



Lucy and Phil Suarez's glass and steel beach house replaced a mass recreational wooden structure that burned down. Their new home has triple-glazed windows that are not only hurricane rated, but coated to minimize the penetration of ultraviolet and infrared light.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONYA TONKOW FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

High and Mighty

With 25 tons of glass and 5,000-pound I-beams, Richard Meier creates a Fire Island cottage to withstand any storm.

By JULIE SCELFO

The story of how Richard Meier, one of the world's most-celebrated architects, came to design a small, one-bedroom house on a barrier island likely destined for extinction goes back nearly a half-century.

It was 1969, and Phil and Lucy Suarez were newlyweds. Mr. Suarez, 27, would eventually become the business partner of the acclaimed chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, but at the time he had just co-

founded a company that became very successful at producing popular commercials and music videos. He and Mrs. Suarez, 24, had bought their first apartment, in Gramercy Park, and were contemplating a renovation. When Mr. Suarez asked a colleague to recommend an architect, he was given the name of Richard Meier, a rising star already becoming known for his dramatic stark-white buildings.

Mrs. Suarez had never heard of him. "So Lucy calls him and says, 'I want to see your portfolio,'" recalled Mr. Suarez, now 73. "And Richard said, 'Excuse me?'"

After seeing a photograph of one of Mr. Meier's houses, though, she was astonished. "I saw this house and said: 'Oh, my

God! If you can do this, you can do our apartment.'"

Over the course of the renovation, the three became close friends, a bond that endured even after Mrs. Suarez redecorated the all-white interior Mr. Meier had meticulously made for them, introducing a riot of textures and colors. ("I want you to be prepared for a little bit of a change," she told him during a strategic phone call before their annual Christmas gathering. "He said, 'You can do what you want with your house.' Then he called back and said, 'What is it you did?'"

It was around this time that George Lois, the legendary ad man and Mr. Sua-

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1. Phil and Lucy Suarez's house is something of an oddity in Fair Harbor, a steel-and-glass structure among conventional wooden beach houses.
2. A cantilevered roof offers shade for outdoor entertaining, and 1,700 square feet of decking provides plenty of space.
3. Mrs. Suarez regards the home's all-white color palette as an opportunity to decorate with brightly colored furnishings, like the outdoor dining chairs from Paola Lenti.
4. Although the interior gives the impression of being wide open, the kitchen and television area are concealed from the main living space by a white plane, as is the master suite upstairs.
5. On the small balcony off the master bedroom is a choice by Francesco Rota for Paola Lenti.



6. The built-in bed in the master suite was designed by Richard Meier as an extension of the architecture. Above the windows are slats that hide the shades when they're not in use. Although Mr. Meier prefers white, Mrs. Suarez chose blue sheets from Pratesi.
7. A skylight in the master bathroom illuminates the sink and mirror. A (hidden) frosted-glass pocket door can be pulled out for privacy.
8. The all-white kitchen has open shelves and wide-plank walnut floors.
9. Sliding glass doors in the kitchen and living area open the house to bay breezes.



10. Beside the Saarinen Worm Chair is a Tube Light by Eileen Gray, designed in 1927 and re-issued by ClassiCon.

High and Mighty

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rez's first boss, invited the couple to visit him in Fair Harbor, a small town on Fire Island with wooden bungalows and a bon-vivant-meets-bohemian personality. Mrs. Suarez, who has a reputation for being the last one at a party, instantly fell in love with the communal cocktails and barefoot dining.

The couple bought a bay-front summer cottage in Fair Harbor in 1971, and several years later upgraded to what was then an expensive midcentury modern house on a quieter street, paying about \$80,000. Like most homes in the area, it was a wooden structure with no air-conditioning or insulation, but it had views across the bay and enough deck space for a grill and plenty of visitors. For nearly four decades, the Suarezes hosted an endless stream of friends. And over time, they purchased two adjacent waterfront houses for guest quarters, creating a small compound. "There was a lot of love in the walls here," Mr. Suarez said.

That was what made it so painful when an electrical fire took down the house in 2011.

"It was 40 years of pictures, and all the tchotchkes and gifts that were given to us," Mrs. Suarez said. "Everything that was something to do with the beach, something to do with our friends."

They were still reeling several weeks

later when they had one of their regular dinners with Mr. Meier, and he offered to help them rebuild. That an architect who had by this time won the Pritzker Prize, architecture's version of the Nobel, and was known for ambitious projects like the Getty Center in Los Angeles would have an interest in something so small and possibly ephemeral was astounding to them.

But Mr. Meier loved the idea. After almost 50 years of practicing as an architect, it was like coming full circle: The first house he ever designed and built was on Fire Island, in 1961, for the artist and illustrator Saul Lambert and his wife. ("They had \$9,000 to spend," Mr. Meier recalled. "I didn't have a lot to do in those days, so I said fine.")

Soon they were having regular meetings at his office. Mrs. Suarez told him she was hoping for something with the charm of the old wood house, but early in the process the couple was forced to confront an unwelcome reality: Because of new construction codes aimed at minimizing storm damage, the new house would have to be elevated.

As Amalia Rusconi-Clerici, one of the designers, said: "They were used to having a house that was pretty much on the ground; now you have this grand entrance that you walk up. It's a new concept we all had to accept."

Once they came to terms with that, however, the couple became more open to the idea that Mr. Meier envisioned, something entirely different from the original. But building the \$2.25 million steel-and-glass

structure he had in mind presented a number of challenges on Fire Island.

For starters, they had to dig 10 feet below sea level to bury the wood piles. Then they had to put a steel frame on top that could support 25 tons of glass.

Sam Wood, the contractor, had been working on Fire Island for 30 years and had never seen anything like it. "It's built like a mini-skyscraper," he said.

"We had ironworkers on the job for two months straight," he added. "An ironworker on Fire Island? Maybe once before in 25 years we've welded on job sites here."

What's more, some of the I-beams weighed 5,000 pounds, so he had to rent a barge-mounted crane to hoist them onto the site directly from the ferry. But when the first load arrived, he discovered the bay was too shallow for the barge to get anywhere near the shore.

"So one by one," he said, "we brought every single steel column from the dock up to the house by wagon and dolly."

Still, all that effort proved worthwhile. Before the house was completed, its first test arrived in 2012, with Hurricane Sandy. And while many homes on the island were destroyed, the mini-skyscraper survived unscathed.

As Mr. Suarez put it, "If that house falls down, then literally the island is gone."

True, it is something of an oddity here, a steel-and-glass structure that sticks out among the more conventional beach houses. But maybe because of its modest size — just 2,000 square feet — or maybe because of the laid-back attitude of the community, there has been little backlash or gossip among the neighbors.

Mr. Vongerichten, a frequent guest, offered another explanation. "A lot of people who are successful have people who are jealous of them," he said. "But with Phil and Lucy, you just want to hang out with them."

An architect comes full circle: The first house he ever designed and built was on Fire Island.