

ON LOCATION

The Long-Term Beach House

Carrying forward a family tradition of summering at the shore with a new chapter — and a new house — in Montauk, N.Y.



By Tim McKeough

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Growing up near Buffalo, N.Y., Jonathan Yellen cherished his family’s annual pilgrimage to the beach. “We’d throw everybody into the station wagon, drive out to Cape Cod, stay in a little two- or three-bedroom cottage a block from the beach, have a phenomenal time and come back sunburned a couple weeks later,” he said. “That’s a really resonant memory for me.”

It was a tradition that Mr. Yellen — who is now 51 and lives in Dallas with his wife, Marianna, 42, and daughters Olivia, 13, and Natalie, 11 — was intent on continuing.

“When Marianna and I got together, one of our early conversations about hopes and dreams was about being able to have something like that for our kids,” he said. “It’s important to me, and she totally got it.”

As a successful lawyer, he had the resources to go one step further and build his own beach house. The question was where.

So every summer for several years, the family went on what Mr. Yellen called “an annual shopping spree” — renting in various places to audition different beaches. “We did Cape Cod, Kiawah, Nantucket, La Jolla and East Hampton,” he said.

It was Montauk that won them over. “I don’t think there’s a nicer beach in the United States,” he said, adding that they were also taken with the easygoing vibe. “Montauk is very real.”

During a visit in 2015, they bought a termite-ravaged 1960s cottage a block from the beach for \$975,000, with plans to tear it down and build anew. Then Mr. Yellen contacted Katherine Chia, a schoolmate from Amherst College who had become an architect and co-founded the New York firm Desai Chia Architecture. Although he and Ms. Chia hadn’t spoken in decades, Mr. Yellen had seen her work online and was impressed.



The living-and-dining area opens to the outdoors with an enormous sliding glass door. It is furnished with Pumpkin armchairs by Pierre Paulin for Ligne Roset (from \$2,300 each), a Shattered coffee table by Brent Comber (about \$3,200) and Scighera sofas by Piero Lissoni for Cassina. Eric Striffler for The New York Times

The Yellens drew up a long list of things they wanted in their house: low-maintenance materials, privacy from the street, separate studies, an oversized kitchen where they could entertain without bumping into guests, a shading strategy to reduce sudden changes in light (Ms. Yellen has a sensitivity that can cause headaches), a space the children could call their own, and an overall sense of peace.

The architects came back with a proposal that satisfied those requests in part by taking inspiration from the artists James Turrell, Ellsworth Kelly and Louise Nevelson. “The James Turrell references were really about Marianna’s sensitivity to light, and thinking about how to modulate the light,” Ms. Chia said. “With Ellsworth Kelly and Louise Nevelson, it was about chiaroscuro, and this back and forth in the facade, with dense areas versus airy moments.”

Mr. Yellen was delighted by the conceptual approach. “They kept us from getting overly suburban or conventional,” he said.

The final design was for a four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bathroom house built to the maximum size allowed on the lot — 2,950 square feet — with outdoor living space on patios and decks that would make it feel larger.

The lower level of the house, which is cast-concrete, has three bedrooms and a family room that are largely the domain of the children. The upper level is clad in shou-sugi-ban boards, inside and out, for the look of wood that has weathered with age. Tough, end-grain wood floors and Caesarstone counters in the kitchen are intended to be worry-free, no matter how much sand is dragged inside or tomato sauce is spilled.



The architects designed a large kitchen using worry-free materials like end-grain wood flooring and Caesarstone counters. Eric Striffler for The New York Times

Upstairs, the master suite and studies are in the back of the house, with the living room, dining area and kitchen at the front, looking out over wetlands through floor-to-ceiling, sliding glass doors that open onto a covered deck. “It’s almost like a treehouse experience, where you’re up in the branches,” Ms. Chia said.

To save energy, windows and a central stairwell were designed to take advantage of natural ventilation, and the roof is equipped with a solar array large enough to power the house. Aran Construction began building the house in January 2017 and finished last October, at a cost of about \$2.5 million.

The Yellens spent all of this past summer there — walking the beach, practicing yoga and watching Olivia become an avid surfer — and they plan to continue using the house throughout the year.

“This is a long-term family house,” Mr. Yellen said. “We can grow older in it, and be in other places as well, but for those critical times of the year” — like Thanksgiving, which they are looking forward to — “it will draw our family together. That’s part of the cleverness of the design.”

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