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Hudson Modern

Residential Landscapes

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A House in the Woods

However unintentional, design history is often a narrative of heroism, portraying architects as knowing all and acting alone. The story of this 4,800-square-foot weekend home in Ulster County, New York, by William Reue captures the more collaborative reality of design projects. The residence was a creative enterprise between the New York–based architect and the homeowner.



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One long side of A House in the Woods includes a monumental Cor-Ten wall whose patterning evokes colors and textures in nature.

The client mulled this project for twenty-five years before formally commissioning a design from Reue in 2008, and by then she had made several key design decisions, such as purchasing wooded acreage at the base of the Shawangunk Mountains and devising a rough plan in which three distinct volumes are united by a curved Cor-Ten steel wall. She had also researched sustainability strategies, anointed the unbuilt project A House in the Woods, and interviewed multiple other architects for the job.

“I think we were chosen for our willingness to listen and work together,” Reue recalls, explaining that the client had switched careers from corporate law to sustainable land use, and wanted to capture her environmentalism and overall character in three dimensions. Of form following self-expression, Reue says, “The conceit is unique to modern architecture—she was basically reprogramming her existence through this house. It was up to us to determine how to do it gracefully.”

To reconcile long-gestating ideas to executable reality, the architect consolidated the three-part plan into one rectilinear volume that follows a southwest–northeast axis. The move best accommodated valley views to the south and east, and reduced the amount of building envelope exposed to the elements to improve energy efficiency. The house is assembled from fourteen-inch-thick structural insulated panels and clad primarily in local bluestone.

While the project’s plan submitted to Reue’s logic, the weathering steel wall was not to be debated. Measuring 125 feet long and twenty-four feet tall at its highest point, it originates south of the inhabitable spaces, appearing as an extension of the row of Norway spruces lining the driveway. It then veers into the rectilinear volume, and reemerges to point almost due north. Forecourts occupy the splays between curving steel and linear bluestone.





In addition to creating a pair of impressive outdoor rooms, the Cor-Ten wall orchestrates the first impressions of A House in the Woods. The wall's monumental dimensions shield the long west elevation of the house, conveying refuge for those within. It also stokes the anticipation of guests as they trace the driveway to the formal entry inside the northern forecourt—perhaps noticing all the while how the forest floor is repeated in the irregularly patterned, earth-hued steel.

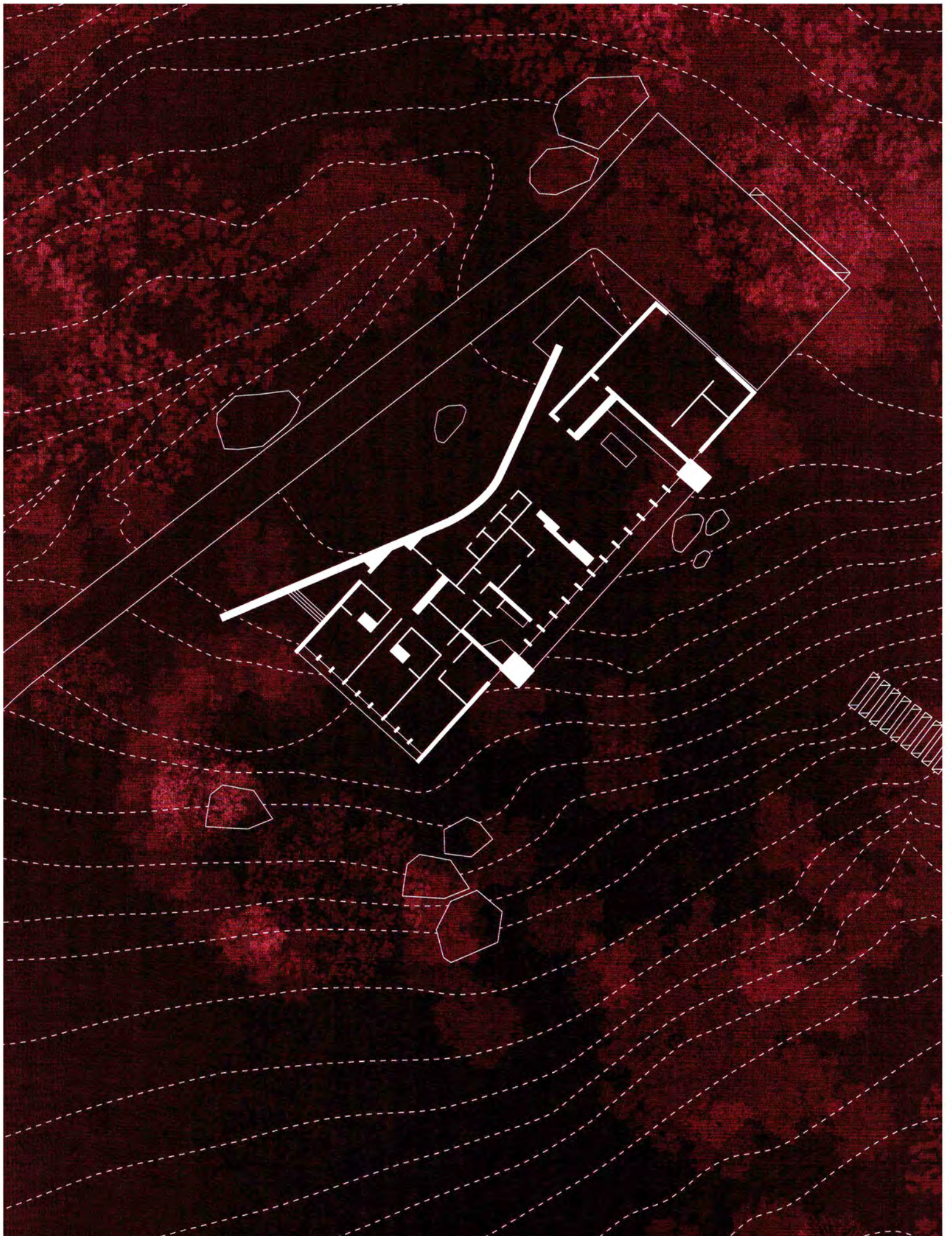
The wall's counterpart is a 65-by-13-foot expanse of quadruple-paned glass that floods the east-facing great room and adjoining master bedroom in daylight. On the residence's exterior, Reue placed this glass wall within a projecting cementboard-clad volume. Where the cantilever intersects with the house, Reue peeled away strips of bluestone and put long windows in their place. "It was important for the parts to read as discrete sculptural elements, so that the house didn't become a massive suburban block that ignores the scale of the landscape," he explains of articulating the east elevation.

For the occupant, these various moves make the great room and master bedroom "seem as if you're sitting inside binoculars," as Reue phrases it. "Hovering above the ground, watching the squirrels and chipmunks, is like being in the middle of a zoo." Nature suffuses through the open-plan interior, and causes the protective steel wall to largely fade from memory. In fact, the curving form only appears in the interior subtly, to suggest where public space gives way to bedrooms.

A House in the Woods rewards the winding, mysterious journey to its entrance with a haven for watching the passing of wildlife and seasons. And if it removes the visitor ever so slightly from the landscape like an observation deck, it completely enmeshes her in the homeowner's emotional life. Reue says of the client, "What I love about this house is that once the front door is opened and you are welcomed in, all of the boundaries melt away. Once you understand this house, you understand her."

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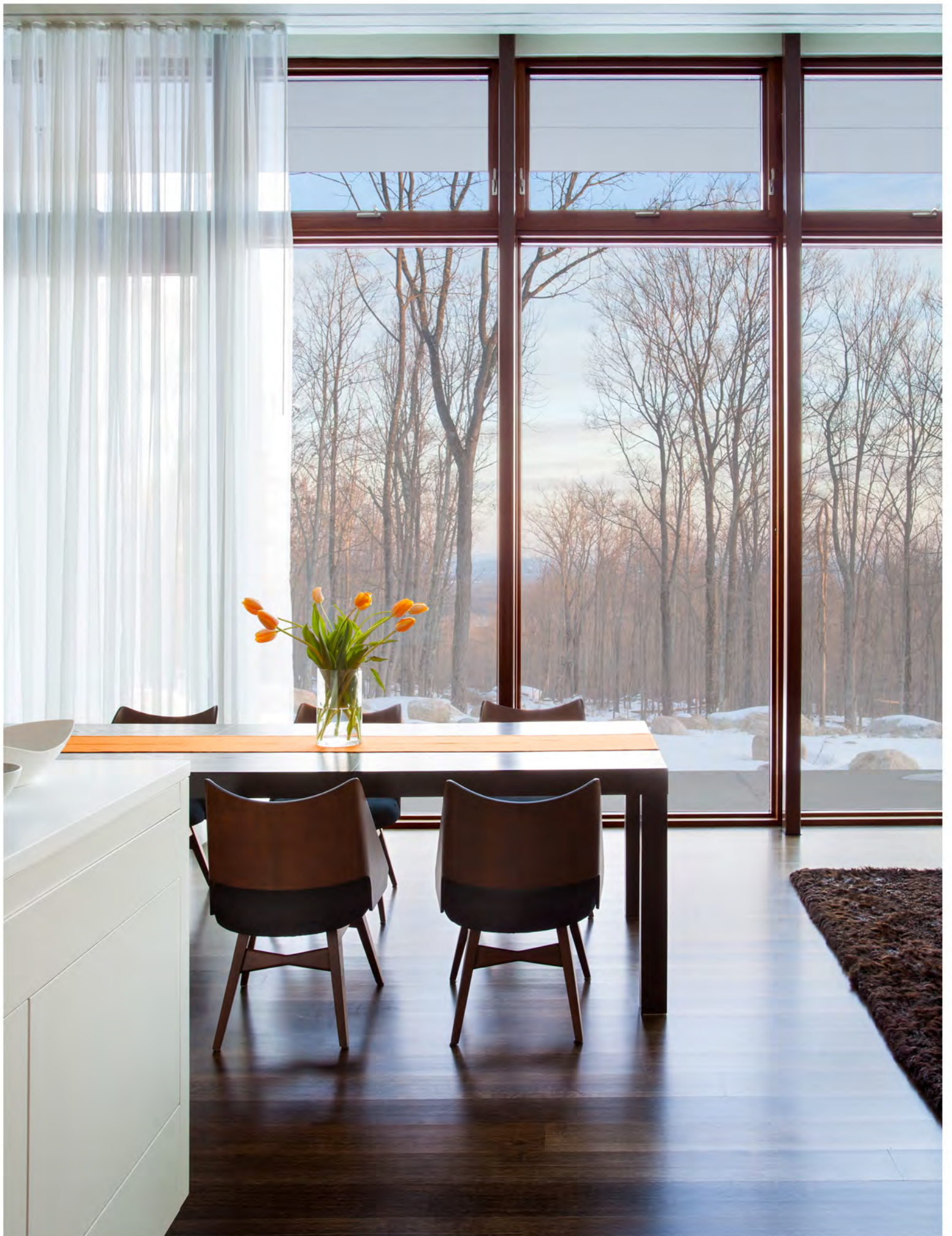
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Bucking first impressions, the residence's interior is
emphatically open to landscape.





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The rear elevation of A House in the Woods appears to hover slightly above the forested hillside.

