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Field of Vision

In the Hamptons, where potato farms once thrived, architect Paul Masi, working with designer Damon Liss, raises the elemental barn to a new level of sophistication

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WERE RIP VAN WINKLE to awaken in the Hamptons after one of his long naps, he would be gobsmacked to see how the old potato fields have given way to vineyards, and the farmhouses and cottages to McMansions, and how the area's casual, largely rural way of life has been transformed by the urbanity that has invaded country life: same sun, same ocean, same flat landscape, but a lot of Chardonnay and bruschetta now on Texas-sized wraparound porches.

But sometimes, the more sophisticated side of sophistication is getting back to basics. When a young Manhattan couple with three children called on Long Island architect Paul Masi, of Bates Masi + Architects, to design a roomy weekend house on the South Fork, they wanted understatement, to better fit in with the existing neighborhood of older homes settled in a mature landscape. Instead of commissioning an imposing house they might flip were the right offer to come along, they wanted a home that could be enjoyed over generations. An heirloom, not a trophy. Detail and quality mattered. ▷

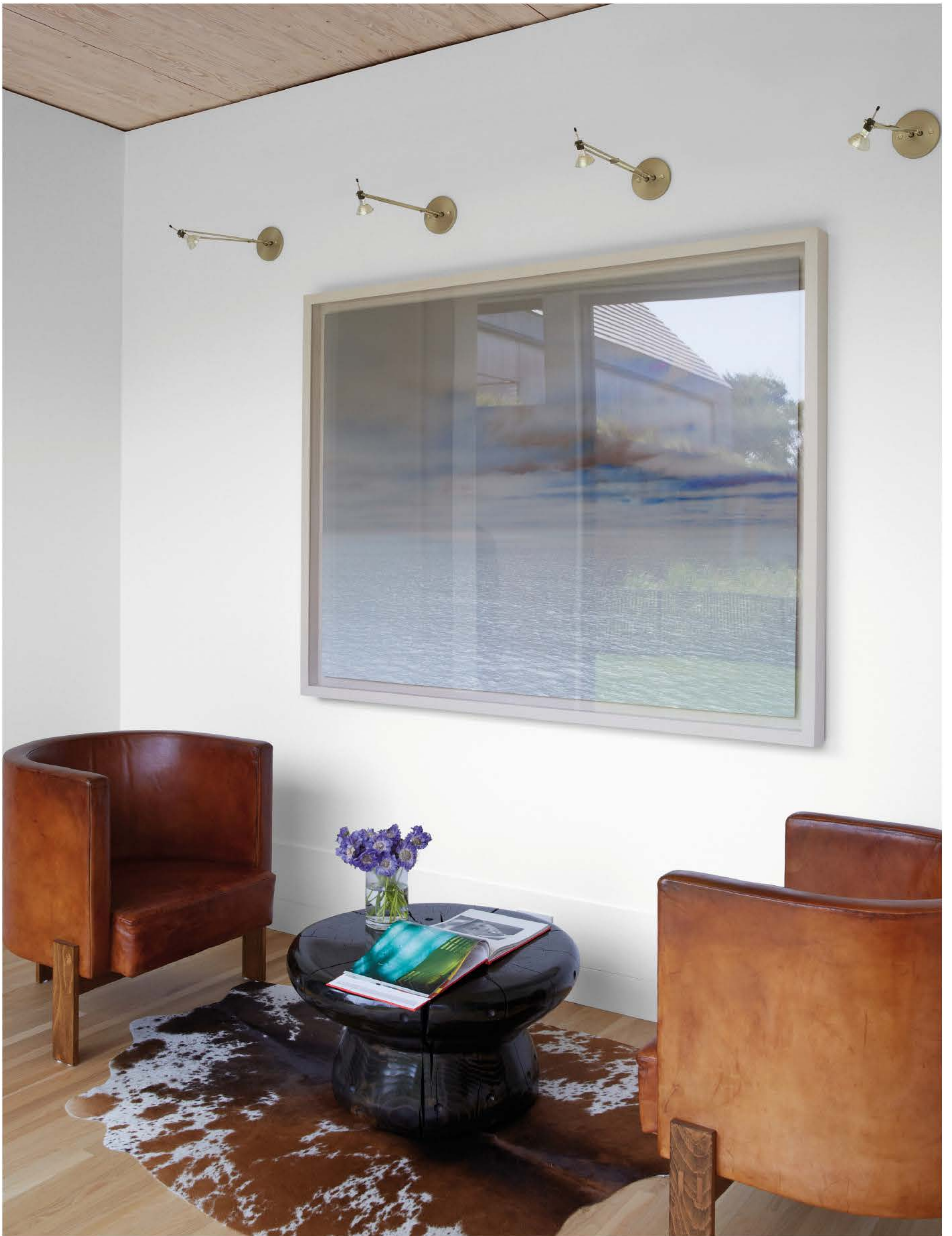


















Based in nearby Sag Harbor, Masi—who has three kids of his own and a full lacrosse dance card on weekends—understood: His clients wanted family time at the beach in a house that didn’t overpower the landscape they came out to enjoy. To root his design in unpretentious simplicity, he looked past the Shingle Style houses so popular in these parts, some inflated like the Michelin Man, back to the vanishing native potato barns, with their big volumes dug into the earth or nested among grassy berms (potatoes like to keep cool).

“The potato barn was a simple vernacular form that engaged the landscape and fit the community,” says Masi. “Each place has its own interesting history, which we like to recall. We rework familiar forms so that they become our own.”

Glimpsed through the trees of the country lane passing through the neighborhood, the house looks bearded, with tall native grasses growing in long, low planters and hirsute berms rising to the second story. At certain angles, the berms seem to halve the building’s height. The house is segmented into four semidetached barns, each shaped with the straightforwardness of a Monopoly house, its crisp corners and sharp silhouette revealing the eye of a modernist.

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Masi used every arrow in his architectural quiver to break down the scale of the 8,500-square-foot house. Each barn is covered top to bottom in oversized shingles dimensioned to make the volume look smaller. Masi sequenced the barns into an *L*, which embraces a pool and an expansive lawn, so you can’t see the whole house at one time.

If the agenda outside was making nice with the neighborhood, inside it was all about family values. Working closely with interior designer Damon Liss, the architect conceived the floor plan to gather the several generations who converge here, along with guests, around shared activities. The barn form offers generous, lofty volumes that open onto one another without the compartmentalization typical of Shingle Style houses. A kitchen island, crafted in walnut and seating eight, leads to a round bleached-maple dining table, opening onto a den with a double-sided fireplace and a comfy banquette. Behind the dining area, a long desk equipped with electrical outlets keeps kids on computers tethered. An adjacent playroom sports a bulletin-board wall. The children are not exiled to their own wing, out of sight and out of mind.

Like a longhouse in Asia, the spaces open onto a patio (outfitted with a serious barbecue) and the house’s playground beyond, with its lawn, pool, and small prairie of grasses. Inside and out, the house is layered for activity, all within earshot of crashing waves.

Liss took the family-friendly warmth cultivated by the architects and translated its spirit into fabrics, colors, and furnishings that dovetail with the architecture to form a seamless whole. “The shingled ceilings and natural woods were such beautiful materials to pick up on,” says Liss. “We tried to blend the modern tastes of our clients with the architecture, so that the interior was both rustic and inviting *and* refined and modern.” The designer used sophisticated pieces to balance the rusticity, including spidery 1950s Italian chandeliers and colorful Brazilian chairs in the voluminous living room.

The result is a rich, warm interior without clutter. “We give pieces space so that they can breathe,” says Liss. Fabrics are pale, durable, and nubby—light and tactile, like the house. “The interiors needed to be year-round, beachy but not summery, and child-friendly. Like the architects, we designed everything to strengthen the bond of the family.” ■

