

MAGAZINE

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2011

# new haven

www.newhavenmagazine.com

## THE HIGH LIFE

**A Milford beach house reaches for the sky**

**FOUR FABULOUS FALL HIKES**

**PRIVATE & PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS REACH OUT**

**WHIZ KID: A TEEN PRODIGY TAKES WING**



\$3.95

Pre-sort Standard  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
New Haven, CT  
Permit No 375

20 Grand Avenue  
New Haven, CT 06513



# Up and Out on a Limb

A radical approach to building spec homes in a down market

BY DUO DICKINSON



FEATURE PHOTOS: ANTHONY DECARLO  
COVER: STEVE BLAZO

Living room looking out to a water view over traditional homes, this modern 'statement' home has an absence of expressed trim but countless small details that simplify and celebrate planes and lines over ornament and 'decorating.'

Like no other profession, architecture involves the marriage of art and commerce. A painter's blank canvas or a sculptor's block of marble cost little in comparison to even the smallest porch addition to a house.

Unlike a painting or sculpture, a building's design is more than an aesthetic nicety. Buildings have to exist in the world where the realities of gravity, weather and the cultural norms of the community surrounding them cannot be ignored.

Having said that, many architects engage in commerce by treating buildings as if they are mere commodities — objects to be bought and sold. The problem is that the act of design is a process that leads ultimately to something that gets built. But by definition, the practice of architecture is a service.

Architectural designer Gernot Bruckner directly addressed these issues in a major career shift three years ago.

Bruckner was gainfully employed in a Greenwich branch office of a Southern architecture firm that drew up traditional homes for affluent clients. That rarified practice and clientele encouraged him to pursue a different type of career. So Bruckner created Brio54, a company that is a one-stop-shopping venue for those in search of an overtly new type of home.

Brio54 is Bruckner and a roster of on-demand builders who will build any one of five stock Bruckner designs wherever the client wishes. "We are not an architecture firm," Bruckner asserts. "We are builders, not architects."

As one might guess, the proof in the pudding is the building itself. Even during the most fevered housing bubble why would potential gamble their hard-earned dollars on mere drawings? So Bruckner decided to put his money, and his family, where his conceptual breakthrough was and build Model H4 in Milford. A classic modernist ideation, it is sculpture, structure and geometry distilled in a structure that is as crisply "modern" as any building you would see from the Yale



The exterior of the Brio54 model of Gernot Bruckner's line of home designs. This is a classic Modernist 'idea' house where a 'box for living' floats above the ground, its dramatically striped siding 'voided' to create porches. A simple stucco-faced connection to the ground helps emphasize the floating quality and its flat roof enables the home to both meet the minimum code height for coastal living space and get a full second floor under the city of Milford's height restriction.



But it's more than simply design. It's actually a building that's built in a real place with real materials and with a real price tag — \$463,000.

Like most other buildings in Connecticut, it had to deal with heavy-handed government input. First, federal coastal regulations meant that its first floor had to be at a certain height (creating the space under the built block for cars and a very small stair and storage area touching the ground level). Next was the city of Milford's height restriction

that, at 35 feet to the mean distance between the peak and the eave, would have meant essentially a one-and-a-half-story house floating above the federally mandated one-story void to let the raging hurricane-fed saltwater wash below it.

Fortuitously, Bruckner's modernist inclination was to create a geometric shape and not a symmetrically pitched-roof house (part of his graphic presentation of Brio54 is the classic gabled house icon with the equally classic "do not" diagonal slash through it). The bold flat roof in coastal Connecticut allowed for a full third level of the house on a very small lot — resulting in 2,171 square feet of finished space with

three bedrooms and 2.5 baths. It should be noted that the H4 model is one of Bruckner's five prototype designs (known as H1 through H5) from largest (four-bedroom H1, with 2,540 square feet) to smallest (H5, a studio of 510 square feet and one bath). Those paper designs follow the same rigorous modernist ethic of rectilinear cubist construction that engages quite well with current building technology.

It's clearly an aggressive move to build an uncompromisingly modernist design as a speculative project during a recession. But there is a real method to Bruckner's insight. The Connecticut coastline is glutted with thousands upon thousands of gable-roofed bungalow/Cape/Federal/Colonial houses all squeezing up to the edge of the Sound in tight lockstep. All of these stereotypes sit waiting for buyers who are left to value price first when there is so little stylistic distinction from one home to the next. Bruckner has opted to go the opposite way — the contrarian notion that distinctiveness is its own marketing. He needs only one buyer for one house — one buyer who can see the elegance of a modern design, even one at odds with its surroundings.

When asked about the ability of his flat roofs to deal with the windswept torrents of this last season, Bruckner says he didn't have a single problem — and a visual inspection of the 18-month-old ceilings shows that to be true. This winter Bruckner did have to shovel that roof given the quantity of snow that fell — as did so many owners of low-pitched-roof ranches.

This is an architecture of unbroken planes, abstracted shapes and super clean lines where there is virtually no trim, only gaskets of aluminum strips that create a reveal — a visual gap between doors and walls,

walls and floors and even shower curtains and ceilings. This gapped aluminum trim is rigorously applied to the corners of the house and extrapolated into the galvanized steel column supports for the house itself. The home's starkly flat wall planes are perfectly mimicked by its consistently detailed maple veneered custom cabinets' spare and clean lines (which also incorporate aluminum trough detailing). There is one central skylight (which hasn't leaked yet, either) but the house is small enough that light enters from all sides. With natural light from so many sources it eliminates the harsh glare of the south-facing coastal exposure.

Obviously, a box starkly elevated on steel columns is dramatic. But it is Bruckner's treatment of the exterior surfaces and balconies that make it memorable. Using off-the-rack pre-painted concrete clapboards of alternating dark and light striping, a vibrant pattern is set up for the home's skin. Porches are recessed on both of the narrow ends of the house creating a sense of shadow and depth which breaks the flatness of the cubist shape and reveals the sinuous system of wire and steel railings, narrow mullions between windows and doors and stucco ceilings.

Stiffness against the harsh coastal wind is provided by invisible sheer walls (steel panels), which do eat some square footage at the corners of the home, and are invisible in one set of interior walls.

Modernist houses distill each and every part of a house to line, shape, space and plane — inside and out. The goal is to find a universal sense of design without reference to culture, context or ornament. This home embodies those principles and thus is as much sculpture as it is house.

The central hallway allows for access to storage and a bathroom on either side as well as two smaller bedrooms, and creates a top-filled light from a single skylight, illumination that continues down the stairwell connecting this floor to the floor below.







Dining area facing away from the water. This open space has built-ins (far right) and a full connection to the outdoor world despite its floating one story above it.

The quiet elegance of its flowing open floor plan is a blissful complement to the rest of the family that lives within. Gernot is married to Suzanne Bruckner, an early childhood development researcher at Yale. Exactly parallel to Bruckner's decision to leave a stable design job creating traditional American architecture in the epicenter of traditional suburbs, Greenwich, he and Suzanne designed, built and delivered their own extremely collaborative effort – young Julian, born a year and a half ago, whose vibrant and playful charm is a delightful counterpoint to the serene distilled lines of the home he inhabits.

As a testament to the durability of Bruckner's detailing, living with a toddler has inflicted virtually zero damage on the home's simple surfaces. It is also a testament to the designer's detailing that the home feels nothing like a machine or a box. It feels essentially like a distilling frame both for the natural activity of the Sound facing south but also a family life – a quiet refuge from the messiness of day-to-day life and a celebration of the

need to impose order on an inherently complicated world.

Clearly, building houses on spec in this economy is risky – but it's a risk that other architects have taken in other eras. Frank Lloyd Wright intended his Usonian homes to be mass-produced and sold to buyers who could not normally afford an architect's fee. The Architect's Small House Service Bureau of Minnesota built more than 10,000 homes between the World Wars – most of them traditional in style – but those were sold only as a plan service versus Brio 54's high-risk, built-product business model. During pre-2007 building boom, *nouvelle* Modernist developments on both coasts attempted to capture the cachet so cleanly defined by *Dwell* magazine.

Beyond all the artful aspects of the home, each one of the "H series" offers a thoroughly engineered approach with every detail well thought out. Truth be told, many homes now built in America have a "by guess and by gosh" engineering approach, and perhaps 95 percent of them

are erected from stock plans untouched by anyone with architectural training.

Although Bruckner is not a licensed architect in the U.S., his education in Austria is virtually the equivalent of that required for an architectural degree here. Notwithstanding, the home is replete with elements of light, space, detail, line, form, plane, void and solid that are straight out of any architect's formal training.

This is not a house for everyone – but it is a house for those who want a breath of fresh air during a time of settling for low-risk options. Even though Bruckner proffers the now-expected ethos of "green" materials and high efficiency mechanical systems, those admirable underpinnings are not as compelling as his moral imperative to break the paradigms of a real estate market in which low expectations and easy answers are hyped to create an excessive price tag in good times – and to sit tight in lean times. Given his sincerity and commitment, one cannot help hoping that his high intentions are met with equally lofty success.



The master bedroom. Looking into the common hallway, the simple floor plan is unified by the wonderful wood floors that flow throughout both levels of the home.