

VINEYARD

Summer 2004

\$3.50

# style

Artisans ♦ Gardening

Trends ♦ Home ♦ Cuisine ♦ Interiors ♦ Shopping

The Land and  
Lightscapes

of artist

**Bill McLane**

**HOME PORTRAIT**

**Building Bridges  
in the Woods**

**OUTDOORS**

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**All Decked Out**

**CUISINE**

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# bridge building in the woods

By John Budris  
Photography by Charlie Utz

**O**n the day before Ruth Siegel passed away, she and daughter Ellen Wolfe walked across the Brooklyn Bridge. In the year preceding that memorable stroll, mother and daughter built another kind of bridge, across a generation rather than a river: they built a house.

“We intended that both my parents would spend their last years with us in their own small guesthouse, connected with our daily lives, but with their own sense of home and space,” says Ellen. Her father, Jerry Siegel, did not live to see that dream fulfilled, but mother and daughter indeed had the chance to collaborate as both designers and very, very close neighbors.

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The sweet place setting designed by ceramic artist Ruth Siegel (above left) seems to echo the personal sense of family and togetherness that was always shared at this table.





Architect, homeowner, and home dweller combined their talents and wisdom to create a grand space all within a demure 800 square foot restriction, a kind of gallery that is not only a living space but a celebration of the union of art, work, and home. The first challenge Cambridge architect

Doug Okun took on was blending the styles, look and materials of the main house with guest quarters (above). The primary structure was a seven-year-old contemporary home in the West Tisbury woods.



bridge building  
continued







It would not be the first of their shared creations. Both artists with eyes and hands for work, Ruth was a confidante while Ellen was opening the *Once in a Blue Moon* gallery in Edgartown and her other enterprises in Boston. "This project was rather more delicate and all-encompassing, to say the least," says Ellen.

In fact, the making of the guesthouse was a sixth-degree collaboration, so to speak, involving the opinions and wills of architect, builder, husband and wife, plus two aging parents, all of whose needs would precisely intersect. Add to that the scrupulous eye of the West Tisbury building inspector, whose hawk-like

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The overall design strategy succeeds in bringing a sense of the outside to the indoors, expanding and leading the eye to the woods beyond. One particular nuance expertly accomplishes this visual invitation. The tinted concrete fireplace shelf (above) extends the length of the hearth and runs uninterrupted through an exterior wall to the patio. The sense of space was further strengthened by using only one flooring material, a reflective polished Travertine, throughout the entire house.



bridge building  
*continued*







**The vaulting, shed roof structures (left) that make up the living and sleeping spaces pour light from high and low windows, further emphasizing the sense of outside to the indoors. Decks on each side of the home further visually “expands” the floors and makes the limited space simply feel larger.**

attention would ascertain the guesthouse did not exceed the 800-square-foot maximum: the small project was grander than it seemed at first.

Among the first challenges Cambridge architect Doug Okun took on was the blending of main house with guest quarters. The primary structure was a seven-year-old contemporary home in the West Tisbury woods, an anomaly on an Island infatuated with cedar shingles and colonial lines. Ellen and Ruth’s vision of the guesthouse ramped up the modern concept. “We wanted more angles, more glass, more light,” Ellen recalls. “The vocabulary of drama was the language this design must speak.”

Indeed, architect, homeowner, and home dweller combined to create exactly such a grand space on a demure footprint, a kind of gallery that is not only a living space but a celebration of

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**Ingeniously designed and functionally astute accents allow for comfortable management of small spaces - as is seen with the kitchen storage shelves (above).**

in her own words

## Ellen Wolfe

homeowner

**T**he impetus behind building our guesthouse was really the desire to have a family compound where my mom would live as close to us as possible without being under the same roof. Although we had worked on and even renovated many homes, this would be our first from the “drawing board to the final nail” undertaking and would have to satisfy the requirements of three very differently directed people who more or less shared a common aesthetic.

We knew we wanted the architecture to address our existing main house which had been built in 1986 by a developer for his own family and which was certainly more modern than most Vineyard homes. We knew, too, that not only should the new structure be compatible, it should extend the contemporary vocabulary of glass and light and drama. The town zoning regulations dictated the 800-square-foot size of the guesthouse.

We had initially contacted a Boston area husband-and-wife team of artists/builders with whom we had previously worked. It was they who introduced us to their architect friend, Doug Okun, from Cambridge, who they felt would be able to better expedite the project. It was a serendipitous meeting. In preparation, my mom and I pored over our extensive archive of *Architectural Digest* and *Metropolitan Home* magazines, ecstatic about the seemingly endless possibilities of poetic detail and the many ways in which the larger spaces could be sculpted. Narrowing the options was the hard part. There were more features that we loved than places to use them. Doug proved to be extraordinary. His design, developed over many months, took into account the most important aspect of all: that of making a very small house seem spacious. Discussion and debate were mostly lively, and only occasionally threatened our household harmony.

Besides being excited about the design of the house, we were incredibly pleased with our choices of architect and contractor, who, in addition to being highly competent, turned out to have the requisite patience, perseverance, and good will. **vs**



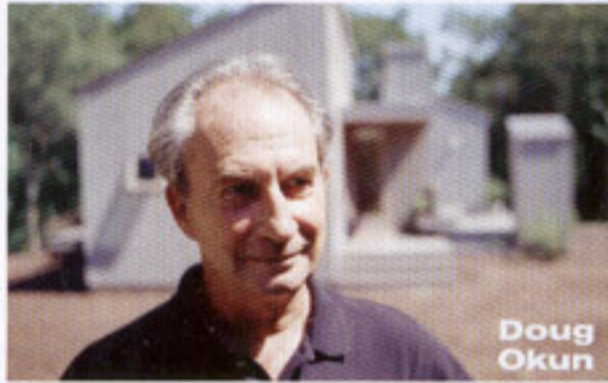


## in his own words

### Doug Okun

architect

In the late fall of 2000, I was approached by my friends Rick and Laura Brown, both of whom are on the faculty of Massachusetts College of Art, to help with the design of a house on Martha's Vineyard. Although they had previously worked with Ellen Wolfe and Edward Zlotkowski, who had bought a Victorian house renovated by them in Brookline, the Browns' current schedule was too full to take on a



Doug Okun

project of this scope or at such a distance from Boston. The initial meeting with the clients, however, took place on the Vineyard with all of us participating, the Browns, me, Ellen and Edward, and Ellen's mother, Ruth Siegel.

Although Ellen's parents were already living on the Island in Vineyard Haven, the family felt it was a good time to consider a single-level living space for them in close proximity to Ellen and Edward, whose property in West Tisbury could accommodate a "guest" house. Local zoning allowed for this second structure, but restricted the size to only 800 square feet. The goal of the project would be to create as spacious a dwelling as possible, one that would relate to the main house not only in materials and style, but would also sit in a kind of sculptural harmony, and would, by design, allow for both interaction and privacy.

Our first meeting was to set the tone of the project. Discussion was lively and far-ranging and everyone had input. It was clear that the clients, particularly Ellen and Ruth, both with backgrounds in the arts, were to be fully engaged in the process. The Browns, having introduced us and contributed in the first

stages, were now to step back as we began to investigate the many possible architectural schemes and models.

Crucial to the success of the project was development of the correct spatial relationship between the existing house, the new house, site access, and landscape. The property, with its thick woods and dense undergrowth, sloped more than was initially obvious and would be the yin of the relationship between the building and the land. The yang, to be proportionate, would require crisp forms and precise detailing. At this point, the existing house was measured and a model was built.

As the planning evolved, it became clear that the concept of a "spine"

through the house with the major living spaces at each end would maximize the sense of flow and be the best and most elegant solution. Clean walls and openings that evoked the classic Barcelona Pavilion helped to keep the forms simple. The house was organized with the kitchen closest to the main house with a long, low slit window to establish a comfortable visual relationship with the existing house and any visitors.

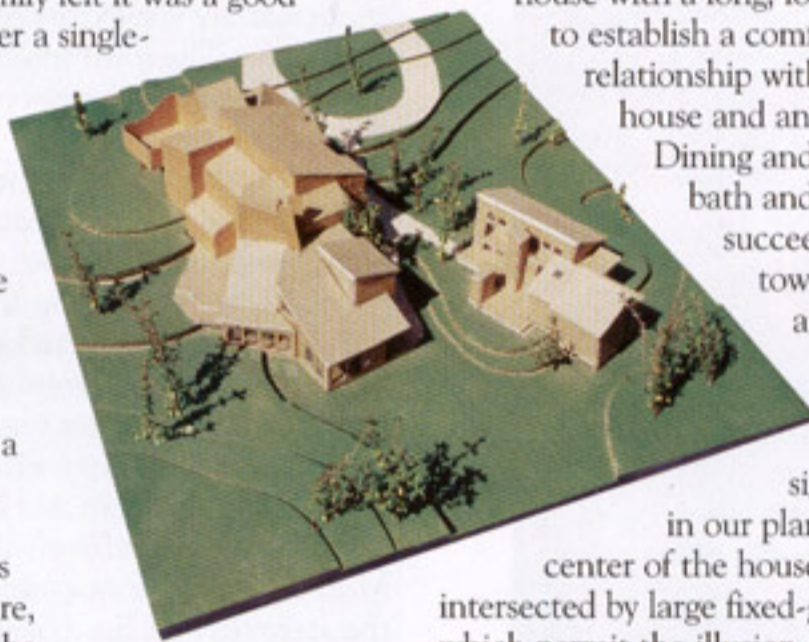
Dining and living areas, bath and bedroom succeeded each other toward the back and the woods.

Lighting would prove to be a

significant factor

in our planning. At the center of the house, the spine is intersected by large fixed-glass windows which permit the illusion of a great lateral flow of space. The sense of space was further strengthened by using only one flooring material, a reflective polished Travertine, throughout the entire house. High walls with small apertures allow indirect filtered light into each of the major spaces as well. Finally, direct and indirect lighting installed in each room facilitate subtle mood and scene changes.

Any successful residential project will necessarily reflect the personalities and aesthetic values of its owners as well as those of its architect. All of us involved in this project found it a meaningful and worthwhile collaboration. **vs**



High walls with small apertures (right) allow indirect filtered light into each of the major spaces. Direct and indirect lighting installed in each room facilitate subtle mood and scene changes. Practical and aesthetic use of built-in shelves in the bedroom (above) and elsewhere was important to utilize every inch of space.





the union of art, work, and home. Melding the practical and the aesthetic required just the right touch.

For starters, since the guesthouse was intended for an elderly couple, Okun banished thresholds altogether, slightly widened doorways and designed the bathroom fixtures and shower for easy access and possible wheelchair maneuverability. The shower has no surround on the floor level, but naturally drains from the gentle pitch, thus allowing clear and unobstructed passage. A single shatterproof glass panel on the fixture side acts as stationary "curtain."

"Doug was expert in delicately re-

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Architect Okun designed the bathroom fixtures and shower (above) for easy access and possible wheelchair maneuverability. The shower has no surround on the floor level, but naturally drains from the gentle pitch, thus allowing clear and unobstructed passage. A single shatterproof glass panel on the fixture side acts as stationary "curtain."

suggesting some of his ideas over the course of time, which we gradually came to accept," says Ellen. "And they turned out to be brilliant in how they worked."

One subject of such perseverance was Okun's choice of flooring: oversized squares of Travertine marble, which create a uniform surface throughout the entire home. The light-hued marble not only reflects the sunlight but also creates the perfect medium under which radiant heat warms right to the bone. The single-medium flooring further adds to the sense of space and grandeur, making the 800-square-foot home feel palatial.

The overall design strategy succeeds in bringing a sense of the outside to the indoors, expanding and leading the eye

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## bridge building

continued

Okun designed the basement space with foundation windows to illuminate Ruth's studio with natural light and harmonize with the overall design.



to the woods beyond. One particular nuance expertly accomplishes this visual invitation. The tinted concrete fireplace shelf extends the length of the hearth and runs uninterrupted through an exterior wall to the patio.

"This really lends a feeling of being in both places at the same time," says

Ellen. The mottled gray leopard-spot finish was unexpected, but a surprise all gradually came to admire.

The vaulting, shed roof structures that make up the living and sleeping spaces pour light from high windows, further emphasizing the sense of expansion. A floor-to-ceiling wall of

cabinets on the north side provides ample storage and sufficiently substitutes for a walk-in pantry.

Since Ruth was a lifelong potter, and had no intention of abandoning her craft, Okun designed the basement space to accommodate her artistic needs. Perfectly placed foundation windows illuminate the



Floor to ceiling windows in the bedroom (left center) creates the illusion of spaciousness and again brings the outside in. The contemporary design of the guest house (left) somehow blends into the West Tisbury landscape.

basement with natural light and harmonize with the overall design. The exterior entrance provides an easy and safe passageway even for the elderly.

"My mother even designed a wooden, slatted skirt that surrounds the outside perimeter of the decks to keep out the critters," says Ellen. That

addition not only adds to the attractiveness of the design, but functions perfectly.

Constructing the home was also a test for West Tisbury builder Jack Gray, a man at ease with any building project but unaccustomed to hovering homeowners. "And I must say he is a

man of enormous skill and patience to match," says Ellen.

On a warm Sunday afternoon, Ellen Wolfe looks from her back deck, not across the water, but across a yet-to-be lawn, and warmly smiles at the eternal bridge she and her mother raised in the West Tisbury woods. **vs**