

DOWN TO EARTH

DESIGNER ROBERT STILIN CREATES AN EAST HAMPTON HOUSE FOR HIMSELF AND HIS SON THAT'S GROUNDED IN LOCAL TRADITIONS YET FULL OF INVENTIVE TOUCHES

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Facing page: Designer Robert Stilin outside the East Hampton, New York, house he designed in collaboration with architect Frank Greenwald. This page: Two paintings by Graham Gillmore, *I Think I Can*, *I Thought I Could* and *Too Good To Be Truf*, hang in the living room; the stools are vintage Hans Wegner, the French '40s leather armchair and vintage Arne Jacobsen Egg chair are from R.E. Steele Antiques, and the Art Deco rug is from F.J. Hakimian. See Resources.



THE FIRST TIME interior designer Robert Stilin built a house for himself in supposedly bucolic East Hampton, New York, its plethora of windows ensured that the house was full of light—but also nonstop traffic noise. So when another opportunity to build arose (by chance, right next door), Stilin came up with an unexpected way to achieve his goal of a relatively soundproof house: He buried it.

The street façade of Stilin's new digs is partly concealed by a cunning earthwork. Imagine a swath of grassy ground that gently rises and swells against the building like a green snowdrift, a berm that leaves little more than a picturesque peaked roof visible to passersby and muffles the unwelcome roar from the nearby Montauk Highway. "If you want a quiet house, the trick is to have no windows on the road," says Stilin, who lives there year-round and so knows that the traffic is a constant.

Although burial may sound a trifle extreme—after all, double-glazed windows might have done the trick—Stilin quickly points out that the apparent

eccentricity of the design, conceived in collaboration with traditionalist architect Frank Greenwald, was actually inspired by old-fashioned potato barns, relics of the not-too-distant days when this fertile stretch of Long Island was a major spud producer. "I have always loved potato barns, which are often sunk into the ground," he says. "And houses should reflect the local landscape and environment."

And it's not as if the entire house is subterranean. The rear of the two-story L-shaped building resembles a rambling neo-Arts and Crafts farmhouse clad in cedar shingles, punctuated by multipaned windows, and wrapped around a courtyard, a sunny terrace, and a swimming pool.

Farm buildings inspired the stylistic spark and the earthy materials—wood, bluestone, stucco, painted metal—but Stilin's house can hardly be described as rough-and-ready. Call it Modern Rustic, as one design-savvy guest did. "I wanted it clean, crisp, and classic," says the designer, a man who likes to juxtapose dynamic contemporary art (the dining



In the dining room, a photograph by Frank Thiel, *Stadt 1/07 (Berlin)*, is juxtaposed with a 1960s Borge Mogensen chair and a vintage American metal light fixture from Scott Estepp. Facing page, from top: Vintage maps of Long Island from Nellie's of Amagansett and an oak-and-metal bench from R.E. Steele Antiques. The cedar-shingled façade of the house was inspired by the region's potato barns. See Resources.



room is dominated by a wall-size Frank Thiel photograph of a Berlin construction site) with crisp cottons and linens and gutsy old furniture. He'll also throw in accessories like a 1960s Børge Mogensen wing chair in the dining room and a 1940s Swedish flat-weave rug in a guest room, not to mention soulful oddments such as vintage maps of Long Island and a 1920s English industrial lamp.

It's the sort of broad-shouldered, fuss-free mix that works especially well when your housemate is an active ten-year-old like Dylan, the designer's son, whose personal taste runs more to electronic keyboards and computer games. "I like the very simple and very strong, whatever the provenance," says Stilin, who collaborated on East Coast projects for L.A. celebrity decorator Waldo Fernandez before striking out on his own. "I wouldn't buy a Thonet chair simply because it's a Thonet chair; I'd buy it because I like the texture and the materials."

That same practical, instinctual approach determined the house's layout. The main floor is geared for communal living: With pegs for jackets and a handsome Swedish chest, the entrance hall is actually a mudroom in stylish disguise; the big and sunny dining room, kitchen, and living room all flow into each other for maximum ease and utility. A guest room is just a pair of French doors away. The overall effect is open, casual, and briskly all-American. The second





Clockwise from top: A Hans Wegner oak-and-rope chair and a leather-upholstered armchair by André Sornay in the library; the vintage flags are from Stilin's collection, and the Samarkand rug is from Y & B Bolour. Stilin designed the kitchen's cabinetry and mixed Benjamin Moore paints to create its ebony finish; the 1940s hanging factory lamp is from Ann-Morris Antiques, and the refrigerator is by Sub-Zero. The stucco fireplace and bluestone-tile terrace are Stilin designs; the teak furniture is by Sutherland, and the cushions are covered in Perennials fabrics. See Resources.







floor was conceived as a private two-bedroom apartment for Stilin and his son, their bedrooms linked by a library with a framed 48-star American flag. There's also a separate board-and-batten guest wing. So no matter how many pals come bounding up the front steps for a long weekend, luggage in hand, the house offers plenty of pockets of privacy. "That's the way I like to entertain," says Stilin. "Guests can do their thing, and Dylan and I can do ours."

One element of Stilin's decor that makes a big impact without being pushy is the patterns that repeat from room to room, providing subtle rhythms. For instance, the ceilings of the main rooms are made of lengths of unfinished satin-sanded ash—all the milled wood came from a lumber company in Wisconsin that has been owned by Stilin's family for generations—but the typical V-shape grooves have been upgraded to a sophisticated quarter-inch square cut. (Even the minimalist fireplace in the living room is surrounded by a sleek frame of unfinished ash.) That kind of couture-quality detail is a constant, from the doors of the custom-made kitchen cabinets to the living room's grooved paneling. "It creates a background you can rely on," says the designer, noting that within the calm architectural envelope, any furniture or art will work. "We have crazy lives. I don't want my house crazy too." ■



In the master bedroom, an English Gothic-style armchair from Croft Antiques covered in a Rogers & Goffigon stripe mixes with a tiered cart from English Country Antiques, a bench from Liza Sherman Antiques, and a Herb Ritts photograph, *Loriki with Spear, Africa, 1993*; the steel table lamp dates from the 1920s. Facing page, from top: Midcentury lamps from Robert Altman flank the bed in the guest room; the armchairs are 1930s Austrian. The master bath's tub, fittings, and towels are all by Waterworks. See Resources.

