

# ON THE AVENUE BEECH

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THE STYLE ISSUE

**SUMMER  
SOLITUDE**  
Ippolita's hidden escape

**SOUTH  
FORK'S  
NEWEST  
SWAN**  
Shoshanna Gruss  
gives a peek into her  
charming life in  
East Hampton

**WILLIAM  
NORWICH'S  
HAMPTONS:**  
Staying at Westerly,  
spending time with the  
Wanamakers and  
loving wicker

Fashion designer  
Shoshanna Gruss

# East End Elegance

Fred Stelle looks to the beauty of his sites to inspire the architecture



by Haley Friedlich

**F**red Stelle is an accomplished architect with a Bridgehampton-based firm, Stelle Lomont Rouhani Architects. He works globally but pours much of his concentration into local East End residential projects. His style is to let the scenery guide the project—resulting in understated and elegant homes.

“Seaside Residence” in Water Mill, N.Y.

**Did you always want to be an architect?** It was like a lot of things that happen to me in my life: not a deliberate analytical process; it was very visceral. I came from a background that encouraged it—my father was an engineer, and growing up we were always building things and making things. Then I had a neighbor down the street from where I grew up in Bedford, New York. We lived at one end of the dirt road; at the other end lived a man named Edward Larabee Barnes, and he’s one of the major figures of 20th century American architecture. In the city,

he designed the Asia Society, the Botanical Garden and the IBM building on the corner of 57th and Madison Avenue.

**So was he your mentor?** I knew him as a child because he lived down the road and architecture just was something that appealed to me. So, I went to architecture school at Syracuse, which was by far the hardest thing I ever did. It was like going to school in a foreign country where you don’t speak the language and you have to listen and they don’t speak your language.

**But you learned the language.** Architecture is a practice. Some people say you need to be good at math or science to do it, other people say you have to be a good artist to do it. It’s its own discipline but it’s also very collaborative discipline.

**So you have to surround yourself with talented engineers and artists?** In my own office, there are three of us—three partners, and we collaborate on everything.

**What were some of your earlier endeavors—your first job and your early projects?** After school: I went to Denver for a year and worked for a man named Marvin Hatami. I enjoyed it there but I always wanted to work for Edward Larabee Barnes. I came back to New York and worked for him for about three years. During that time I worked on an IBM building up in Tarrytown, N.Y. That was great fun: being on the site and seeing the progress every day. I worked on a renovation of the old campus at Yale; we renovated a bunch of buildings there. I think it was a big success. I really enjoyed that—creating modern spaces in these old buildings. Working on old buildings and reconfiguring them for contemporary use and that contrast between the old and new have always appealed to me.

**Do you get to do that much?** I hate tearing

we don't like to overbuild. We try to build what people need without it destroying the beauty of the site. Because the reason people come to rural locations or locations on the beach is because of the beauty of the site. Our work tends to be well integrated in the site. It tends to respond to the beauty in the site. It affords opportunities for the users to appreciate the beauty of a site: the views, the space, the landscape, the texture, the breeze and the light.

**Do you source materials locally?** It's hard to use local materials because there's not much material that is available locally anymore. If you circumscribe an area around where we build, we try to source within a couple hundred miles. Does buying blue stone in upstate New York qualify as 'local'? More local than China that's for sure.

**I know that's important to you—that you strive to be an eco-friendly firm.** For us it's both an ideological thing and a kind of thinking globally and acting locally behavior. But we also try and put it in terms of practicality for our clients. For example, most of the buildings we do employ eco-efficient heating and cooling systems. For us it makes sense in terms of reducing the carbon footprint—but also if you look at it financially, while it is more expensive on a first-buy basis, it's cheaper on a long-term basis. We're constantly engaged in that discussion with our clients. It's a mix of both practicality and financial common sense—and, you know, responsibility.

**Have you had a favorite project that you've worked on over the years?** If I look back long-term, I certainly think there are some milestones. I would say the renovation of the old campus at Yale was a milestone for me because it was my first project that I did working in the office of Edward Larabee Barnes. [The first house I worked on on Long Island in 1984] is a favorite because it was my first application of the repurposing philosophy.

Another one is a property we called Bay Residence in Eastern Long Island. For me, this house is where we transitioned from architecture as a product to making it a process. Saying to people, "You know, I don't know what your house is going to look like, I don't know how big it's going to be, but I do know about the site and I do know what you want. We're going to navigate through an exploratory process where we imagine solutions to your requirements on this site and that's what it's going to look like." ♦

Fred Stelle on the site of his project "Cinnamon Ridge Guest House" in Antigua



BETTINA STELLE

things down and turning them into landfill just because I didn't design it or build it. So we try and encourage people who buy sites with older buildings on them to imagine reusing the old building in the context of the new use.

**And are people generally willing to do that?** Yes! If we can find buildings that have some value or qualities to them. Even if the cost of restoring it and using it is the same as it would cost to demolish it and build a new building, I'd rather preserve it.

**How would you describe your aesthetic?** I think the thing that sets us apart is that

**Indigenous to the state is good!** Well, I think that we're looking for materials that belong, so we're not looking for exotic materials. I have to say there are instances where the exotics simply make the most sense. For instance, there really is no better wood than teak. And unfortunately teak has to come from Southeast Asia. And, unfortunately, most is not sustainably harvested, so it's problematic. But if you really want something that's durable and long-lasting, there is some sense in paying a premium for bringing materials a long distance. It's a challenge, though—certainly the carbon footprint of building is a real challenge.

**THE HAMPTONS ACCORDING TO FRED STELLE:**

Aside from hanging out with my family, I love being in the water; I like fishing, swimming and sailing. I'm a pilot, so I like flying. We like going to Montauk in the summer, and we think Sag Harbor is the center of the universe. In Sag Harbor, we like **Tutto Il Giorno**, the **American Hotel**, and we like **Sen**. We love **Shagwong** because it's such a great part of old Montauk.