

THIS IS NEWPORT?

Amid the Gilded Age mansions of this historic Rhode Island enclave, a modernist gem charts a stunning new path.

A mahogany rain screen covers the upper portion of Charlotte and Herbert S. Wagner III's Newport, Rhode Island, vacation home, which was designed by Stern McCafferty with interiors by Poonam Khanna of Unionworks and landscape design by Stimson Studio. For details, see Resources.





The table in the guest cottage's breakfast nook is by Faye Toogood. Carl Hansen chairs; pendant by Hay.

LEFT: In the living area of the guest cottage, the sofa is by Holly Hunt. Chandelier by David Weeks; artwork by Jennifer Bartlett. Interiors styled by Howard Christian.

In an era of homogeneous highways and interchangeable subdivisions, there remain a few American locales whose mere names conjure an entire world and aesthetic. Places like Nantucket, New Orleans, and Charleston have clung to a unique identity, enshrining vernacular style in residences and downtowns in hopes of warding off the encroachment of sameness.

One domain with a style and backstory surely worth preserving is Newport, the coastal Rhode Island summer community that in the late 19th century became the cradle of what Mark Twain termed (derisively) the Gilded Age. Most of the marquee American industrialist families—the Astors, the Vanderbilts, the Dukes—built neo-classical and Renaissance Revival mansions here, on a scale known nowhere else in America.

A surprisingly large number of the houses still stand, clustered around the deep-water harbor that attracts yachts and regattas. Some have remained as family homes or become trophies for newcomers like Oracle founder Larry Ellison. No matter whose name is on the deed, though, one thing you do not associate with Newport is modern architecture.

Which is why in the spring of 2020, when the ELLE DECOR A-List architect and designer Poonam Khanna,

founder of the New York City-based firm Unionworks, received a call from Charlotte Wagner, a Boston art collector and philanthropist, she was intrigued.

Wagner and her husband, Herbert, a financier, had bought a waterfront plot with a teardrop Victorian where they were building a weekend retreat. As longtime collectors of edgy blue-chip works—Wagner is a trustee of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art—they wanted a definitively modernist house, but it had to be sited, designed, and crafted with the similar level of care as the original grand homes. "We wanted to honor the excellence that distinguishes this community," Charlotte says.

Most of all, the house had to establish a strong connection to the landscape, inside and out. It was an ideal match for Khanna, who in her decades of practice has developed a reputation for balancing minimalism with a quiet, organic grace. She is a master of materials, using metals, wood, and boldly figured stone in a way that seems entirely fresh.

Designed by the Boston-based architect David Stern, the property—a main house and a guest cottage connected by a rain garden—seems almost to blend into the reedy, windswept surroundings. With its flat roof and mahogany rain screen, the silhouette is low slung and severe, in the

modernist tradition, but because a big portion of the lower level is a breezeway leading straight to the sea, it feels as airy as a length of driftwood. Over time, the untreated mahogany will gradually turn silver, adding to the effect.

The couple's principal residence in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is filled with statement furnishings, including works by the Milanese architect Vincenzo De Cotiis, a perfect foil to art by Cecily Brown, Glenn Ligon, and Alice Neel. In Newport, by contrast, Khanna has created an oasis of comfort and informality. To weave in a sense of beachy serenity without monotony, the rooms, while neutral in palette, are vivid with texture. Khanna edited away noise by repeating materials in unexpected places and playing with different colorways in the same textile on the furniture and surfaces. "We wanted there to be a subtle thread that runs through," she says, "like ripples of water."

One of the most compelling inspirations came early in the project when Khanna and Wagner took a walk together around the five-acre property and adjacent beachfront. They scrambled over the formations of local rock, known as puddingstone, a Paleozoic-era aggregate of rounded pebbles of various shades fused with a neutral sandy background. "We found our palette right there," Khanna says.

The exterior's slender verticals carry into the interior, where Khanna plays toward and against that geometry. In the entry, oak wall panels create a warm backdrop for minimal metal stair railings. One of the house's most spectacular artworks—a wobbly grid of brightly colored squares by the 78-year-old abstractionist Stanley Whitney—stakes out pride of place on the landing.

In the main home's great room, an asymmetrical U-shaped sofa sets the tone for the layout and flow. The colors of the furnishings echo the landscape; the mix includes a blocky round oak table by Yabu Pushelberg, Danish dining chairs with delicate wooden frames, and a David Weeks chandelier that is as much sculpture as illumination. "The idea was to have a lot of pattern and detail but modulate it at a low volume," Khanna explains.

In the nearby powder room, she employs her characteristic panache with figured stone. Here, a vanity and wall in richly veined Turkish marble is paired with a vintage French rope mirror. It is this kind of subdued daring—knowing when and how exactly to introduce a graphic slash into that sense of calm—that is at the heart of Khanna's gentle talent. "The idea is to lull you into relaxation," she notes. "And then, when you're ready, bring you back to earth." ■

RIGHT: In the main house kitchen, Stern McCafferty designed the custom island in oak with Arabescato Vagli marble counters and backsplash. Stools by Suite NY; pendants by Apparatus Studio.

BELOW: On the screened-in porch, B&B Italia sofas are in a Christopher Farr fabric. Flexform armchairs in a Perennials fabric; downlights by Allied Maker.

OPPOSITE, TOP: In the dining area of the main home's great room, a Yabu Pushelberg table is surrounded by Carl Hansen chairs. Sideboard by Egg Collective; chandelier by David Weeks.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: A BassamFellows sectional anchors the living area. Armchairs by Yabu Pushelberg; rug by Holland & Sherry; sculpture by Rose B. Simpson; artwork by Roni Horn.





In the primary bathroom, a wall and vanity are clad in Ceppo Bianco marble. Sconces by Apparatus Studio; bench by Peg Woodworking.

OPPOSITE: The custom headboard in the primary bedroom is in a Larsen fabric. Bedding by Mateo and West Elm; nightstand by Ruemmler; chair by Loic Bard; custom rug by Gregory Parkinson.

