At Home on Cape Cod

Home Builders & Remodelers Association of Cape Cod

Outdoor Living

Architect Profile:
Jill Neubauer

Familiar Comfort
on a Hidden Hill

70 Years of Building Community

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Home Builders & Remodelers Association of Cape Cod

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RENAISSANCE

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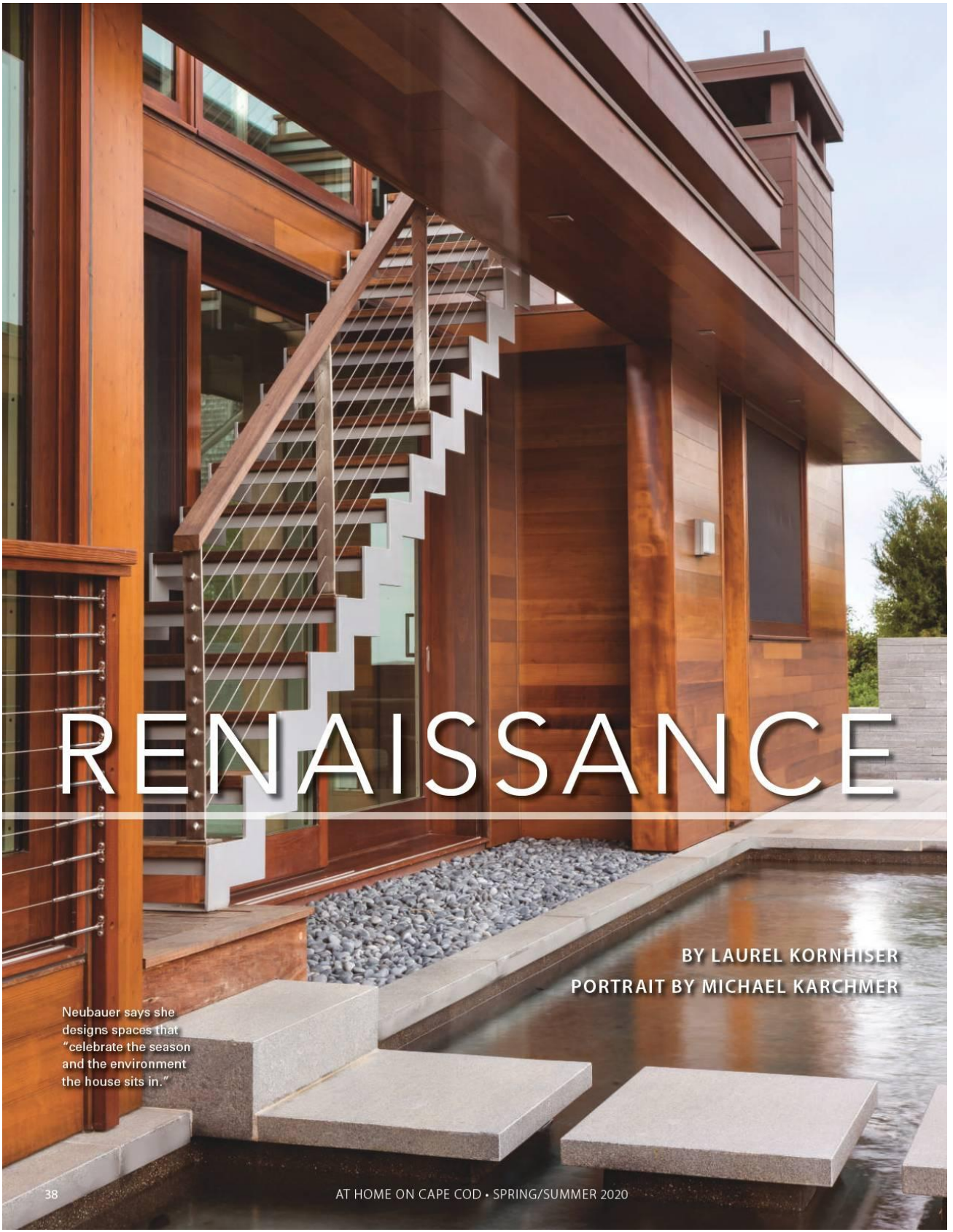

Neubauer says she designs spaces that "celebrate the season and the environment the house sits in."

OPPOSITE: PHOTO BY DURSTON SAYLOR

WOMAN

Falmouth architect Jill Neubauer, who has been producing great architecture for 25 years, credits her upbringing for her creativity and the support of a welcoming community and clients for her success.

WHEN SHE REFLECTS ON THE WORK SHE HAS PRODUCED over the past twenty-five years, Falmouth-based architect Jill Neubauer often uses words like "joy, fun, lovely, thoughtful." She does more than fulfill a client's program of rooms and spaces; she imagines them in those spaces, sharing family time, helping children with homework, watching a sunset, going about the business of life.

This approach arises from the original connections that inspired her future career in the form of two very special places where she vacationed with family: the farmland cottage of one set of grandparents in northern Wisconsin and the lakeside cabin of another.

"I was fortunate growing up in homes that were lived in for a long time—generations," she says. "I went every year with people I loved, and every year was special. I learned the importance of what a building, a place, can do for a family and how architecture can help make these memories."

When she closes her eyes, she can see every detail of the farmland cottage. As for the Northwoods lakeside cabin, she calls that "my core, my soul. The memory and beauty in that

Some of Neubauer's projects like this house on Oyster Pond in Falmouth (left) feature whimsical places like this tree house (above, below)

PHOTOS: DAN CUTRONA

cabin have driven my career and interest in architecture."

Neubauer was born into a creative family: the grandmother with the log cabin was a painter, her sister is a visual and performing artist, her mother is creative, and her father was an engineer. So Neubauer may have been genetically predisposed to notice visual details.

But it was also her experiences. She recounts her underlying motive when she visited the homes of two friends as a teenager: "Each lived in a beautiful, modern house, and I would want to go to their houses and hang out because of the buildings."

Adding yet another dimension to this fascination was the Prairie School, the private high school she attended. Commissioned by Willie Hilpert and Imogene Powers Johnson (of the S.C. Johnson family), its campus was inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright.

These three influences—cottage, cabin, and modern architecture—have informed her work as she has undertaken historic renovations, remodeled cottages, and created new homes in sensitive landscapes on Cape Cod and beyond. In the end, she says, "It's all about meaningful spaces."

While many homes are what Neubauer calls "boxes sitting on the landscape with a stoop," she designs spaces that "celebrate the season and the environment the house sits in." This attention to the environment is, of course, critical anywhere, but when those homes sit on Cape Cod, the impetus

For Neubauer, intelligent design is about the intimate spaces where family activities take place—a dining table with a built-in bench where everyone gathers to play cards (below right), or a bed built into an alcove rather than plopped in the midst of four straight walls (below left). The bathroom shower in the Oyster Pond property (above) fits to the changing rooflines.

Neubauer's porches can dwarf the rest of the house. "We'll design mudrooms, outdoor showers, and spring porches," she says. "And if you want, we will design a house to go with that too.'"

for connection is even stronger. "So many clients are thrilled to be here. Whether new to the Cape or here for generations, they are more aware of the regional environment," she says.

In this aspect, Neubauer sees a kinship with her Midwestern roots, "Like North Wisconsin, this is a place about landscape and escape to that landscape."

Neubauer herself landed in Falmouth, where she raised her two children after earning an undergraduate degree in drawing and photography from Cornell University and her degree in architecture from Harvard's Graduate School of Design.

"Falmouth is such a thoughtful place with a wonderful demographic," she says. "There is so much science and academic strength here, and now there are multiple generations of scientists. There can be deep resources, but there is a modesty about the people here—a quiet New England Yankee quality."

Through her years on the Cape, she has gladly bore witness to the expansion of the architectural aesthetic beyond traditional Capes and Colonials, an expansion she has watched evolve across the country. For decades post-World War II, she reminds us, our "American real estate/development culture" was largely about building formulaic houses quickly to get expanding families settled. "There was nothing intelligent, interesting, or joyful about it."

Today, a wider range of architectural styles is being embraced on Cape Cod and around the country, and Neubauer credits the proliferation of home design magazines and television programs for "shifting people's comfort with a broader aesthetic, and that has meant a rebirth for architecture."

PHOTOS: MEREDITH HUNNIBELL

The porch of this house in Saconesset in Falmouth has a soaring ceiling and a retractable window by some bar seating.

A home she designed for a seven-acre site in Chapoquoit meets the newer floodplain regulations by sitting up on ninety piles forty feet into the ground.

Many of Neubauer's designs embrace the modern aesthetic she fell in love with as a teenager: clean, simple lines; abstracted elements; creative surprises; close connections between architecture and landscape; and generous outdoor social spaces.

One outstanding example of this is a home she designed for a seven-acre site in Chapoquoit. The property is largely in conservation and originally had a home sitting right on a dune in a high velocity zone. Her clients had a choice: Accept the house as it was or tear it down and build to meet the newer floodplain regulations. They chose the latter, and the engineering involved to make it permittable included driving ninety piles forty feet into the ground and connecting them through a foundational network with steel columns coming up to the house.

"It will be the only house standing in West Falmouth in a hundred years," Neubauer remarks.

She simplified the home's original footprint into a rectangle and designed an elegant, strong contemporary home to sit on that footprint. Generous windows offer 360-degree views of Cape Cod Bay, a stunning marsh, and West Falmouth Harbor, giving the impression that the home is an extension of the landscape. "Most of the new homes we do that are teardowns from older cottages that don't meet existing codes are modern with lots of glass so the clients can enjoy the magnificent sites," she says.

With their energy efficiency and use of nontoxic and sustainable materials, Neubauer's designs are right at home in the twenty-first century, though their modern roots go back further on Cape Cod than many realize. Beginning in the 1930s, several innovators of modern architecture moved to the Outer Cape, building creative enclaves for themselves and their friends. Due to the efforts of the Cape Cod Modern House Trust, a wider

PHOTOS: MEREDITH HUNNIBELL

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One of the decks of Neubauer's modern Truro beach is open all around so guests can soak up the sun.

public is now recognizing the precedent for this type of architecture. In that spirit, Neubauer designed a modern Truro beach house that settles into its landscape. Built to step down the hill so as not to obstruct the neighbors' view and built with a flat roof to adhere to a height restriction, the home, like others she has designed, engages in a dialogue of glass, or what she describes as "a quiet relation of matching glass from one side of the house to the other, a one-to- one match of beautiful transparency," she says. "The house that taught me that is a historic house owned by Katharine Cornell on Lake Tashmoo on Martha's Vineyard. It has a gorgeous old living room with matching glass on each side. I saw it years ago and never forgot it."

Beyond wall-sized windows, Neubauer's designs connect to their environments in other ways. One of the most important is her attention to what she calls the "in between spaces"—porches, screened porches, terraces, and outdoor rooms. "Screened porches are the most successful spaces we build because they mean we can celebrate going outside finally," she says. "We make them bigger so you can eat, lounge, even watch television or sleep in them. There is no reason to come in during the high season. They are joyful and lovely." Sometimes clients have to be convinced of the need for a screened porch, but once they agree, it becomes their favorite space, she says.

Some of her outdoor rooms are standalones, like the glamp—or glamorous camp—structure she built for a Cataumet property. "I am very interested in glamps," Neubauer says. "I made the first one for myself after I had been on a trip to Moab in Utah and had the opportunity to stay in one." She has since created these outdoor rooms with their canvas shells and room for beds and bureaus for clients. They are not only fun, they save clients money. While adding a bedroom can cost $100,000, a glamp offers a less expensive way to

PHOTOS: DURSTON SAYLOR

This home settles into its landscape (above). She explains it has "a quiet relation of matching glass from one side of the house to the other, a one-to-one match of beautiful transparency" (left). It even has a bunkroom that has a garage door, which opens up to more bunks outside.

PHOTOS: MEREDITH HUNNIBELL

Some of her outdoor rooms are standalones, like the glamp—or glamorous camp—structure (left) she built for a Cataumet property (above). They are also marvelous for children, like the three sons of her Cataumet clients, who often use their glamp as a hideaway for playing games and reading on these beanbag chairs (bottom left).

house extra summer guests. They are so popular with her clients, she says, "They become the room everyone wants to stay in."

They are also marvelous for children, like the three sons of her Cataumet clients, who often use their glamp as a hideaway for playing games and reading. That is, when the three boys are not ensconced in their bunkroom, which Neubauer re-created from a non-descript guest room with two single beds and two small windows. Typical of the level of fun detail on which Neubauer thinks is the tin washtub-style sink she installed in a barnboard-encased alcove in the room. Imagining their toothbrushes and washcloths overwhelming the guest bathroom, she created this space to give them a sense of camping in their own room.

The entire Cataumet home, in fact, was remodeled from tired, boxy house into a shingled cottage with distinctive character with its second floor wall of windows, and handsome deck with enclosed storage space underneath. The kitchen went from disorganized and inefficient to spacious and streamlined, with open shelving and modern lighting. This home is an example of intelligent design, based on how people really live and encouraging them to be more playful in their spaces.

One room that exemplifies thoughtful design in any home is the mudroom, Neubauer says. While a lot of attention is usually paid to dining rooms that mostly sit passively, the need for the humble but critical mudroom is often overlooked. "A lot of the time, everyone gets out of the car and heads to the kitchen with all of the stuff that they have—coats, backpacks, homework papers, beach towels, flip flops— all of the stuff we schlep and

need. If we did nothing else but dedicate a space to all of the stuff, it would be much better." She adds, "We say, 'We'll design mudrooms, outdoor showers, and spring porches, and if you want, we will design a house to go with that too.'"

For Neubauer, intelligent design is less about grand great rooms, formal dining rooms, and large master bedrooms and more about the intimate spaces where family activities take place—a kitchen island around which children do their homework, a dining table with a built-in bench where everyone gathers to play cards, a nook with a chair—perfect for viewing a sunrise—or a bed built into an alcove rather than plopped in the midst of four straight walls.

Each project represents a story to Neubauer, from her imaginings of how spaces will be enjoyed to the experiences she has with her clients as she creates them. "The projects that are really terrific," she says, "are the ones where the clients really embrace this wonderful adventure. I rarely separate the architecture from the experience we had."

To keep her perspective fresh and inspirational ideas flowing, Neubauer turns to travel, reading (mostly about business and visual people), and collaborating with a host of creative people. She worked with many of her favorites on a new home for Gunning Point clients. Pairpoint Glass of Sandwich created the colorful globes and pendants for the kitchen and dining room, Cor Metals in Mashpee made accents for the kitchen island, Saltwoods in Boston made the dining table, and Retrocraft Design in Concord provided furnishings. Her approach to the design

PHOTOS: PETER VANDERWARKER

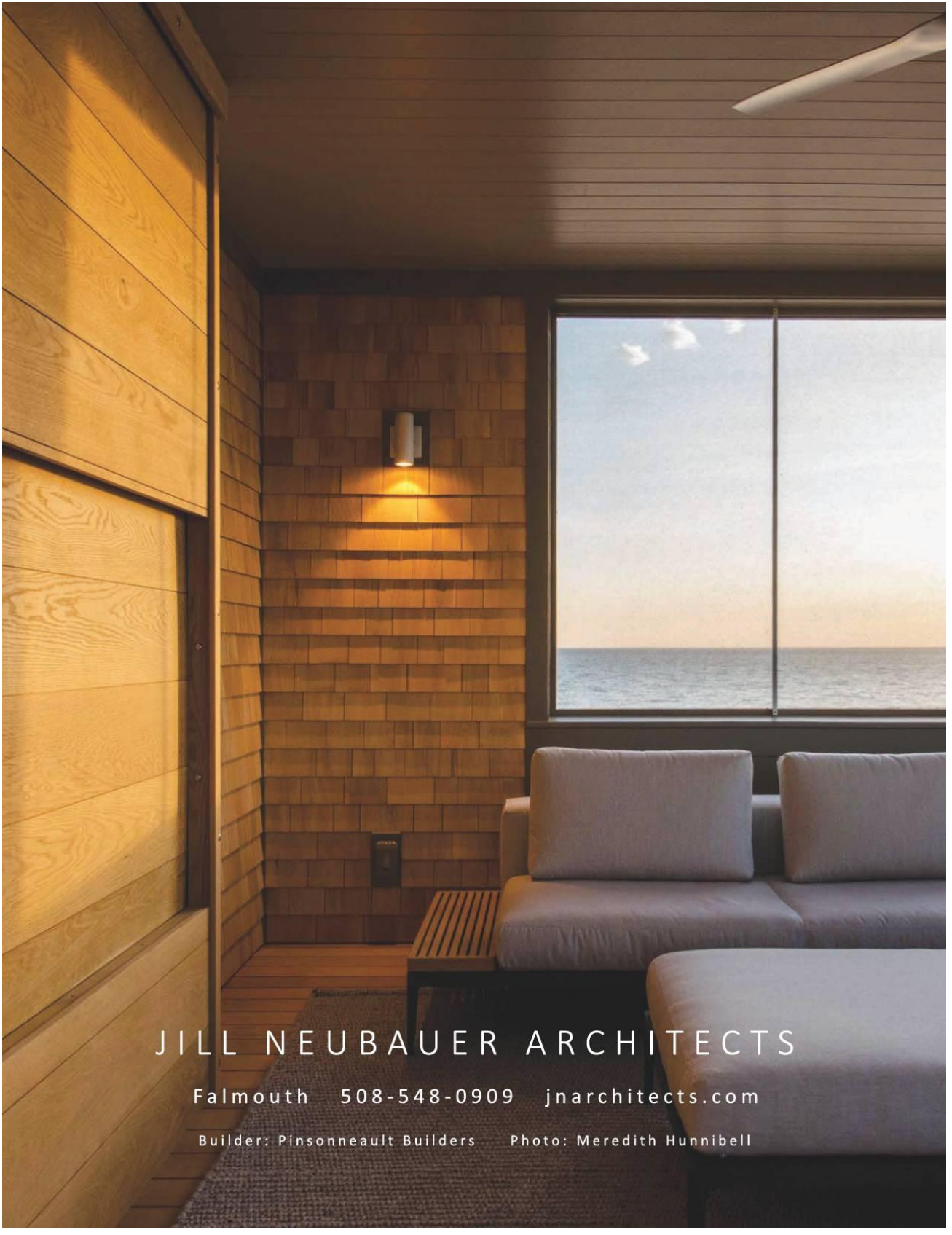
On a new home for Gunning Point clients (top), Neubauer designed a variety of windows that provide peeks into the surrounding environment.

itself was creative, with an abstracted grove of interior and exterior columns providing a preview of the grove of real trees surrounding the property.

Twenty-five years into her career, she is excited about what is coming next: "Now I keep learning and keep doing it better and better. It takes a long time to learn how to do this, but it is so wonderful to get to a place where you know some things."

Still, some principles have persisted over the years. "For all of my clients, whether we are doing a vacation home or making a primary home, I like doing something fresh. It's always about spaces that function well and that bring joy, fun, and beauty into their lives." And this is the primary lesson Neubauer learned long ago, surrounded by the textures of family, love, and beauty established by her beloved grandparents.

Pairpoint Glass of Sandwich created the colorful globes and pendants for the kitchen and dining room (above). Her approach to the design itself was creative, with an abstracted grove of interior and exterior columns (below left) providing a preview of the grove of real trees surrounding the property (below right).



JILL NEUBAUER ARCHITECTS

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Builder: Pinsonneault Builders Photo: Meredith Hunnibell