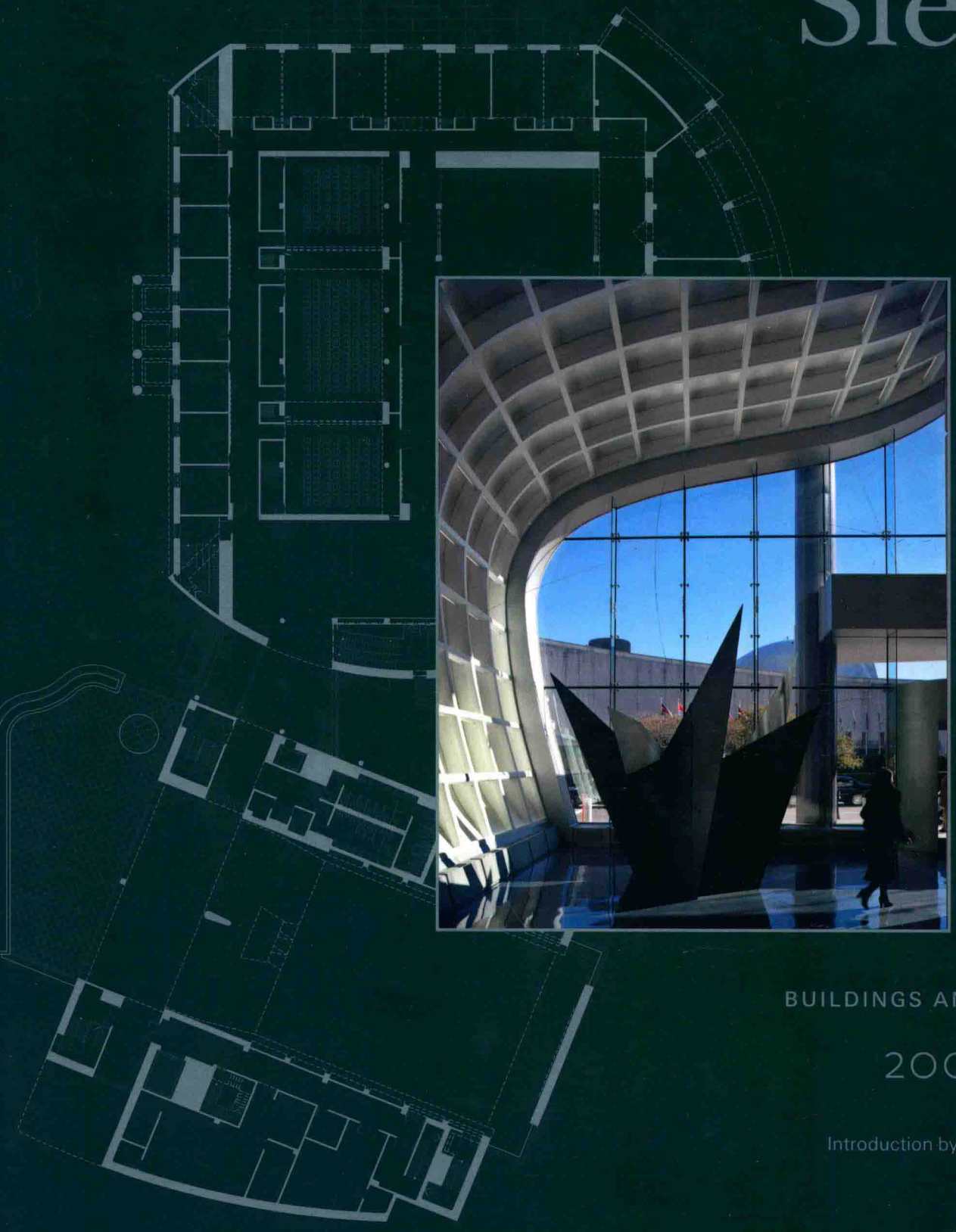
Gwathmey Siegel



BUILDINGS AND PROJECTS

2002–2012

Introduction by Kenneth Frampton

RIZZOLI NEW YORK

Gwathmey Siegel

Edited by Brad Collins

Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects

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New York · Paris · London · Milan

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Foreword

I first encountered the work of Gwathmey Siegel while in architecture school, more than thirty years ago. That visceral first impression has never left me. Looking back, it is apparent that the intellectual rigor and patient exploration of architectural ideas that have been the hallmark of the firm through the decades have never subsided, despite the changes that time has wrought.

The passing of Charles Gwathmey in 2009 is an irreparable loss. Subsequently, Robert Siegel and I began conversing about the future, and it was evident that not only were his architectural ambition and intentions undiminished, but that the current work itself was still true to those earliest ideals, and to the many years and many extraordinary projects since. And so it was a great, great honor to become principal of the firm in 2011 with the intention of continuing not only a great legacy, but an active firm, comprised of many individuals, that has continued to be a standard bearer for an approach to architecture that speaks to us today with an undiminished purity.

The decade of work from 2002 to 2012 represents an unequivocal statement of architectural inquiry into the nature of form, language, space, meaning, and the ineffable essence of art. The simultaneous condition of maintaining a core vision while developing multiple expressions through the many projects may be seen as analogous to the work of a great musical composer, whose many scores both maintain and transform the vision that informs them. The notion that an architectural program informs each project and elevates it above the particulars of the project parameters not only unites disparate projects and building types, but also creates a series of works where the continuity of vision speaks to a larger frame of reference.

Despite the active manifestation of that vision, with its many permutations of forms, materials and expressions, one senses a certain level of transcendence and a remarkable feeling of peace. This sense, that something has been achieved in a very pure way, will touch each person who comes to experience the building and spaces that have been created. Ultimately, it is this communication, from the architect to those that look at and inhabit the work, which becomes the essence of what has been attempted, and what has been achieved.

Preface

From 1967 until August 2009, when Charles passed away, we collaborated on the design of over 400 projects ranging in scale from a Bird House to a University for 12,000 students in Singapore. Throughout this 42 year period we shared a desk and a pin-up wall, sketching and discussing design concepts.

The practice began with private residential projects and expanded to include educational facilities, museums, libraries and other public facilities. Throughout all our projects, the design of circulation spaces and their intersection with specific use spaces was prioritized. We believed that the spirit of a building, its character, was experienced while moving through it, at threshold moments entering spaces and while circulating around a composition. We considered design to be a discovery process and our engagement with many different building types proved to be a great learning experience which enriched and expanded design capabilities.

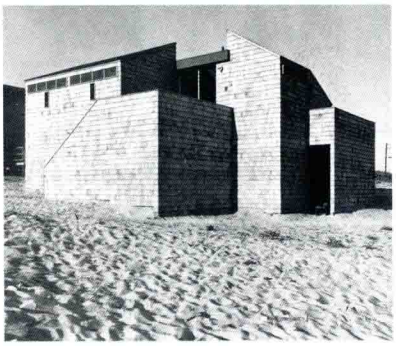
Our architectural vocabulary was primarily based on geometric and volumetric relationships. Horizontal and vertical datums corresponding to human dimensional characteristics and program requirements were interfaced to form a three-dimensional framework within which floor levels and plan boundaries could be established. Curvilinear and angled volumes were developed as objects in counterpoint within and beyond the orthogonal frame.

This monograph is the third in the Rizzoli published series and completes the overview of our work. It also marks the beginning of a second generation of the firm as Gwathmey Siegel Kaufman & Associates Architects with Gene Kaufman joining the firm as a principal. Gene and I collaborate on the design of projects with the Associate Architects, senior members of the firm who have worked with Charles and me for a great number of years. The level of detail, the craftsmanship and the seamless integration of the engineering and specialized consultant input would not have been possible to achieve without the project development skills of the Associates.

Special thanks to Brad Collins who designed the Rizzoli monographs as well as to Elizabeth Skowronek and Amelia Golini for organizing and editing the material for this volume.

Introduction

Originally delivered as a lecture at the Yale School of Architecture on November 17, 2011



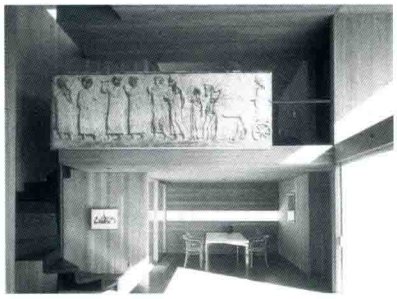
Miller House (1)

Amangansett House (2)

One cannot approach the work of Gwathmey Siegel without addressing the multiple origins from which their work appears to stem. I have in mind in the first instance the American balloon frame timber tradition as this was subtly transformed by the émigré Bauhaus masters, who were warmly received by the modernizing East Coast elite as constituted in the late 1930s by such figures as Alfred Barr, James Johnson Sweeny and, above all, Joseph Hudnut, who was responsible for bringing Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer to the Graduate School of Design (GSD) at Harvard. As we know, there were other significant Bauhaus émigrés fed into the States via Black Mountain College, Yale University, and two radical design institutions established in Chicago, Moholy-Nagy's Institute of Design and Mies's faculty of architecture in Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). As far as the East Coast is concerned, one has to acknowledge the exceptionally seminal role played by Marcel Breuer, since it was he who seems to have been able to create overnight an extraordinarily sympathetic modernizing manner with which he was able to fuse the functional legacy of the German Neue Sachlichkeit with the empirical white clapboarded, fieldstone domestic tradition of New England. One first encounters this in Gropius's own house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, of 1937 and in the Chamberlain Cottage designed by Breuer for Wayland, Massachusetts, in 1939. This so-called New Humanist manner, a coinage invented somewhat later by Ian Nairn of *The Architectural Review*, was in the end one of the primary substrates, so to speak, from which, thirty years later, the incisive domestic manner of Charles Gwathmey will eventually emerge. The catalyst in all of this was surely the post-war American modernist architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, who, having studied at the GSD, found a way in his own work of translating Breuer's New Humanism into a sharper minimalist manner as we find this in the houses that he designed and realized between 1950 and 1971, in which outriding fieldstone walls, standing seam roofs, tight white boarding on shingle siding along with freestanding chimneys were combined with carefully proportioned fenestration and pitched roofs into precise abstract assemblies. Typical of this work by Barnes was the Cowles House of 1962, the Righter House of 1965, and Heckscher Houses of 1974. Both Gwathmey and his future partner Robert Siegel worked for Barnes during part of this fertile period, with Siegel already serving as the straw boss of the practice by 1963, which happened to coincide with the time when Gwathmey joined the firm. Gwathmey started to moonlight almost as soon as he entered Barnes's office much to the latter's subsequent shock and annoyance when Gwathmey's shingled Miller House (1), built on Fire Island in 1964, was published in *Progressive Architecture* alongside a house by Barnes. Soon after came the canonical Amagansett House (2) designed and realized by Gwathmey for his photographer mother and painter father between 1963 and 1965. Gwathmey's exceptionally touching account of the way in which this house came into being tells us a great deal not only about the house but also about the future ethos and modus operandi of the Gwathmey Siegel practice. I am alluding to Gwathmey's possessive attitude toward domestic design as this was set down in the book *Gwathmey Siegel Houses*, published at the millennium:

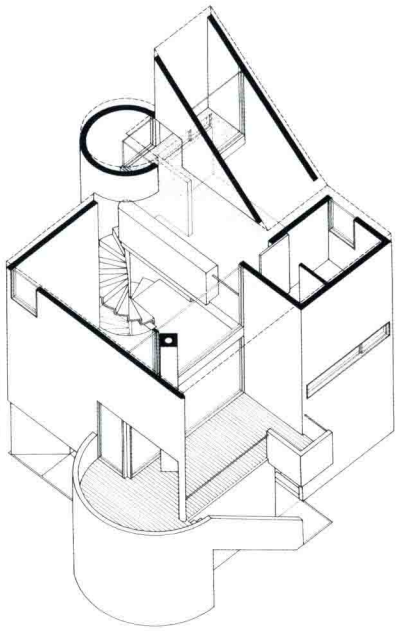
When my mother and I bought the land in Amagansett, a one-acre flat field with views across the dunes to the ocean and surrounded by undeveloped land, my mother said, "Do what you would do for yourself, just take our program and make believe it's yours." That in fact, is the way we do all the houses. We inherit the program from the client, we take the site, we take the orientation, we take all the things that affect or impact the opportunity and we make it our own. In that way become so integrated with and emotionally part of the process that it could never be detached or automatic or repetitive. Each time it's an invention. The chance to build this house for my parents was an incredible opportunity. Building it clarified for me that architecture doesn't have to be big to have presence or content, that a building as an object on the land, though small, in this case only 1,200 square feet, can occupy a site with sculptural

monumentality. This house, as in all our houses, it is the section rather than the plan that the primary space defines, It is the volumetric manipulation and the vertical rather than the horizontal description that articulates and defines the space. ... [The] public spaces - living, dining, and kitchen - one level above grade capitalized on the views and established a relationship between the living space and the ground plane that was, at the time, unique in modern rural house architecture.



Greek relief (3)

Two features of this work which have perhaps not been sufficiently highlighted up to now is, first, the absolutely canonical character of the form, making it comparable to the stature of the Rietveld / Schröder House of 1924 or even Le Corbusier's Maison Cook of 1926 and, second, the surreptitious homage it pays to Paul Rudolph's Art & Architecture Building in Yale from which Gwathmey had graduated under Rudolph's effective tutelage in 1962. This debt became clear at the time in a photographic blow-up of a Greek relief (3) as this is superimposed on the balcony front of the bedroom overlooking the double height space of the Amagansett House.



Amangansett House (4)

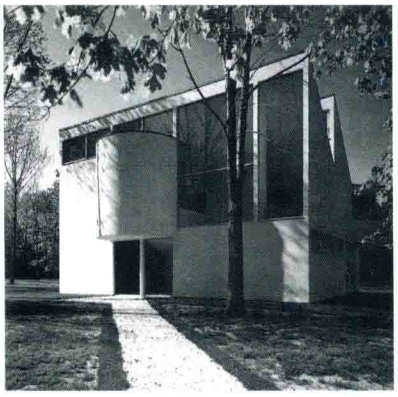
It was this house that propelled Gwathmey into becoming a member of the New York-based Five Architects. I am alluding to the familiar coterie that, under Peter Eisenman's leadership, shared the common credo that their generation had the responsibility of creating an American architecture capable of rivaling the compelling achievements of the prewar European avant-garde both formally and ideologically. Apart from Giuseppe Terragni and Theo van Doesberg, the primary referent and inspiration for three of them at the least, Michael Graves, Richard Meier, and Gwathmey, was indubitably Le Corbusier, to which Gwathmey's Fulbright Fellowship notebooks of 1962–63 amply testify. All of this would be confirmed by the exhibition and seminar, entitled *Five Architects* held in the Museum of Modern Art in 1966, for which both Colin Rowe and I wrote critical texts. Alongside Rowe's sophisticated skepticism which would be fully fleshed out much later in his essay *The Architecture of Good Intentions*, I wrote a more open, somewhat banal appraisal in which I saw the work of the Five as oscillating somewhat uneasily between the vestigial classicism of frontality and the dynamic spatiality of rotational form.

These countervailing architectonic tropes as first synthesized as a dualistic trope in Le Corbusier's Villa Garches of 1927, were to be synthesized later in the work of the Five Architects through the conceptual stratagem of the 45 degree axonometric, as this format, pioneered by Auguste Choissy and Le Corbusier, was largely popularized in the United States through the graphic representations of James Stirling's work, who had exploited this mode of projection in his early house projects and in his design for Churchill College, Cambridge, along with his presentation of the Leicester Engineering Building in 1959. Notwithstanding the neo-Baroque-cum-Cubistic axonometrics projected by Graves in the mid-1960s and above all his Hanselmann House of 1968, the most forceful exponent of this rhetorical device was for a while Gwathmey himself, as this is undeniably evident in the axonometric of the Amagansett House, where we have in one and the same drawing both the dynamic spatial parti of the house and the implied rotational movement around its form (4).

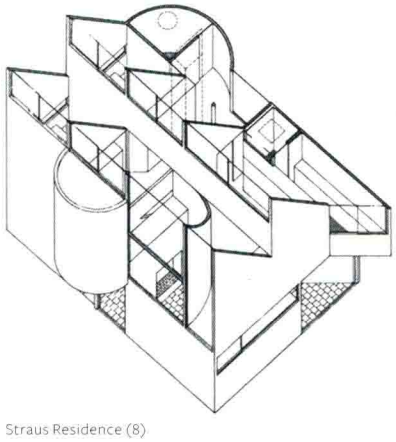
Designed and detailed in collaboration with Richard Henderson, who was then his partner, this singular neo-Corbusian work took the form of a pinwheeling, cubic space-form, which, as it happened, was also a graphic preoccupation in the Cooper Union School of Architecture, at the time, under the leadership of John Hejduk, who, having been appointed professor of architecture in 1964 (and who later served as dean from 1975 to 2000), was the fifth member of the New York Five. While Hejduk took pains to distance himself from the neo-Corbusian ethos—as was evident in his "Diamond Show," staged with the painter Robert Slutsky in 1966—he

Amangansett House (5)

Cooper House (6)



Straus Residence (7)



Straus Residence (8)

nonetheless emphasized a comparable axonometric presentation of form. One should note how the 45-degree skewing of the freestanding atelier in relation to the house in Amagansett would prompt the visitor to rotate around the two cubic forms so as to view the one in terms of the other and vice versa. (5) This conjunction initiates the theme of rotation in Gwathmey's domestic architecture, in that the rotation in question not only applies to the inner spatial dynamic of the sculptural form, but also to the way in which the viewing subject is induced to rotate around and through the work. While the spatial dynamic of the Amagansett House is undeniably neo-Corbusian, its architectonic syntax could hardly be more removed from the Purist paradigm in as much as Le Corbusier's Villa Garches of 1927 was a totally frontalized composition, the rotary spatial movement being confined largely to the interior. The rotational synthesis of the Amagansett House was the essential trope from which the rest of Gwathmey's domestic architecture unfolds. This synthesis merits further examination, since it puts Gwathmey's houses into a class of their own when compared to the houses realized by the other members of the New York Five.

Gwathmey conceived of the primary form of the Amagansett House as being carved out of a cubic block, and this aesthetic illusion was sustained by the use of tongue-and-grooved cedar boarding as a continuous finish, inside and out. While he insisted that this materiality was not a motif, he nonetheless concluded his later retrospective assessment of the house with the words: "Within a limited budget, a formal parti and vernacular were developed that set a precedent for the later work" as a continuous finish; thus, Gwathmey directly acknowledged that the vernacular character came from the flush-jointed, narrow vertical boarding which he even extended to the soffits of ceilings, irrespective of whether they were flat or pitched. As far as the exterior was conceived it was just this "gray" character stemming from the way in which cedar goes gray with age—which served to differentiate him from the rest of the Five, who were virtually committed, one way or another, to a smooth white finish, inside and out. This was a conscious return to the proverbial white architecture of the International Style, particularly with respect to the work of Richard Meier, whose language was closest to that of Gwathmey. This ideological difference at the level of the exterior finish may well have been due to the fact that Gwathmey had studied first with Louis Kahn at Penn and with Paul Rudolph at Yale. Without depreciating the importance of Gwathmey's dynamic plastic invention, this Penn/Yale background gave particular emphasis to the expressive value of soundly detailed construction. This preoccupation was reinforced by Gwathmey's postgraduate internship with Barnes from whom he seems to have assimilated a particular penchant for creating abstract, minimal set pieces, be they domestic or otherwise, in tightly boarded construction, even though Gwathmey used this approach to achieve a much more concentrated, rotational spatial trope. The next four houses built by Gwathmey after his parent's house, that is to say the Straus, Sedacca, Goldberg, and Cooper Residences that he realized between 1966 and 1968, were all predicated on the manipulation of equally compact cubic partis pris, even though these formats passed through distinctly different permutations as the architect tackled, in each instance, a slightly different program and a decidedly different site. A more open, pinwheeling, spatial configuration bursting out of the confines of the original cube is most decisively evident in the Cooper Residence (6) built in Orleans, Massachusetts, in 1968.

In the Straus Residence (7,8) on which he collaborated once more with Henderson, bold semicircular and quadrant forms enliven a two-story format, the whole being unified by twin, mono-pitched roofs that cover the breadth of the entire house. Subtle formal/spatial inflections serve to animate the overall form by both adding to and subtracting from the volumetric point of departure. The 45-degree counter-form that played such a key role in the Amagansett House is reduced here to a mere quotation;

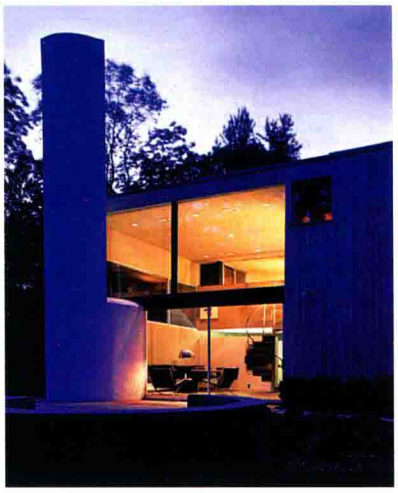
an angled blade wall on the ground floor. However, a bold, semicylindrical element added to the basic orthogonal matrix accommodates a dining volume at grade and a bathroom above. This gesture is answered by a quadrant of space cut out of the first floor so as to provide a partially double-height volume over the living room. In its contrapuntal turn, the main stair rising behind the chimney breast is received by a semicircular landing cantilevering out over the main entrance. These yin-yang spatial rhythms are accentuated by the fenestration while a single chimney, rising above the monopitched roofs, serves to stabilize the composition.

In the next Gwathmey Henderson house, the Sedacca Residence (9), built in East Hampton in 1967, the virtual cube is more consistently maintained as a referent, with a freestanding spiral stair situated asymmetrically within a square plan so as to animate the otherwise static space-form of the house. Three very simple moves impart a liberative dynamic to the overall volume: first, the provision of a raised terrace, triangular in plan, opening directly off the living-dining area; second, a full-height, plate-glass window-wall, which affords access visual and otherwise to the terrace; and third, an aerodynamically profiled chimney shaft that closes the composition at the corner of the terrace, in a kind of static response to the spiral stair which curves up from the living room to the semicircular mezzanine bedroom above. This, in its turn, overlooks the double-height space of the house. As in the two previous houses, circular forms are played off against an orthogonal matrix. In this instance a drum accommodates the entry, while housing the kitchen at grade with the principal bedroom above. The tubular handrail of the spiral stair seems to energize the entire composition through its dynamic movement. Once again narrow cedar boarding is used as the primary facing material both inside and out. As Gwathmey wrote of the tight economic constraints which drove the design:

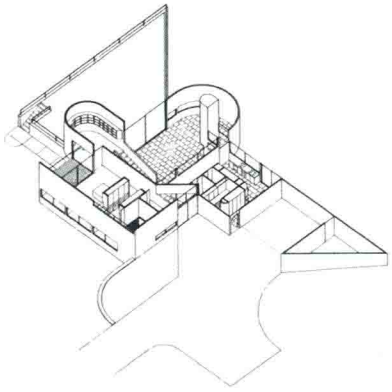
The materiality was also basic: formica cabinets, vinyl tile floors, electric heat and cedar siding on the interior and exterior. The selection of materials in these first houses, which I built as well as designed and how they were detailed was thoroughly considered. Even though they look simple, craft and longevity were and always have been pertinent obligations of the work.

An elevated triangular terrace would also play a key role in orchestration of the Goldberg Residence (10), completed on a wooded site near Manchester, Connecticut, in the same year. In this instance, the two-story format is poised at the crest of a hill down which it subtly unfolds so as to culminate in the aforementioned terrace. On the entrance side, the house appears as a single-story structure, while organized about a split-level section, with the children's bedrooms being situated half-a-level below the main living floor and the master bedroom suite being conversely positioned half-a-level above. At his juncture in the evolution of his houses, Gwathmey began to move away from the Amagansett ideal, typical of the domestic work of the Five who conceived of the house as a freestanding aesthetic object. Instead, Gwathmey engendered a whole series of houses in which the expansive topographic aim was to extend the centrifugal form of the house out into the surrounding landscape, either as outriding terraces spinning off the centroid of the house or as timber *passerelle* running off out into the dunes.

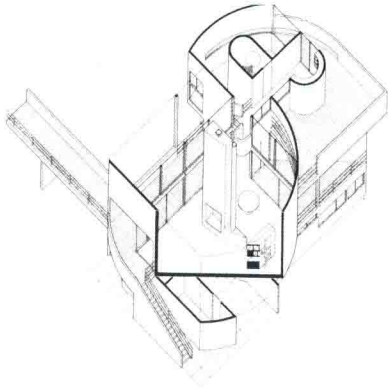
The Amagansett parti becomes greatly expanded in the two Steel Residences (11,12), constructed in the same year in Bridgehampton, New York. In these twin residences, built for two generations of the same family, Gwathmey plays with the idea of inflating the previously subordinate cylindrical elements to such an extent that they plastically encompass and overwhelm the basic orthogonal format of the rest of the house.



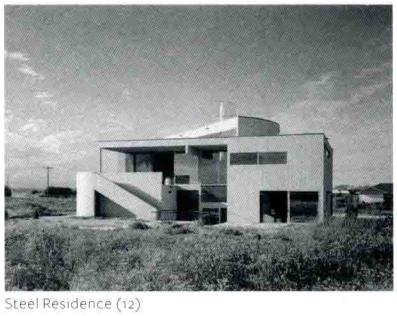
Sedacca Residence (9)



Goldberg Residence (10)



Steel Residence (11)



Steel Residence (12)