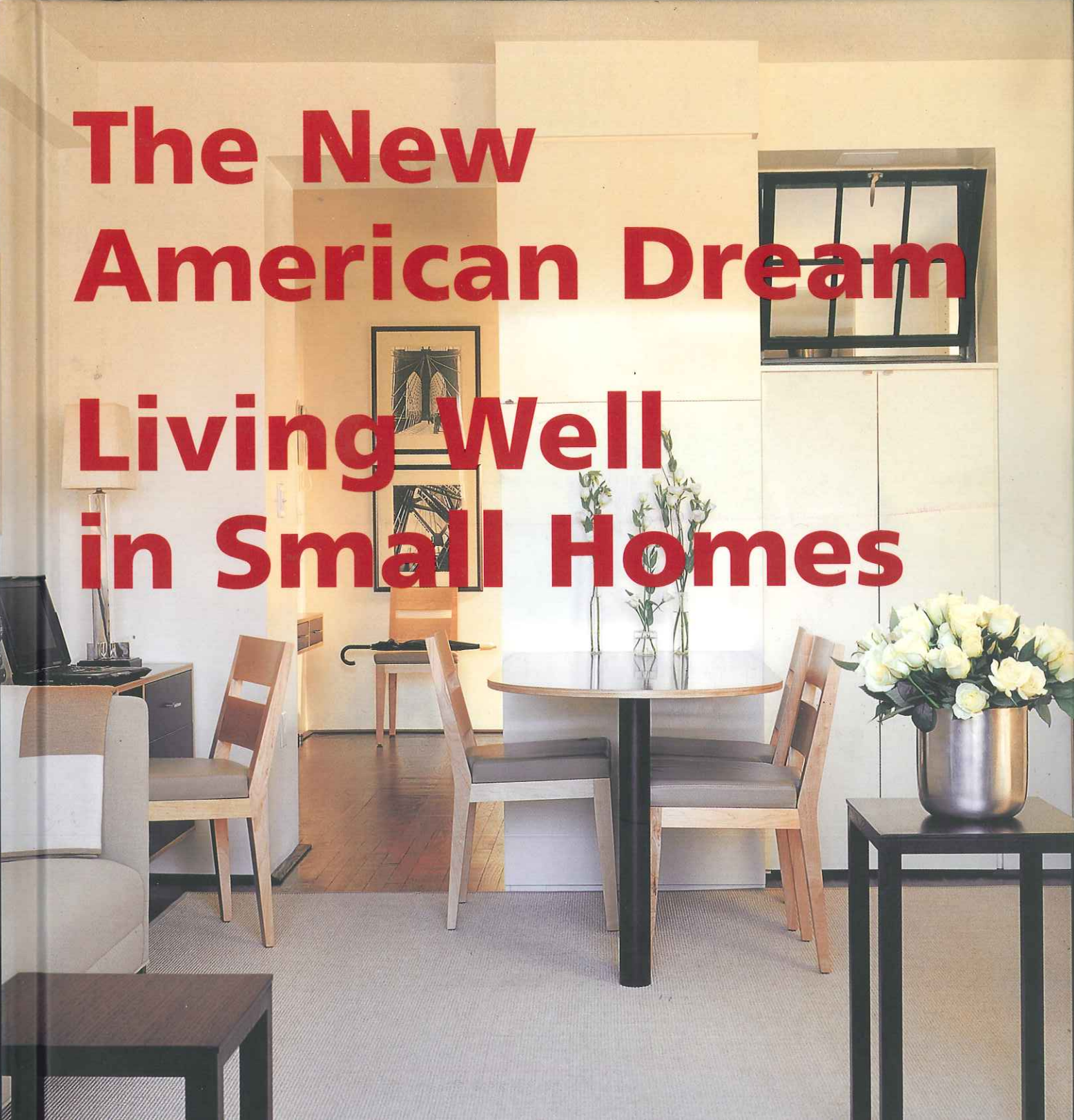


**The New
American Dream**

**Living Well
in Small Homes**



Small at the Beach and Small in the Village: Two Elegant Essays in Modesty

This very small eastern Long Island beach house and even smaller Greenwich Village apartment exemplify a refined and elegant brand of modesty in a complementary pair of small dwellings that two New York architects call home.

Rice Welch House
Amagansett, New York
520 square feet
Architects: Ward Welch and Paul Rice

Ward Welch and Paul Rice view the simplicity and smallness of their urban and rural homes as a product of their financial status. "But to a greater degree," says Welch, these qualities "are a much sought-after prize." There are two reasons for this. First, because their limited budgets are concentrated in small areas, they allow the two architects to enjoy a high level of quality in their homes. Second, these small dwellings fulfill deeply rooted childhood desires for well-defined spaces.

Their beach house had begun its life as a three-hundred-square-foot fishing shack. Over time its porch had been enclosed and two small wings added. When Welch and Rice bought it, its total size was 520 square feet, all on one level. Local zoning regulations precluded enlarging the footprint of the house. Undeterred, the owners were confident that the existing space could be reconfigured to accommodate their own basic needs plus an occasional overnight guest and dinner party, "without the final product being about smallness," recalls Rice.

The modesty of the program suited the modesty of the cottage. It consisted of two bedrooms, a bathroom,

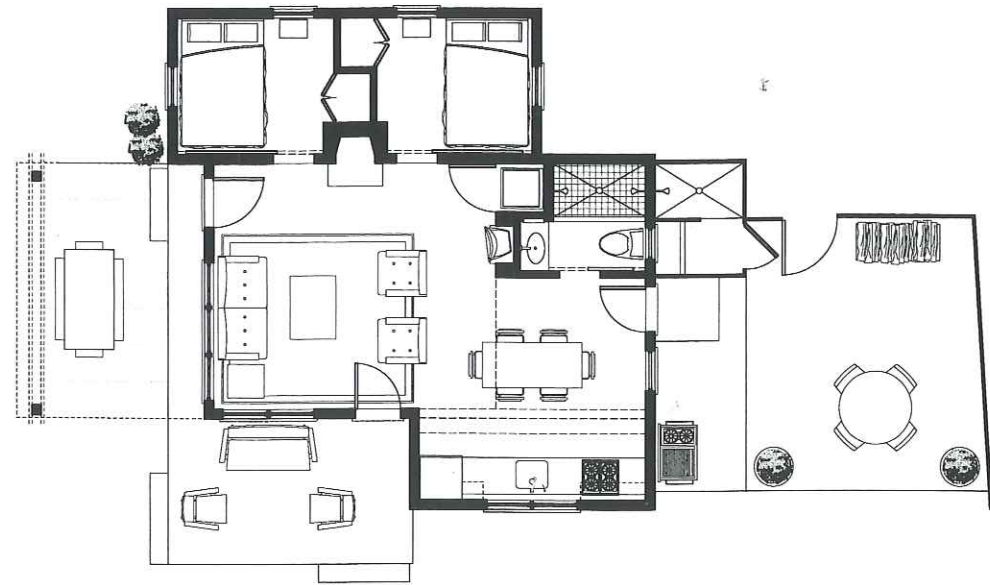
laundry, storage, kitchen, dining and living areas, and outdoor space. The architects examined many schemes in an effort to maximize living space within the cottage's limited confines. Despite the modest program, the chosen scheme established a clear spatial hierarchy. The living area was given pride of place—and the highest ceiling—by placing it under the main gable of the roof. All other spaces were arranged around the living area in a pecking order based on light and quiet.

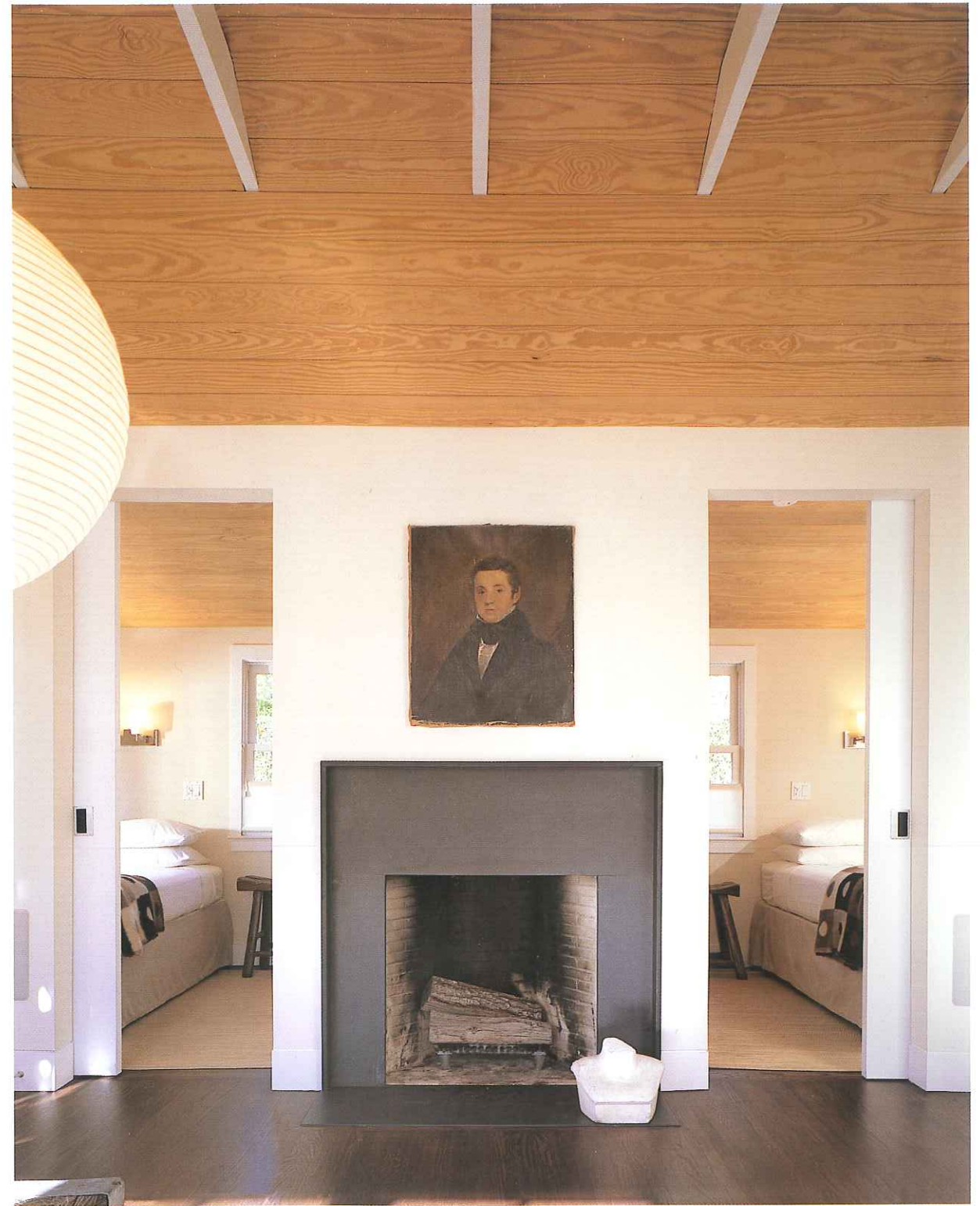
The house strikes a skillful balance between discrete rooms and open space. "The size of the house," explains Welch, "made it all the more necessary to make the rooms within feel special. Though the spaces are clearly defined, the plan's openness makes it feel like one big room with alcoves." Low ceilings were removed, exposing additional height up to the rafters. Devices used to maximize floor space include built-in cabinets and sliding door panels. The fireplace is detailed as minimally as possible, and the tiny twin bedrooms flanking it are treated as ship's berths. These features were born of necessity, but they exert a powerful charm.

The exterior of the house maintains the modesty of the interior. Cedar decks and an ivy-covered trellis embellish the simple massing and extend the limited interior space outdoors. The architectural language never strays far from the local vernacular. Cedar shingles accented by crisp white windows, doors, and trim make this an iconic eastern Long Island beach cottage.

Welch and Rice's ambitions for this cottage were well suited to its modest character and scale, and they achieved them through suitably modest means. The result is a house of great charm and serenity where nothing seems forced and everything seems right. As for their initial concern that the final product not be "about smallness," they needn't have worried. Modesty, coupled with talent, skill, and an unerring eye, has taken this former shack far beyond smallness.









Rice Welch Apartment
New York, New York
475 square feet
Architects: Ward Welch and Paul Rice

The apartment that Welch and Rice bought in the West Village defined modesty. It was that most humble of urban housing types, the cold-water flat in a walk-up tenement building. This apartment type is also known as a railroad flat because of the way its long narrow rooms are strung out from front to back without halls for circulation. It had four rooms, two without windows, with a toilet and sink at one end and a tub in the kitchen at the other.

The overall length of the apartment is fifty feet. The width is eleven feet at the ends and eight feet in the middle. Windows exist only at the ends. The shape is essentially a dumbbell: two rooms connected by a narrow rectangular bar. In their beach house, Welch and Rice considered many different plan schemes. In the apartment, however, the options were very limited. "The apartment," said Welch, "seemed to design itself from the circumstances its gutted shell presented." These circumstances dictated living area and bedroom at the windowed ends and kitchen, bath and dressing area in the narrow middle. The plan is simple and largely

predetermined, with no room for immodest architectural gestures.

The clear logic of this scheme did not make it easy to achieve. Moving the kitchen and bath from the ends to the middle required extensive plumbing relocations. It also deprived both spaces of windows. And the undulation of the apartment's south wall meant that some spaces were destined to have irregular shapes.

The architects made virtues of these vices. Some of the plumbing runs became an occasion to level the floors that contain them. The build-out needed to carry the wall-hung toilet provided space above for much needed storage. The kitchen is completely open to the living area's east-facing windows and so gets an abundance of borrowed light. The windowless bathroom borrows light from the adjacent bedroom through a floor-to-ceiling frosted glass panel. And the undulating wall provides a recess for the toilet and a closet for the laundry. "The inconsistencies of the shell define all aspects of the space," explains Welch. "No space is wasted, none taken for granted."

The kitchen in particular is a good example of how modesty, in tandem with common sense, drives the plan of this apartment. The eight-foot width of the available space meant that the kitchen would have to double as circulation. An architect or client trying to impose immodest ambitions on this little apartment and make it grander than it was meant to be would have found this troubling. He might have tortured the plan until it provided some artificial separation between the two functions. Instead, the architects laid out the kitchen as a straightforward double galley with four feet of circulation and simple painted cabinetry. Is it an efficient kitchen or a generous hall lined with cabinetry? The answer is both.

To attain a level of richness and simplicity, the architects chose a muted color palette of dark woods paired with warm whites and beiges. The effect is rather like a small suite in a smart boutique hotel, a suitably urbane style for a small urban space. "As with the Amagansett house," explains Rice, "we wanted an architectural aesthetic of subtlety and simple elegance, which would maximize space without magnifying the lack of it, but also respect the diminutive character of both places and let it guide the design process." He goes on to summarize the essence of modesty. "We sought to determine what was essential, and anything not needed was not done."



