

# Residence

THE HAMPTONS REAL ESTATE, HOME AND DESIGN WEEKLY



Named “Inversion,” this Wainscott home by Barnes Coy Architects has an inverted peaked roof, a design choice that created a workaround for a zoning restriction and ended up being a unique and distinct feature in the home.

## Work Of Barnes Coy Collected

BY CAILIN RILEY

When they were working together at the Bridgehampton architecture firm they co-founded in 1993, Robert Barnes and Chris Coy would often collaborate at a simple trestle table located between their desks, sketching out ideas on the same piece of drafting paper for the high-end, modern, single-family homes they’d become famous for. It was a way of working that spoke to the special connection they had as business partners and life-long friends, and a creative synergy that allowed them to become, over time, some

### Bridgehampton firm’s first monograph is dedicated to the late Rob Barnes

of the most sought-after architects not just on the East End but in the country. Over the course of a quarter-century-long partnership, the friends — who first met as 10-year-olds attending a summer sailing program at Devon Yacht Club in Amagansett and later attended boarding school together — developed a reputation for their commitment to a modernist style that did not waver despite whatever trends came and went. They built minimalist homes, where the natural elements present at the building site and the qualities of the light drove the design.

That work is featured in a monograph that was published last year, titled “Assembled in Light: The Houses of Barnes Coy Architects.” The large tome — what some may call a coffee table book — is as aesthetically impressive as the houses featured in it, thanks to stunning photography by Michael Munday, who shot the Obama White House for Architectural Digest. Unlike many other monographs, it has a strong narrative presence as well. Architecture critic Alastair Gordon, who got his start at The East Hampton Star and went

on to write for The New York Times and Architectural Digest, among other publications, had for years gently urged Mr. Barnes and Mr. Coy to consider featuring their work in a monograph. In the preface, Mr. Coy describes Mr. Gordon as “uniquely qualified” to write the book, not only because of his encyclopedic knowledge of modern architecture, but because of the close friendship he had with both men over the years — he, too, attended that summer sailing program at Devon many years ago. “Assembled in Light” is the result of a publishing partnership between Gordon deVries Studio, the publishing arm owned by Gordon deVries and his wife, Barbara, and Rizzoli, which handled marketing

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*‘During that period in the ’80s and ’90s when everyone was tearing down modernist houses from the ’50s and ’60s and replacing them with neo-traditional McMansions, they really stayed pretty true to a certain vision.’*



“Assembled in Light: The Houses of Barnes Coy Architects,” written by Alastair Gordon, gives an inside look into the high-end, modern homes designed by architects Rob Barnes and Chris Coy. MICHAEL MUNDY



*A design always starts with the site, using strong and durable materials is a must and capturing the beauty of the light is of utmost importance.*

**MONOGRAPH:**  
*Work Of Barnes  
Coy Architects  
Collected In Book*

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and distribution.

In his one-page introduction to the book, Mr. Coy — pictured on the facing page looking down from atop a curving flight of stairs — notes that the “true preface is to say that Rob Barnes is no longer with us.”

During the development of the book, Mr. Barnes died unexpectedly in September 2018, at the age of 68, after suffering a heart attack while exercising at a gym in New York City. Mr. Coy writes: “Now the book itself must stand as a tribute to Rob’s exceptional career as an architect, as well as being a celebration of our 25-year partnership, and a critical look at the firm’s residential work over the past decade.”

That is precisely what “Assembled in Light” does. As noted in a foreword by Pilar Viladas, a New York Times and Architectural Digest contributor, the book dives into the core principles that have informed the work of Barnes Coy Architects — that a design always starts with the site, that using strong and durable materials is a must and, of course, that capturing the beauty of the light is of utmost importance.

For Mr. Gordon, Mr. Barnes’s and Mr. Coy’s determination to remain true to that set of principles despite outside forces is worthy of veneration.

“During that period in the ’80s and ’90s when everyone was tearing down modernist houses from the ’50s and ’60s and replacing them with neo-traditional McMansions,

This oceanfront Water Mill home, dubbed “Liquidity,” features a swimming pool built above grade and a parlor indoors with a window that looks into the pool for watching swimmers go by, like an aquarium.

MICHAEL MUNDY

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they really stayed pretty true to a certain vision,” he said.

He pointed out that they were both influenced by several highly respected modernist architects, with Mr. Barnes working for Norman Jaffe for a period of time before striking out on his own with Mr. Coy.

“The way Jaffe thought about light and landscape influenced Rob,” Mr. Gordon said.

Despite the reputation they have now, it wasn’t always easy for Mr. Barnes and Mr. Coy to hold on to those sensibilities.

“When they went into partnership, they had some tough years because they refused to do the work that was very popular at the time,” Mr. Gordon said. “To their credit, they really stuck to their guns and in the long run, that’s a good thing. You eventually get a credibility base that’s much stronger than that of people who just shift with every changing fashion.”

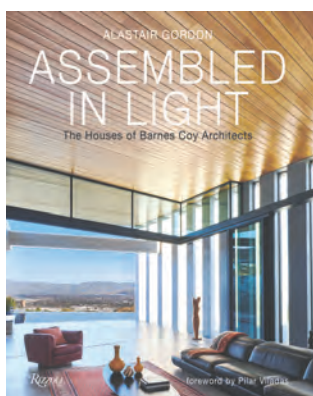
Clients who were willing to be experimental and daring helped put them on the map, he said.

Once their reputation was solidified, Barnes Coy Architects took off and started to build the kind of unique and impressive homes in the monograph. A home featured in the early pages, dubbed “Liquidity,” is a perfect example of unique work they’ve done. The 11,000-square-foot home, on oceanfront property in Water Mill, features glass curtain walls on both the north and south facades, but its most impressive feat is a 10-foot-deep, transparent glass swimming pool built 20 feet above grade to capture ocean views. Because the pool is made from mirrored glass, it was able to have large, transparent “windows” facing west, south and east. The eastern side of the pool becomes the back wall of an indoor parlor, allowing anyone sitting in there to see swimmers as they float by, as in an aquarium. In deference to the site, Mr. Barnes and Mr. Coy built into the design a long, curving line along the northern end of the house that echoes the natural curving line that defines the setback from a saltwater pond to the north, which Mr. Gordon says “anchors it to the site.”

Mr. Barnes and Mr. Coy designed homes that have box-like elements, but their ability to think outside of the proverbial box is what sets them apart. Another home featured in the book, which they call “Inversion,” has a unique design element that came about as a work-around to comply with local zoning laws in East Hampton. Mr. Coy cites it as one of his favorites. Located on oceanfront property in Wainscott, the house is “a good example of a very site-specific design because the shape of the house follows the twists and turns of the coastal erosion hazard line,” he said.

They faced a design constraint because of zoning laws that allowed pitched roofs to be built 32 feet above grade — which is the height they wanted — while allowing flat roofs — their desired choice — to be built only 25 feet above grade. So the architects decided to build a pitched roof, but in reverse, creating an inverted pyramid that was clad in teak and is, in effect, an indoor sculpture, which is lit up at night.

The book explores the inner



The cover of “Assembled in Light: The Houses of Barnes Coy Architects,” written by Alastair Gordon, with a foreword by architecture writer Pilar Viladas and photos by Michael Mundy.

workings of designing these houses, and how the design duo got it done, consistently, and kept getting better and better over the years.

“I think people are interested in a partnership that lasted as long as ours did,” Mr. Coy said, adding that he and Mr. Barnes would still be working together if Mr. Barnes had not died.

After cutting their teeth working for big firms in New York City and working on a wide range of projects, Mr. Coy said he and Mr. Barnes eventually figured out what they wanted to be.

“We formulated the idea that we’d form a small firm and focus on single-family houses,” he said. “We decided that houses were the front line of architecture; they have elements of many other building typologies.”

Co-designing every project was another tenet they stayed committed to over the years, handing over the day-to-day development of the projects to the rest of the firm’s team of architects only after collaboratively figuring out the initial design concept together.

A solid business plan was also a key to success, Mr. Coy said.

“We saw other partnerships crumble, and usually the problem was money. We never argued about money; we were both half partners, and the two of us were the only ones who owned the business, but we also decided from the first month that it would be a corporation and we’d be employees of the corporation and get regular salaries.”

Mr. Coy has carried on without Mr. Barnes for the last three years and said that while it’s been a lot more work and less fun without his longtime friend by his side, he is committed to continuing the work the firm does and maintaining the livelihood of his longtime employees.

Assessing the book and the work of Barnes Coy Architects over the decades, both Mr. Gordon and Mr. Coy said it isn’t easy to distill what the firm has done into a singular calling card kind of style. Despite that, the book makes it clear that the partnership was something special.

“I don’t think we have a Barnes Coy style, because we believe that architecture begins with the site, and with the family we’re designing for,” Mr. Coy said.

“This was one of the first times they had to put together who they were and what they’re about,” Mr. Gordon said. “I think a lot of people seeing the book are impressed by the quality of the work. You can lay very low, and they did for a long time. This is exciting for them, that people are getting to know the work.”

*‘To their credit, they really stuck to their guns.’*