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Terraced dunes

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Terraced dunes

Text: R.J. Weick

Built into the dune bluff on the eastern shores of Lake Michigan, this contemporary home gives sculptural impression of stepped and winding pathways, tiered decks and angular massing, and a composition of limestone, glass, and zinc cladding tempered by the warmth of eucalyptus. Intentionally engineered and carved into its steeply sanded plane, the residence invites contemplation of its series of volumes, offset angles, and versatile spaces that allow light and views deep within the home.

Designed as a family retreat, this lakefront home is inspired by generational memories of time spent at the beach and a vision of creating a place that would serve as a space to gather and to entertain with family and friends. There is a depth of detail, an exploration of traditional contemporary form, and a balance to its overall construction where space is informed by a need to accommodate both large groups of people and intimate gatherings amid a setting that embraces its lakefront waterscape. Sean Barry, owner, noted having grown up spending sum-

mers in the region with his family renting and then owning a place on the lake, he and his wife, Michelle Barry, decided as their family began to grow to build a retreat of their own.

“We knew what it was like living on the lake and we liked the views of the beach. We looked for a while and finally found this vacant lot on the lake. It seemed like the perfect setup: because the bluff was a lot higher than where we had lived before, we thought it would be important to create a home that doesn’t feel like you are walking four-to-five

stories down to get to the beach,” Barry said.

“We really wanted a place where we can have a family retreat for years to come, where [our kids] can come back to as they get married with their kids and spouses and feel like they have a place to go to,” Barry added.

To help realize their vision, the Barrys looked to the collaborative design and build team of Stoneberg & Gross Architects of Chicago, Gooch Design Studio LLC of Chicago, and Scott Christopher Homes of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Having worked with Gooch Design Studio in the past in the conversion of a 20,000-square-foot, old bow truss warehouse into his company’s new office space, Barry said they reached out to Wendell Gooch to tap his expertise in contemporary work. Established in 2001, Gooch Design Studio is a multidisciplinary interior design firm that specializes in high-end residential, commercial, and hospitality work. Led by Gooch, who has more than 35 years of experience, the studio’s team of academically trained architects and interior designers embrace a studied and collaborative approach to the design process, working with craftsmen, manufacturers, contractors, and other architects to bring their clients projects to fruition. It was through Gooch that they were then referred to Jack Stoneberg, principal architect of Stoneberg & Gross, to help with the design of the exterior and massing of the home.

“We wanted a really contemporary looking house, which is not something either [Michelle or I] had worked with in designing before. Most of the buildings I deal with are all vintage. I’m used to dealing with 1920s and 1960s style buildings and everything in between, but nothing really contemporary. We really loved the look and feel and the lines of it, it was just a little more challenging to pull together,” Barry said.

“Jack did a great job working with Michelle and me, because we both have strong opinions on what we like and how we blend those together. Jack did an amazing job incorporating our cascading concept on the lakeside of the property. I really worked with Jack more on the exterior and the massing, the massing of rooms, and finishes of the outside, and then Michelle really took off with Wendell and his team on the interiors. Both Jack and Wendell are the top in their field. I have never seen such attention to detail before,” Barry added.

For the last three decades, Stoneberg & Gross Architects, founded by Jack Stoneberg and Julie Gross, architect, has built a portfolio of work spanning residential, commercial, and public space projects, and honing a shared affinity for drawing, design, buildings, and innovative solutions. It was while still early on in the design process that the team also looked to bring in the expertise of the team at Scott Christopher Homes, as Stoneberg and Barry began interviewing a number of contractors. The site, which brought all the nuances and chal-



lenges common to dune bluffs and lakefront living—dune protection, zoning, narrow lot constraints—presented the additional technical and engineering task of solving high water erosion issues, which was familiar terrain for the Grand Rapids, Michigan-based team.

“We interviewed them and they came across very competent with what they could do. I talked with a couple of their clients, who were all really happy with them. I looked at the

jobs they had done, they had done what looked like some more complicated jobs working on a dune, because I knew we wanted to excavate out the dune so the house could kind of tier down toward the lake,” Barry said.

“I definitely felt like they were going to give me the attention, they were excited about the job, and I had some zoning questions and some building questions right off the bat and honestly, they jumped at it. They talked with the build-



ing and zoning departments and came back to me with answers to my questions before I had even hired them to do any work,” Barry added.

Scott Christopher Homes is a custom home builder specializing in new builds, renovation, home maintenance, and custom cabinetry and furniture work with more than 35 years of experience. Backed by a team of talented craftspeople and a build philosophy focused on honesty and a client-focused approach, Scott Christopher Homes is dedicated to customizing the build process to uniquely fit each client. Scott Christopher, owner of Scott Christopher Homes, noted he is inspired by bringing a client’s vision to reality and feels it is the team’s job to make the build process smooth and enjoyable—and recognizes for a project to be successful, it is a collaborative team effort.

“There are three questions we ask ourselves regarding the success of a project: Is the client happy? Does the client feel they received value

for the services that have been provided? Has it been a success for the entire team? For a project to be successful, I want us all to cross the finish line at the same time, smiling,” Christopher said. “We are professionals; our clients expect that, and I expect that of our team. We are to act and function as professionals in an industry that doesn’t always deliver that to clients.”

Christopher also said the clients envisioned a very modern and contemporary home that maximized views and outdoor living that could accommodate large groups for entertaining. While the property had already been picked out, it was still early in the design process when they became involved.

“The sooner you can get the team together, the better off you are going to be. We started the house and shortly thereafter, there were high water erosion issues. We had to build a revetment with steel pilings and steel panels, which wasn’t planned originally. It was wise on the



owners' part, because when we looked at the site originally with the owners, the water level was normal. It wasn't even a discussion or consideration at that time," Christopher said.

"I said, 'I can only guarantee Mother Nature wins every time,' so we decided to install the steel pilings before the house went in. He made the investment and had us install them, and by the time we had, the beach and the bluff were totally gone. The water was actually coming over top of the steel wall we put there and we had to add to it," Christopher added.

While the water has since receded to more normal levels, revealing the beach down below, other technical challenges in the build of the lakefront home comprise the unique angular massing of the structure itself. In both the floor plan and vertical walls, there are angles that are seven degrees offset of a right angle, or 90 degrees. Stainless steel toe-kicks and the lack of millwork casing offer another layer of inten-





tional, contemporary detail through dedicated craftsmanship and clean lines. There are large installations of glass that not only allow natural light deep into the home, but also provide connection to the view and landscape beyond, as its carefully edited materiality serves as neutral canvas for the blues and greens of the Lake Michigan shoreline.

“Sean utilizes architecture for the work they do, so he’s a deep thinker when it comes to design. So much thought was given to this, nothing was by accident and I think the finished product shows that,” Christopher said.

Some of the other intentional details of the home comprise the four bedrooms on the second floor designed with lake views and ensuite bathrooms that can serve as intimate spaces for family and friends to retreat to, a heating and cooling system to help mitigate solar heat gains in the summer and heat loss in the winter for some of the larger gathering spaces, and integrated sound control solutions to reduce noise levels.

“I’ll say right off the bat, there isn’t a corner or an inch of the house that hasn’t been thought through a half a dozen times or more.





I love the detail of this house. I think as you go through it, the more you look at it, the more you appreciate the craftsmanship, skill, and attention to details that went into it," Barry said. "I love the flow and lines of the house."

Lakeside, as the home opens outward, landscaped spaces and decks unfold down toward the lake in an intentional manner, creating pockets of intimacy and delight across its series of multi-tiered decks. From the lower level, embraced on both sides by the flanking arms of the house, an infinity-edged pool with a seven-foot waterfall extends forward as if to reach out to the lake's horizon, dissolving boundaries. There is a deck complete with a firepit for intimate gathering, an outdoor kitchen area, and a beach cabana featuring a hammock and a swing adjacent to a grassy terraced area, before the stairs finally descend to the shore.

"We have different areas of the house to retreat to depending on how many people you are with. If there are a few of us, we sit around the

firepit just off the kitchen area up top; if it is a larger group, we gather around the pool deck, or even just go down to the grassy area to play bags or to just hang out. I love the versatility of the house," Barry said. "You can be with everybody and you can be by yourself."

To Christopher, who noted the clients and the design team were great to work with, the project was a fun and exciting one to work on, from its site constraints and how the design is able to bring the exterior landscape into the home, to large format tiles, unique selections, and level of detail that went into the entire design-build process.

"From a construction standpoint, a lot of thought had to be given to the technical requirements and logistics of building this home. It required a great deal of structural engineering to allow for these big, open spaces and it really took the trades and ourselves, who have experience with these types of structures, to make it work," Christopher said. "Anytime you have

a very unique prototype on a very unique property, there are going to be challenges that arise. Narrow site access required forward-thinking and precise scheduling to allow large equipment to build from the lakeside of the home, working our way back to the streetside. Those types of challenges are not new to our team and we know from our experience how to plan for them. This is what we do."

And for Barry, there is a significance to a well-built and well-balanced home that goes beyond the durability of a structure exposed to the weather and elements on the lake.

"I think there is something very calming to it when you have something that is both beautiful to look at and well-balanced. It becomes, for us, almost as much a piece of art as it is an expression of ourselves. We put so much of our blood, sweat, and tears into this and we just love sharing it with our friends and family," Barry said.