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HENRY URBACH. PRODUCED BY MARGARET RUSSELL.
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN HALL

OPEN house

FRED HOCHBERG BANISHES GRANDIOSITY
FROM A FIRE ISLAND BEACH HOUSE

With its Hamptons-style symmetries, central stairwell, and the window that lets passing beachcombers peer into the swimming pool, this Fire Island Pines house first appears just a touch overdone. And, indeed in 1989, when Fred P. Hochberg bought the house, which presides over the eastern end of the island community, he was surprised by his own choice. "Soon after the closing, someone asked me if I'd ever thought I would own the house," Hochberg remembers. "It looked so grandiose, I never thought I'd ever even be invited to lunch there." The house—built in 1987—nonetheless held promise. "Even though I was looking for something simpler, I realized, once I got into it, that it has its own understated elegance, a simplicity its image masks." The informal ambience was essential for Hochberg, who uses the house as a summer retreat from his demanding New York schedule. President until a year ago of the family-founded business, the Lillian Vernon Corporation,



Its wings angling out symmetrically at 45°, Fred Hochberg's house sits high above the Pines to look straight into the ocean. The pool is outfitted with an aquarium-style window through which swimmers can ogle passersby—or vice versa. The central stair landing has no glass, just a rail. On the rear wall of the living room hangs a blow-up of Max Yavno's 1949 *Muscle Beach*.





The living-room furniture is covered in a nubby, neutral silk from J. Robert Scott, chosen by designer Bruce Bierman, who also designed the coffee table. Facing page: Plycraft Company chairs are a 1958 version by Norman Cherner of a George Nelson Associates design for Herman Miller that was discontinued in 1960. The Bruce Weber photo is a repro because of the salt air, like all the art. See Resources.

LUNCH FOR TWO OFTEN BECOMES LUNCH FOR 12 IN THIS OCEAN-FRONT BEAUTY

Hochberg now devotes his professional energies to political advocacy and philanthropy for the lesbian and gay community—organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign Fund, the New Festival, the ACLU, Gay Games, GMHC, and the Stonewall Community Foundation.

New York interior designer Bruce Bierman directed his attention to enhancing simplicity

and comfort. He recalls: "I wanted it to look as though the architect had also done the interiors. And I wanted it to be very laid back, very casual, the way people live at the beach." Bierman, who has summered at the Pines for more than a decade, and Hochberg have known each other socially for years and first discussed the renovation one morning at

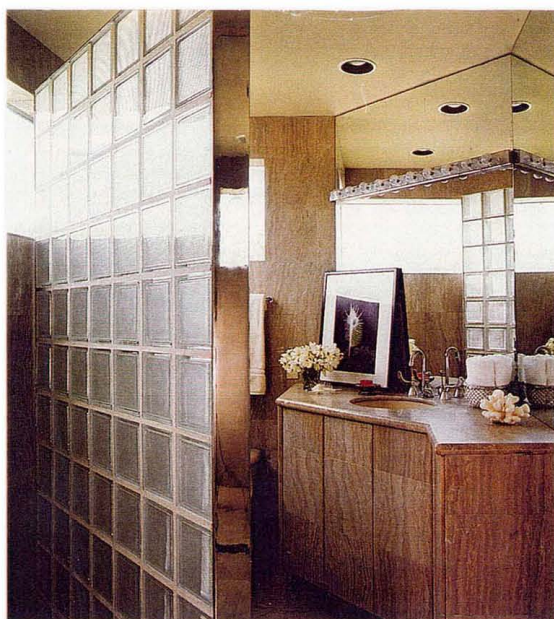
their Manhattan gym. When Hochberg moved in, the house was filled with the previous owner's furniture—"Bland, nondescript and uncomfortable; it was all pastels with pink towels," by Bierman's account. Beyond general refurbishing, a single architectural renovation was called for: pockets were placed in the ceiling along the southern wall to hold recessed

shades. The idea was to moderate the sunlight—"Before, you couldn't even take a nap inside; it was so bright," says Hochberg—but not allow the shades to interfere with the ocean view.

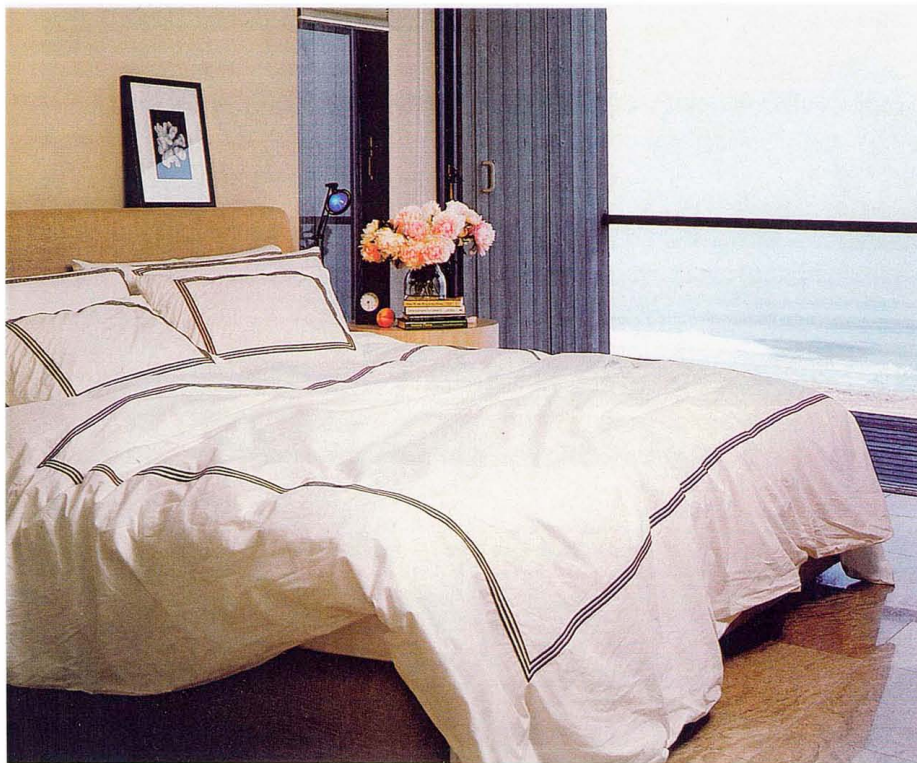
Bierman was clearly inspired by the sublime dunescape of the Pines. His palette derives from the off-white variegations of the beach; woods are bleached neutral, and the living-

room and bedroom upholstery—a nubby silk from J. Robert Scott—suggests the hue and texture of sand. Hochberg admits that the choice of fabric was one design decision he felt unsure about—“silk seemed so fussy”—but, in the end, he applauds Bierman’s choice as sturdy and comfortable—even against bare skin—and quick-drying to boot.

Comfort, ease, and seaside ambience guided other decisions as well. Walls and ceilings were painted the same off-white verging on taupe, and the marble floors covered with sisal. Furniture takes a 1950s stance, coordinated without fuss to accommodate the occasional oddball piece. Plycraft chairs



HOCHBERG CAN OPEN HIS HOT TUB TO A ZILLION STARS



surround the Pace-designed dining table, its sandblasted smoked-glass surface perched atop a bleached-ash base. In the living room, an Eames chair cohabits with pieces upholstered to order and a Bierman-designed table. The bedroom picks up aspects of the furniture, fabric, and lighting from downstairs alongside a single remnant of the former owner’s furniture collection—a cabinet with punctuation-mark pulls that Bierman has refinished in a lighter tone.

A casual spirit prevails—crucial to a house where lunch for two often becomes lunch for a dozen (“People seem to time their walks just so!” observes Hochberg). Afternoons are usually spent outdoors, reading or dozing in deck chairs provided with shell-shaped cushions, while evenings end in the upper-level hot tub, floor-to-ceiling windows open to the bay and sea surf, beneath a zillion stars.

Both architect and client speak fondly of the design process, hinting at a degree of compatibility that is rare. A shared love for the Pines comes through. Bierman praises its landscape, light, and social diversity. Individuals, couples, and families—straight and gay—summer here together. Hochberg emphasizes the enclave’s social harmony. “The Pines,” he says, “is a community where neighbors say hello, and where it’s possible to escape the car and commercial distractions. And, for gay men, it’s a place of extraordinary ease, where you can hold hands in public without fear or threat. It’s one of the few places you can really be yourself.” ★

