

Nick Martin: A Man and His Architecture

Mixing space, geometry, and light

By Amanda M. Fairbanks, photos by Durell Godfrey | February 15, 2016 - 11:00am

Nick Martin is a man in perpetual motion.

Before sitting down for a recent interview, Mr. Martin had already had four meetings, two conference calls, and signed a contract for his latest project — all before lunchtime.

In 1998, after more than a decade spent honing his skills at various Manhattan-based architecture firms, Mr. Martin decided to take a gamble on the South Fork, drawn to the promise of a better quality of life, its close proximity to the city, and above all, its natural beauty and shifting light. He never looked back.

Mr. Martin took a position with James Merrell Architects in Sag Harbor before striking out on his own in 2000, first opening an office in East Hampton and later moving his 10-person firm to Sagaponack. In 2004, he launched 4MA Builders, which offers soup-to-nuts services from new construction to custom furniture.

Over the years, Mr. Martin has designed more than three dozen houses in East Hampton. In 2014, he worked on the Orogold boutique (conceiving of its 11 layers of shiny, white lacquer) on Newtown Lane in East Hampton Village and put the finishing touches on a 24,000-square-foot private residence outside Washington, D.C., among other projects. Last summer, he designed Wölffer Kitchen, a restaurant in Sag Harbor, overseeing the process in record time, five months from start to finish.

“Sometimes I do too many things,” he readily conceded, over a cup of chamomile tea, one recent afternoon at the Living Room restaurant at c/o the Maidstone. “I generally have a lot of energy.”

Besides a head cold, Mr. Martin was also recovering from a back injury, the result of an overzealous tennis game. Whether sailing, rock climbing, or kite surfing, he admits to being deeply competitive. Midway through a tournament at East Hampton Indoor Tennis, he felt an unmistakable pinch. But rather than admit defeat, he promptly downed two Advil, and played a final set.

On many mornings, he’s up at 5:30 a.m., often to go surfing before tackling a full day’s work, and to spend time with his wife, Christina, and his young family. The couple have a 14-year-old daughter and 4-year-old and nearly 2-year-old sons. Later in the afternoon, he might fit in a quick game of tennis, adjourning after dinner to his “jam barn,” where he plays guitar and sings with friends.

In a given year, Mr. Martin tackles somewhere between 7 and 12 new projects, a delicate balance given a seasonal market that demands quick turnaround. Often, designing and building occurs in tandem, with most houses averaging about a year and a half from start to finish. Word-of-mouth referrals generate the bulk of his business.

In 2005, after buying a weekend house overlooking Three Mile Harbor on Clamshell Avenue in the Northwest Woods section of East Hampton, Robert McLain went in search of architect. Mr. McLain works as head of



The dining and living rooms, on the split-level first floor, are separated by panes of glass. The walls and floors are pickled white oak.

investments for Latin America at J.P. Morgan Chase. His partner, Alberto Blanquel, an interior designer and artist, said the old house on the site resembled a department store. “It was very formal, very cold, very plain,” he said. Mr. McLain reached out to Mr. Martin after a silver-roofed mahogany and cedar house at the intersection of Cedar Street and Osborne Lane repeatedly caught his eye.

“Nick is easy to talk to and he understands you,” Mr. Blanquel said during a visit to the five-bedroom, five-bathroom house. He and Mr. McLain, along with Cody, a Labradoodle, divide their time between East Hampton and an apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. “We love this house.”

Over the years, Mr. Martin has tackled several different aspects of the 4,300-square-foot house. He first overhauled its interior in 2010. “Of the original house, there’s just a bathroom, part of the living room, and part of a bedroom left — everything else was redone,” he explained. Four years later, Mr. Martin designed an outdoor pavilion made of mahogany and aluminum — and a vanishing-edge hot tub. In June, he completed a new kitchen, added steel and cedar exterior walls, and built a “minimalist crystalline glass box,” designed to disappear from view and to bring the clouds overhead seemingly within reach.

“The project wasn’t easy because of its complex grade and site layout,” Mr. Martin said, explaining the dual challenge of neighbors in close proximity and a 26-foot height difference on two sides of the sloping, wooded property. During the initial reconfiguration, he paid particular attention to each season’s rising and setting sun. “How do you make a space so that in each part of the house, in each season, a dynamic light energy unifies the house?” Mr. Martin asked.

Once inside the spacious yet modest residence, pickled white oak floors and walls create warmth and a glass wall reflects contrasting light. The kitchen now contains white oak cabinets, concrete countertops, and handmade green tiles. Just off the kitchen, two layers of glass create insulation, with ventilation supplied and then returned from either side to prevent condensation. The latest addition allows for unobstructed views of the water.

Though the cubic house, made of cedar, steel, aluminum, and glass, is technically three levels, it includes two half-levels to mediate the steep grade, allowing for space to exist beyond single planes — or for the dining room, kitchen, living room, and den to meld seamlessly on the split first floor. “If you mix space, geometry, and light properly,” Mr. Martin said, “architecture reads as individual, dynamic, and timeless.”

During the initial gut renovation, Mr. Martin converted the first-floor master bedroom to a guest room and moved the master bedroom upstairs, across from two additional guest rooms. On the second floor, he added two generous bathrooms, the master equipped with a custom bathtub and a shower built for two — and previously unseen harbor views.

The basement includes a laundry room, a small gym, a television room, and a separate guest suite with its own sliding glass door so that guests can come and go freely — to the pool or the bay without stepping upstairs.

A peripatetic childhood led Mr. Martin to create a sense of home — both for himself and his clients. His parents met in Washington, D.C. Harry, his father, gathered intelligence for the federal government. A native of Germany, Brunhilde, his mother, worked as a translator. Within two years, the couple had married and moved to Bogota, Colombia, where Nick, their second child, was born. The family crisscrossed the globe, moving nearly a dozen times throughout Mr. Martin’s childhood, his father later working as an international banker.

Early on, living in Buffalo, Brooklyn Heights, and Buenos Aires, Mr. Martin came to think that “everything was changeable, modifiable, and able to be improved.” Living in a nine-bedroom Victorian house in Rye, N.Y., or a five-bedroom townhouse in London’s Hampstead Heath, he paid close attention to how some houses ultimately function better than others.

At 14, Mr. Martin enrolled at the Salisbury School, an all-boys boarding school in Connecticut. The school instilled in him an unflinching discipline, with only 14 of the original 75 members of his class making it to graduation. “My grades were good, but they weren’t fantastic,” Mr. Martin said. He then went to the College of Wooster in Ohio, intending to study art and economics.

Growing up, his mother, who later became a painter, exposed him to archaeological sites — whether Mayan or Egyptian ruins during frequent travels. In college, a 12-country global program called a Semester at Sea further enhanced his love of architecture.

The next year, a career program run through Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design solidified his career choice. From there, he went to Pratt Institute, completing a five-year architecture program in three and a half years. He secured his first job with the prestigious Gwathmey Siegel Architects in Manhattan while still an undergraduate.

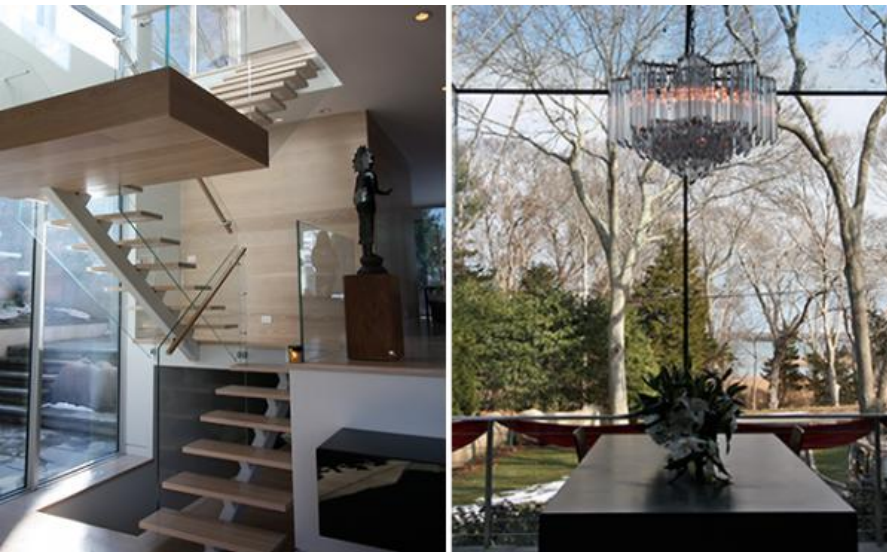
Mr. Martin, a member of the Village of Sagaponack’s Architectural and Historic Review Board and the Breakwater Yacht Club, noted that his firm offers one-on-one apprenticeships for middle school and high school students. At 46, he said his next decade will focus on giving back to the South Fork community.

“I’m less concerned with a legacy and more concerned with continually improving the craft,” he said. He eschews quick and easy cookie-cutter styles, preferring instead that each project — and client — forge a unique path.

“What I’m trying to do is not easily bought and sold. It takes more time to understand what I do and to believe in the work I’m doing,” he said. “Ultimately, it’s about trust.” For now, Mr. Martin said he is most interested in building relationships. “It’s the humanity and art that I’m after — a bigger sensibility.”



Nick Martin is seen in the latest addition to the house, a minimalist crystalline glass box with a breakfast table, 1950s chandelier, and unobstructed views of Three Mile Harbor.



The staircase, made of pickled white oak and glass, reflects light and draws the eye upward.



The cubic-shaped house reflects each season's shifting light.

Connor Harrigan



Cody, a 90-pound Labradoodle, enjoys being inside as well as out.



A pinwheel mirror reflects objects in the living room as well as trees and light.



The kitchen now has white oak cabinets, concrete countertops, handmade tiles, and a six-burner Viking stove.



A wooden Buddha sits on a lacquered cabinet near the front entrance.



The master bedroom and spacious bathroom allow for previously unseen harbor views.



About the Authors



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Reporter

Amanda M. Fairbanks previously worked in the editorial department of The New York Times and covered higher education for The Huffington Post. Her writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Boston Globe, Newsweek, The Atlantic, The Hechinger Report, Education Week. A graduate of Smith College, she spent two years at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism.

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