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# A Shimmer of Glass

Architect Carol Wilson's designs are modern, elegant, and — in the case of one Portland house — incredibly controversial.

BY EDGAR ALLEN BEEM  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN VANDEN BRINK  
PORTRAIT BY CARL D. WALSH



ERIK MUSHIAL



**W**hen Erik and Caitlin Mushial first proposed building a glass and steel house in a hodgepodge Portland neighborhood of apartments and tenements overlooking the Casco Bay Bridge, city planners gave them the thumbs down. The proposed design, they said, was too radically different from its nineteenth-century surroundings to comply with city guidelines for development.

Almost immediately several local architects rose to defend the Mushials' plan. "This is the best architect the state has seen in a generation," architect Scott Simons told the Portland Planning Board. "Everyone who lives in this neighborhood will benefit from the beauty of this building." Even Greater Portland Landmarks, far from opposing such a drastic departure from the Clark Street neighborhood's existing housing styles, supported the ultramodern Mushial residence. "The quality

of this design, the thinking behind it, and the commitment to the neighborhood is outstanding," wrote Portland Landmarks director Hilary Bassett in the *Landmarks Observer*.

In the end, the Planning Board overruled the city staff and unanimously approved the Mushial house. The decision signified more than just the approval of one family's home. It was an affirmation that quality always trumps tradition and that great architecture can be very much about Maine

**BEAUTIFUL GEOMETRY**  
Since moving to Maine in 1982, Carol Wilson has designed some of the state's most striking buildings, including the environmentally friendly headquarters for the Maine Audubon Society (below). But the glass-and-steel home (left) she recently created in a Portland neighborhood of historic townhouses has touched off a heated debate about whether art and tradition can coexist in the West End.



“The quality of this design, the thinking behind it, and the commitment to the neighborhood is outstanding.”



**A DELICATE BALANCE**

Wilson's designs take the vernacular of Maine architecture and stretch it nearly to the breaking point. A cantilevered screenwriter's studio on Mount Desert Island (above) is precarious both in concept and in fact. At Maine Audubon in Falmouth (right), the idea of a traditional timber-frame ceiling gets a postmodern update.



without speaking with a stereotypical Maine accent. In this case, that accent came from a Southerner — a former North Carolina architect named Carol Wilson.

Carol Wilson was born in 1953 in Salisbury, North Carolina, a sleepy backwater town that has the twin distinctions of having its entire twenty-three-block downtown on the National Register of Historic Places and of placing more houses in Virginia McAlester's classic *A Field Guide to American Houses* than any other place in America. While growing up she often visited the grand local tobacco plantations with her grandmother, but the Colonial mansions did not move her nearly as much as a very contemporary home designed by an architect friend of her father.

"He designed a very modernist house in a small Southern town. Spatially, it was so amazing, and so unlike anything I had ever seen," recalls Wilson. "It was open, glass, all light, not divided into little rooms. I knew early on I would be an architect."

After earning an undergraduate degree in environmental design in architecture in 1976 and a master's degree in architecture at North Carolina State University, Wilson spent several years working for a Philadelphia architectural firm. In 1982 she moved to Portland, where her now ex-husband served his medical residency at Maine Medical Center. In 1985, after a year in Florence, Italy, she returned to Portland and worked for an architectural firm for a year before going out on her own. She eventually moved her studio from the Portland peninsula to Falmouth.

The radical simplicity and elemental geometry of Carol Wilson's glass houses are a clear departure from the pitched-roofed, wooden vocabulary of Shingle style and Federalist homes in Maine. With Van Dam & Renner Architects of Portland she designed Maine Audubon's environmental education center in Falmouth. On her own she has designed a cantilevered writer's studio on Mount Desert Island, a garden house on Prouts Neck, a modular housing concept in Falmouth that she titled House One, two

homes on Chebeague Island, and a third yet to come. Her current projects include the design of the Georgetown Historical Society, a pair of homes in West Bath, and the Mushials' four-story glass townhouse in Portland.

Wilson's work has won a series of design awards from the Maine chapter of the American Institute of Architects, beginning with House One, a prototype of modular affordable housing in which she resides today. Tucked within the woods of suburban Falmouth, House One and its detached studio are very much like Wilson herself — slight, thoughtful, and ascetic.

"Even today, I can't stand excess," Wilson says, describing the spartan elegance of the trim, glassy structures where she lives and works. "If one thing comes in, one goes out, but I feel really good if two things go out."

The clarity and integrity of Wilson's architecture have won her recognition well beyond the Pine Tree State's borders. The studio she designed for a screenwriter on Mount Desert Island won an American Institute of Architecture New

**VISIONARY**

Wilson is one of only four Maine architects ever elected to the American Institute of Architects' College of Fellows (another was the great John Calvin Stevens). During the recent uproar in Portland, a peer proclaimed her "the best architect the state has seen in a generation," for designs like the writer's studio (above left) and House One (above right).

## A Shimmer of Glass

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 67 England award in 2005. And last May Wilson became the only working architect in Maine to be elected to the American Institute of Architects' College of Fellows, a distinction shared by only three Maine architects, including the legendary John Calvin Stevens.

Wilson's work has a lot in common with the architecture that inspired her as a child. Often constructed of glass and steel, always light and airy, her designs are clean, spare, and unlike just about any other houses being built in Maine. Far from being heretical structures in tradition-bound New England, Carol Wilson's designs demonstrate that architecture can be very much about Maine and yet also very much about the present moment.

In her quest to bring contemporary design to conservative Maine architecture, Wilson has been blessed with a succession of sophisticated clients. She moves from commission to commission entirely on word of mouth, so it is more than mere coincidence that three of her recent projects, as well as an upcoming one, have all been built on Chebeague Island in Casco Bay.

"I decided to be just a small office," says Wilson. "It's not like we've done a lot of work, but I hope it's been good work."

The most public of Wilson's island designs is the Museum of Chebeague History, a 2003 renovation and adaptation of an old island schoolhouse into a historical museum. Though the museum building is very much in context with the island's history, by inserting a glass entryway between the schoolhouse and an old addition that once served as the island's salt shed, Wilson created (a word she avoids, preferring "invented") a building that announces its twenty-first-century mission while preserving its nineteenth-century form.

Philip Jordan, the retired president of Ohio's Kenyon College, was the president of the Chebeague Historical Society when the museum renovation was undertaken. Jordan recommended Wilson for the project because she had designed the island home he shares with his wife, poet Sheila Jordan. That project, Wilson says, was conceived as "a house in nature with two studies." More modern than the museum, the Jordans' house is still traditional in its use of cedar clapboards and shingles.

"We wanted as little intrusion on the

forest as possible," says Philip Jordan of the house, which sits nestled in trees and ferns with a layered view across the lawn, through the trees, to salt marsh and beach and finally out across the water to Crow Island. "We didn't want to offend the island idiom," explains Sheila Jordan of the choice of materials. The Jordans were pleased, then, by an island native's faint praise: "At least it doesn't have towers and turrets on it."

But it is the house's interior plan that speaks most directly to Wilson's minimalist vision, with its use of passages instead of doorways, spaces instead of rooms, corridors that double as library, gallery, and storage spaces.

"The house simply will not tolerate clutter," remarks Philip Jordan. His wife notes that simple fact explains the house's power. "There is a clarity here that you respond to," she says.

The purest expression of Wilson's modern minimalism to date is the Bisharat residence, winner of a 2006 Maine Design Award. This long, lean home stands with its back, lightly fenestrated and clad in vertical boards, facing the road and its glass façade staring out at the bold Atlantic.

*Ironically, it is in Portland, putatively Maine's most liberal city, where Wilson's architecture has run into opposition.*

"This is very much a house that is connected to the sea," says homeowner Leila Bisharat, pointing out the distant view of Halfway Rock through the sailcloth curtains that luff in the island breeze.

Leila Bisharat, who can trace her ancestry back to Chebeague's first settlers, owns two other historic homes on the island with her husband, Suhail Bisharat. Having restored and expanded these structures, the couple decided they wanted something quite different for themselves. When they commissioned Wilson to design their new home, they listed their top priorities as light, landscape, and simplicity. And that's exactly what Wilson delivered.

Relying on "physically grounded in-

formation," Wilson positioned the Bisharat house to take in the theater of the harbor as well as the view of the Halfway Rock lighthouse. Sitting on hand-hewn granite from an 1820s island farmhouse, the angles of the house are precisely calculated so that sunlight penetrates to the base of the interior wall for warmth in winter and yet stops at the base of the windows to avoid overheating in summer.

Suhail Bisharat compares the house's design to that of a Bedouin tent, with the back side closed and the front open. Freestanding fireplaces divide the interior space, while the open plan affords views the length and width of the twenty-eight-by-eighty-foot structure.

"From the sea," says Leila Bisharat, "this house is just a shimmer of glass."

Ironically, it is in Portland, putatively Maine's most liberal city, where Wilson's architecture has run into opposition. In response to the approval of the decidedly non-traditional Mushial house, the city's housing committee has proposed changes to the city's design certification guidelines to promote buildings that, in the words of senior planner Barbara Barhydt, are "more in context with the adjoining neighborhood."

If it wasn't already approved, "there's no way on earth this house could be built today in the city of Portland," says Wilson. "They used the word 'traditional' at least fifty times. I just don't think you can regulate good design."

Owner Erik Mushial, who sells rock-climbing and backpacking equipment, and his wife, Caitlin, who designs leather handbags, say they have a long-standing interest in modern design. Their collection of mid-century modernist furniture, for instance, will be right at home in the dwelling Wilson has designed for them. The upper stories will afford the Mushials and their six-year-old son, Wyatt, spectacular views of Portland Harbor through banks of aquarium-like windows.

Asked why they decided to build such a unique house, Caitlin Mushial replies, "Why not modern?"

"It's definitely designed for today," her husband adds.

That's really what Carol Wilson is all about — designing for today, pursuing the present in architecture. "I would never design a building just to be provocative," she says, "but I hope I'd never design a building that was just ordinary." ■