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HOME +

DESIGN



An aerial photograph of a modern, multi-level house with a prominent zinc roof, situated on a lush, green hillside. The house features large glass windows and is surrounded by dense trees and a winding path. In the background, the ocean stretches to the horizon under a clear sky. The overall scene is serene and scenic.

a
cinematic
sweep

A pair of filmmakers enlisted a dream team of designers to build a showstopping second home on Long Island's North Fork.

by FRED BERNSTEIN Photographs by IWAN BAAN

The zinc-roofed house fronts Long Island Sound.

“IN

the summer we wear sunglasses to dinner,” says Dana Ben-Ari of her house 100 miles east of New York City. With walls of floor-to-ceiling glass, the house she shares with her husband, Nikola Duravcevic, and their three children is flooded with light when the sun sets over Long Island Sound.

But she’s not complaining. Experiencing nature—not shutting it out—is the *raison d’être* of the house, says Ben-Ari, a documentary filmmaker. The site, on the North Fork of Long Island, is hilly and wooded, unusual for a waterfront property. To appreciate the full sweep of the land, the couple set the building far back on the site, creating a view that is equally compelling in foreground and background.

Duravcevic fled his native Yugoslavia in 1991 to avoid being drafted by the Serbs and arrived in the U.S. as a refugee. He and Ben-Ari, who was born in Israel, met as students at Queens College, in an accounting class. “As immigrants, our parents all

thought we needed some practical skills,” he says. After graduation, he became an asset manager, which he calls a “15-year detour” from his true love, making movies. In fact, the couple can’t talk about the house without comparing it to a film.

It took four years for Duravcevic and Ben-Ari to decide where exactly on the 20-acre site to build. Then they had to decide what to build there. The couple, who spend weekdays in a Brooklyn brownstone, knew they wanted a house on one level. “Brooklyn is a vertical experience. We wanted a different feeling here,” says Duravcevic. And though they knew they wanted a contemporary house, they didn’t want a simple glass box. “We’re petrified of sterility,” he says. Ben-Ari adds, “We were afraid of getting a house without character.”

What they got, thanks to New York architects Jing Liu and Florian Idenburg, of the firm SO-IL, and Carl Shenton, is a group of rectangular volumes with steeply pitched zinc roofs,



Opposite: The exterior of the house, including the porch.
Right: The patio, paved with granite slabs; the covered walkway surrounding all sides of the house has outdoor furniture from Hay. Below: The oak Jean-Michel Frank dining room table is from Ecart; the Fluorescent Tube Light is by Castor.



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arranged in a cruciform plan. Each wing serves a different function: kitchen, living room, master bedroom, kids’ rooms. Because the house sits on a slope, the quadrants have different relationships to the land. One room seems to float above the property, while another nestles into it. That produces a range of experiences, from cave-like to nearly airborne.

From the outside, the house’s most prominent features are its unusual stainless-steel walls and a series of connected porches. Duravcevic calls the porches the *engawa*, using the Japanese term for a space that links inside and out. Two sections of the *engawa*, where the living and kitchen areas meet, are sheltered by a curving, cantilevered roof, which provides protection from the elements and breaks up the otherwise angular composition.

To Duravcevic, the house is spiritual but unassuming. Spiritual because its plan derives from the San Biagio church near Montepulciano, Italy, a Renaissance masterpiece with a cross-shaped interior that “blew our minds” when he and his wife visited.



Left: Two-inch-thick granite slabs surrounded by perennials lead to the foyer. Above: Nikola Duravcevic collaborated with his brother, Aleksandar, on the design of the double-sided fireplace in the living room; the Pryce nylon rug is by Patterson Flynn Martin.



Unassuming because it’s meant to recall the traditional metal barns of eastern Long Island. Of the architects’ concept he says, “The brilliant thing on their part was coming up with a design that combined those two inspirations.”

SO-IL’s Idenburg and Liu, who founded their firm in 2008, have become well known as designers of cultural buildings, including the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis in California and the tents for the Frieze Art Fair in New York. They often create innovative surfaces, stretching chain link over a building, for example, or employing glass tubes for a façade. But they’ve never built a house from the ground up. That lack of experience appealed to Duravcevic, because he thought that they “wouldn’t play it safe; they wouldn’t be afraid to make a statement.” He was also friends with Idenburg and Liu before he asked them to design the house, and he was determined that they remain friends. So he added to the team Carl Shenton, who

has completed nearly a dozen houses and, Duravcevic says, is “incredibly detail oriented.”

And there was no shortage of details to consider. Duravcevic wanted the house to be designed on a module for aesthetic consistency (and for ease of fabricating parts). Specifically, all of the room dimensions were multiples of 5½ feet. But after the plans were finalized, he decided to shrink the module by about 5 percent, to 5¼ feet, to make the house more intimate. The change meant Shenton had to reconsider every detail, a process that delayed construction by six months. But rather than become frustrated by the difficulty of the design and construction process, Duravcevic, who grew up in a 400-square-foot apartment back in Yugoslavia, seemed almost to revel in it.

Among all the complicated features, one of his favorites is the stainless steel lattice outside the living room; it helps define the *engawa* while carefully framing views of the property and



Above: The master bedroom features a marble tub by Vaselli and a steel Nyx bed by Zanotta.

Below: The west-facing porch has a stainless steel lattice wall and views of Long Island Sound.



the water. It weighs about 10,000 pounds, and Duravcevic says that “if you removed one bar the whole thing would collapse.” A metal fabricator spent six months creating and installing it.

Duravcevic also has no regrets about the year it took to build the fireplace, which is made of precast concrete blocks with fluting that suggest a classical column unspooled. SO-IL presented dozens of ideas, from which the couple selected a double-sided version that would also serve as a room divider. Then Duravcevic’s brother, artist Aleksandar Duravcevic, designed the skin of the fireplace, which Nikola calls “an homage to the Yugoslavian concrete utopia of our childhood. It’s a Brutalist-inspired decomposed Doric column cast in cement.” Shenton did the construction drawings; Brooklyn’s Essex Works, the fabrication.

Finding a way to support the curved portion of the zinc roof was also ambitious. The beam that undergirds the wood rafters below the roof is so complex, Duravcevic says, “there are maybe three companies in the U.S. that could have made it.”

Though Duravcevic calls the house modest, it certainly isn’t small, with around 4,000 square feet on the main level. Paraphrasing an observation by director Robert Bresson about filmmaking, he says houses live or die three times: in the designing, in the building, and in the living. The designing and the building are done, but the living is still a work in progress. “We’re not the kind of people who can hire an interior decorator and ask him to have it ready by Memorial Day,” says Duravcevic.

The couple did bring in designer Adam Charlap Hyman of the firm Charlap Hyman & Herrero to help them; his contributions include the basement’s womb-like screening room. And they had the master curtain maker Erik Bruce create the drapes that make sunglasses unnecessary in some of the rooms. (Bruce gave the linen drapes a frayed bottom to complement elements like the terrazzo-style concrete floors, a balance of raw and refined.)

And yet there’s still more to be done. To make the house more energy efficient, Duravcevic plans to install solar panels on the roof of the separate garage. He shows off a rendering of a large aluminum credenza for the library/dining room (at the center of

the cross) that is being made by Jonathan Nesci of Columbus, Indiana. Other custom pieces are also in the pipeline.

Even decisions already made aren’t necessarily final. “We’re on our second dining table,” Duravcevic says, his tone suggesting that there could well be a third. Meanwhile, landscaper Patrick Cullina, the former head of horticulture for Manhattan’s High Line, has added more than 15,000 perennial plants around the grounds. And there’s talk of a pool, and what’s a pool without a pool house?

Duravcevic isn’t in a hurry. “We decided we would take our time,” he says. “It’s like making a film. You have to sit with your ideas.” And hopefully enjoy the view from where you’re sitting. □



The porch’s roof is supported by the lattice wall; an opening frames the view.