound employing

plain-shingled boxes that could be mistaken for early farm buildings.

Even the more avant-garde designers seem comfortable with cedar. Yet, despite the thoughtful use of the vernacular, the notable new Vineyard houses are those where the architects were willing to take some risks.

The house designed near Menemsha by California architects Fernau, Hartman de-constructs a traditional island plan and reassembles its forms with jarring angles. But the ubiquitous shingles almost disguise the house's radicalism; it is traditional and edgy at the same time.

Kalkin & Co.'s Gay Head House, of 1989, is the most far-out house in the book. A combination steel warehouse and New England barn, this Aquinnah house seems an interloper, a rude piece of architecture designed to upset older habits.

Keith Moskow's weekend cottage, Arbor House, is also conceptual. The architect uses grape vines, like those described by the island's discoverer in 1602, to frame an outdoor court, while fish-scale roof shingles make reference to Wampanoag fishermen.

Literary allusions also inform the house that Steven Holl designed at Aquinnah in 1984. Holl (one of the runners-up for the addition at the Rhode Island School of Design addition) quotes from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, recalling how the Indians used a beached whale skeleton as a frame for a skin-covered dwelling. An inside-out balloon frame, echoing Herman Melville's great bones, forms the natural gray wood house.

One small island, as these new houses demonstrate, can be a powerful incubator of good design. But given that 100,000 people will swarm over Martha's Vineyard this summer, architecture mavens might see more by reading Keith Moskow's book.

William Morgan is a Providence-based architectural historian. His next book, *The Cape Cod Cottage*, will be published next spring by Abrams.