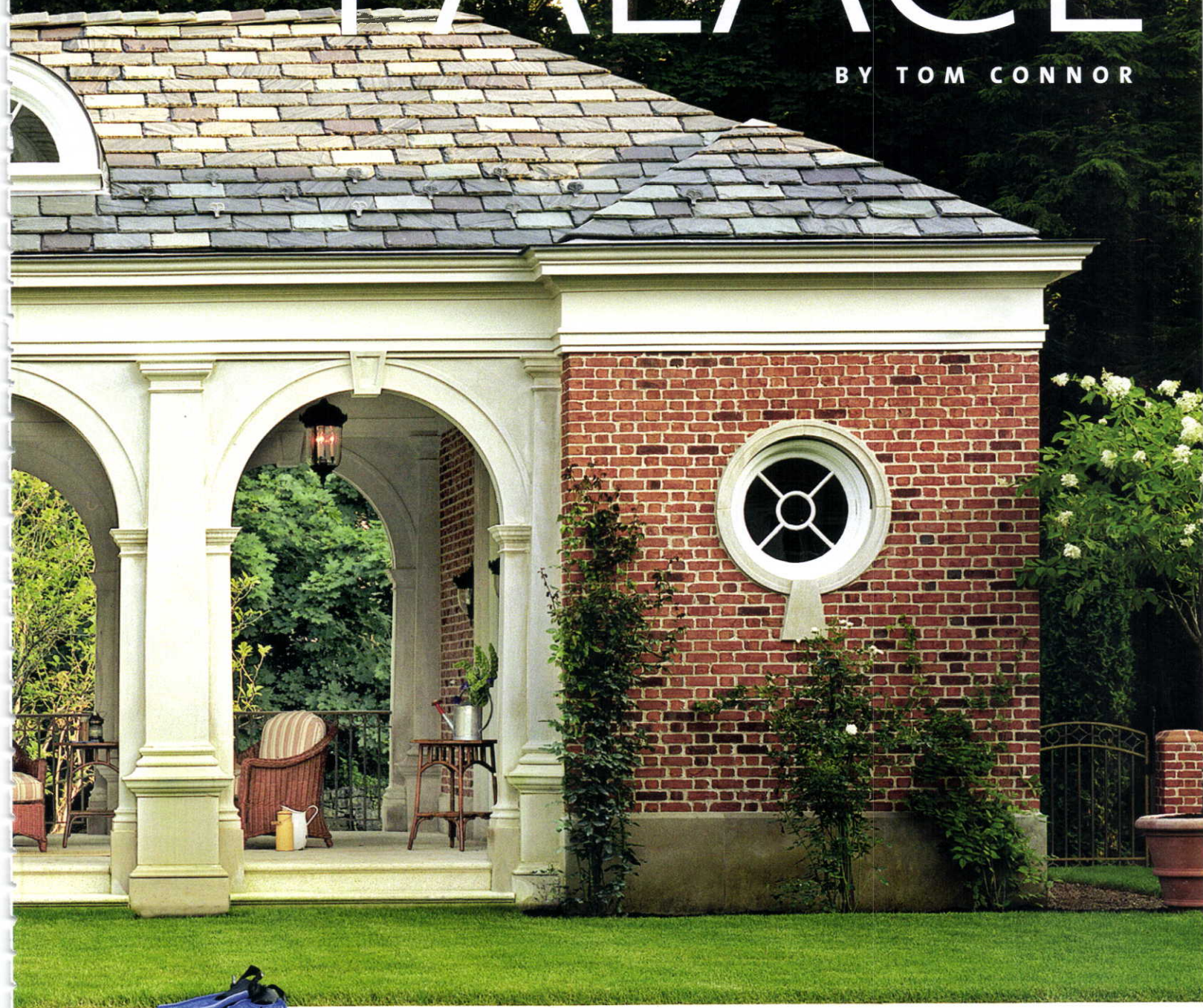


aqua

PALACE

BY TOM CONNOR



Pools have always been inviting. But increasingly, pool houses — like this one designed by New Canaan architect Dinyar Wadia — have become larger and more luxurious.



This pool house by Hobbs Construction in New Canaan can be used during several seasons, not just in the summer.

The Swimmer stops for the night

In the summer of 1966, camera crews began filming *The Swimmer*, based on a John Cheever story, in the lush green and blue backyards of Greenwich and New Canaan. In the film Burt Lancaster plays middle-aged Neddy Merrill, who appears one afternoon in his bathing suit at the pool of old friends. Realizing that neighboring pools form a necklace of sparkling blue lakes, he sets off on a journey to “swim home,” pool by pool, across New Canaan to his wife and daughters and the life he believes he still possesses.

Originally published in *The New Yorker*, the Cheever story and film were viewed at the time as a chilling allegory of the surface tranquility and inner emptiness of affluent suburbia.

But now, more than forty years later, New Canaan men appear far more content than Neddy Merrill, and pool houses have changed as dramatically, evolving from little more than service outbuildings to aqua palaces of comfort and familial fun.

While *The Swimmer* ends with Merrill, disillusioned and exhausted, arriving home in late afternoon to a house long neglected and abandoned, our modern-day swimmer might well encounter on his way home lunch, a nap, dinner, a movie and an overnight stay spent dreaming of living in places as heavenly as these.

the changing room

In the 1960s and '70s, pool houses around town were pretty much limited to a simple, singular purpose. “Growing up in New Canaan, most of the pool houses I remember were utilitarian — a couple of changing rooms with a bathroom and maybe a sink and small refrigerator,” says Scott Hobbs, third-generation president of Hobbs Construction, which has built several dozen such structures in lower Fairfield County over the years.

Today, Hobbs says, it's not unusual for his company to build million-dollar buildings next to the pool. “They’ve become bigger and more luxurious, with high-end finishes, and they’re being used for three and four seasons as opposed to just summer.”

One reason for the change has been the growth of the single-family home throughout Fairfield County. “As we’ve seen houses increase in size since the late 1990s, we’ve seen pool houses also become larger,” says Emily Restifo, an agent with Prudential Connecticut Realty in New Canaan, who has been in real estate in the area for thirty years. And with increased square footage have come many of the amenities of contemporary suburban living.

A custom-designed pool house by New Canaan architect Malcolm Robertson; landscape design by Keith E. Simpson Associates



“At some point the pool house becomes a guesthouse, because it’s a natural overflow place to sleep if you’re having a wedding or big party.” — MALCOLM ROBERTSON, *architect*

“Luxury pool houses are a sign of the times,” she adds. “They’re an extension of the home, an alternate living space.” As a result, just about anything found in a home can be found in a pool house today.

the new luxuries

Six years ago, Dinyar Wadia, a New Canaan architect, designed a 144-square-foot stone and slate-roofed pool house for a couple in backcountry Greenwich. Although it is open to the weather and to views of a sunken garden on one side and the pool on the other, the small-sized building, which is designed loosely in the style of the French country main house, is both regal and casual, and has enough creature comforts to be used for much of the year.

A Manhattan apartment-sized kitchen at one end of the pool house contains a refrigerator, microwave and dishwasher (cooktops and ovens aren’t permitted in outbuildings in town). At the other end is a combination changing room and bathroom with shower. A chimney vents an indoor barbecue grill.

While pool houses of this caliber have been popping up on estates in Greenwich and New Canaan with increasing frequency,

Wadia insists they are more representative of individual lifestyles than of any general trend. “Everyone has his own thoughts on pool houses,” he says. “People with deeper pockets, particularly those who entertain a lot, can afford to build larger, nicer places.”

Others agree. “They tend to be very custom-designed — there is no formula for them,” says Robert Dean of Robert Dean Architects, whose firm designs pools that tend toward sculptural and ornamental — reflecting pools with crisp, geometric lines — rather than the functional.

Yet there’s no denying the evolution of the standard pool house/changing room into places of multiple purposes and possibilities, with an increasing emphasis on entertaining and escape.

“Pool houses have always been euphemistic guesthouses,” notes Malcolm Robertson of Robertson & Lenders. “In New Canaan, they’re not meant to be places of habitation but rather places of recreation. But it’s a gray area. At some point the pool house becomes a guesthouse, because it’s a natural overflow place to sleep if you’re having a wedding or big party.”

For New Canaan clients who have guests stay over four or five days out of the week, Dean designed a 1,360 square-foot, neoclassical

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Warmly lit, this pool house in Darien by architect Robert Cardello of South Norwalk beckons the after-hours swimmer to take a dip in the pool.

pavilion with an expansive, soaring kitchen and living room on the ground floor and a bedroom with full bath on the second. “This is clearly not a place simply to go to the bathroom or put ice in a drink,” Dean says. “It wasn’t as if there was no place in the house for them to sleep. It was a matter of using the whole property, and having a completely other place, and of creating an alternate environment.”

swing spaces

More and more, the once-peripheral pool house, long consigned to the edges of the property, is becoming a focal point of suburban life. As the nature of work and families’ needs change, so do the roles these outbuildings play in modern life. “Pool houses,” Scott Hobbs says, “have become swing spaces for families.”

Even though Dinyar Wadia had designed a spacious home office for his Greenwich clients, once the elder son was out of college and working for his father, the architect was asked to create a second home office, equipped with a satellite feed and gym, below the recently built pool house.

“More and more, people are working at home,” observes architect Malcolm Robertson. “If they have children, they may come to think of the pool house as an office and walk across the lawn to go to work.”

Liz Ann Meire, a mother of two young children and chief investment strategist for Charles Schwab, works from her pool

house when things get too hectic in the main house nearby. She and her husband, Bob, also use the space as a getaway. But that’s far from what they originally had in mind.

In 1998 the couple bought an 1850 English manor house in Darien. A pool on the property was old, small and — worse — adjacent to the master bedroom, which meant that their two children and children’s friends would walk dripping through the room from the pool to use the bathroom.

Three summers ago they put in a new pool with a U-shaped water slide and eight-person spa and commissioned architect Robert Cardello, whose offices are in South Norwalk, to design an outbuilding with a bathroom and changing area. That was their intent, at any rate.

“A pool house always ends up being more than the owners anticipated,” says Cardello, who has designed a dozen places in lower Fairfield County over the years. “It started by Liz Ann and Bob saying, ‘Boy, wouldn’t it be nice to have some facilities out by the pool.’ Then it was, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to have changing rooms, and a refrigerator, and a kitchenette and dining area.’”

A miniature version of the main house, the outbuilding sits at the water’s edge below the spa, slide and lush landscaping — a dream way-station for the weary swimmer. Built by Mary Ann Jones of Property Showcase in Rowayton, the 900-square-foot structure features an open kitchen and great room divided by an island, a full refrigerator with freezer and double beer taps, a



Robert Dean of Robert Dean Architects in New Canaan designed this pool house for clients who frequently entertain overnight guests.

dishwasher and, in the great room, two pullout sofas for guests and family sleepovers. Across the open room are a full bath, laundry and mud and changing rooms. The full basement stores pool furniture in the winter and beer kegs in the summer.

Now, when her children have friends over, Liz Ann sometimes heads down to the pool house to work. But the main allure of the place is its function as a kind of home-based vacation headquarters for family and friends.

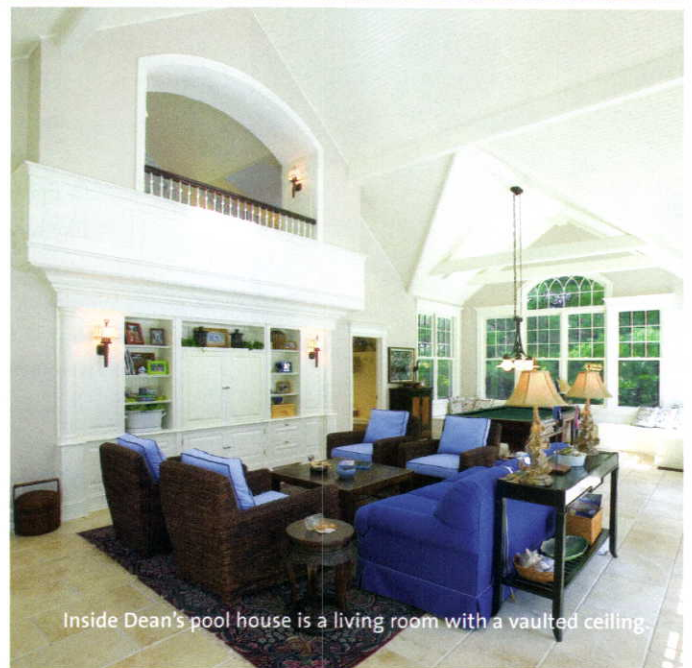
“A pool house offers all the amenities of the country club without leaving home,” says Emily Restifo. “It creates a vacation atmosphere for people who lead busy lives. And when a pool house is in keeping in size and scale with the main house, it really becomes an extension of the house and adds living space. There is no question that it adds value to a property.”

liquid asset

Increasingly, that value is tied to a property's association with water — in any quantity, color or form.

“There's an atavistic, human need to be near water,” Malcolm Robertson says. “You see it in the rise in prices of oceanfront property and the popularity of residential developments around lakes.”

Adds Dinyar Wadia: “My clients would have loved to live on the water, but that's not where their property happens to be. The swimming pool is a substitute for Long Island Sound or a river or lake.”



Inside Dean's pool house is a living room with a vaulted ceiling.

With a bubbling spa, flowing slide and aqua-blue lagoon within a few steps of the house, who would want to stay in the main house? “There are days when we go out in the morning and don't come in until dark,” Liz Ann says.

And if our swimmer were to stop by for a dip?

“We'd be happy to have him stay for the night,” she says. 