

NEWSDAY'S GUIDE TO DESIGN AND DECOR

# HOME

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## Free Expression

Homes that reflect personal vision



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A 240-million-year-old fossil, left, dominates the living room, in which natural light and furnishings in muted tones impart an earthy sensibility. At right, the homeowner need only walk across a rooftop deck to engage in his stargazing hobby in a professional observatory.

# Natural Wonder

Earth and sky enter everywhere in this sweeping East Hampton home

BY JAN TYLER

**T**he couple loved the little glass box of a 1950s beach house they'd bought in East Hampton.

Snug on an idyllic acre that slopes gently from a wooded grove down to near the high-water line of the ocean, the house seemed the perfect natural retreat from city life. But after two or three years, its charming littleness proved to be too, well, little. They decided to expand.

"The idea was to keep the old glass box and somehow build around it," says the husband. They wanted a place where they could indulge their hobbyists' passion for nature and draw the wild world close. They needed, for one thing, to live in a space where enormous alligator and palm frond fossils would dominate the decor — and they were hoping to top it all off with an observatory for their telescope.

"We needed someone with vision to pull

it off," he says. And they knew whom they wanted. "We'd been admirers of Joe D'Urso for a long time; what we'd seen of his work was right on the mark, so we looked him up."

Not an easy task. Despite his reputation as a minimalist interior, furniture and sometimes architectural designer whose meticulously proportioned works align him with the best in his field, D'Urso, currently of Water Mill, is elusive. He works alone with no cumbersome staff and studio baggage and is as discriminating in his choice of projects as he is about every detail of their development. His eventual advice to the couple, reluctantly taken: "Tear it down and start over."

And the evolution of a new 4,000-square-foot house began.

True to the house's organic ethos "it was sculpted in the field," says James Merrell, a Sag Harbor architect who was called in to formalize the architectural and engi-

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A headboard of seagrass matting lends style to the master bedroom, right, while a remote-controlled gas fireplace adds comfort. In the soaring, two-story foyer, opposite, a 16-foot-tall fossil slab is a commanding presence.



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neering plans and then slipped into a role as consultant. "I've always respected Joe's work," he says. "I went into it not as just another job but as a kind of design adventure, to contribute, but also to learn."

The statuesque structure itself emerged as an assemblage of blocky concrete planes pierced with steel-girdled glass panels. Its outline of opposing shapes and heights is its only adornment.

Beside it, the design impact of the swimming pool rivals the house's imposing architecture but is of a piece with its natural feel. Built with a composite of geometric concrete forms, the pool's entire forward rim—called an "infinity edge"—allows water to spill in an even flow into a recirculating trough. To swimmers, the pool and the ocean beyond seem to merge, a somewhat unnerving experience, like swimming in

the sky.

Such boundary blurring was central to the project. "Bringing the views inside became a strong theme," says D'Urso. "The glass was carried upwards in order to capture the quality of the light, the cloud shapes, the endless expanse of sky."

"We wanted to keep that transparency, the sense of being at one with nature, even when we're inside," adds the wife. And, says her husband, "the changes gave me space to indulge my lifelong hobbies of watching the heavens" and collecting fossils. Now he can scan the night sky anytime he wants, courtesy of a roof-mounted fiberglass observatory housing a professional, 24-inch-diameter telescope. And he's built the fossils into his house.

"I've collected small ones since I was a kid, and now I have the wall space for huge 'dyings,' so called because the impressions of fish, palm fronds and this big alligator that were trapped in sediment 240 million years ago remain in petrified rock. To me, they're more exciting than masterwork paintings."

Indeed, the spectacular alligator fossil bathed in natural light from a tented skylight has a high-art impact on the living area. Sliced into two-inch-thick slabs, the fossilized panels (there are two others, one 16 feet high) were mounted on the concrete walls, whose texture complements the irregularities of the ancient stone.

The couple's penchant for natural wonders also can be found in an informal study, where a wall of glass overlooking an enclosed courtyard offers a di-

orama-like view of wild fowl nesting in a man-made pond.

More traditional living, dining and sitting spaces are grouped around an open kitchen, where furniture-grade details blend with mahogany floors and woodwork.

Throughout the house, D'Urso's hand can be seen in the austere lines of tables and fireplaces he designed for specific placement, some bolted to the floor to ensure they remain in the exact position he envisioned.

Like the steel-framed windows, the mahogany doors were designed to fit D'Urso's concept of each space; some, as in the master bedroom, soar to ceiling height to avoid disrupting the linear flow. The master bath, a complex of compartmentalized alcoves, was given no less attention; in fact, an arrangement that includes a clear glass sink backed with layered panels of slate and mahogany stands out like a small work of art. "It's the materials that give the house warmth," says D'Urso. "They were chosen for their color, texture and practicality, and they will mellow gracefully."

"Joe is a master of materials," says Merrell. "He views concrete, wood and metal with the same eye that he gives to fabrics and furniture, and the result is a building whose architectural materials are uniquely powerful as decorative surfaces."

"This house will endure as an ageless classic," Merrell adds, "proof that so-called modern architecture needn't be victimized by clichés." ■

Jan Tyler writes frequently about homes for Newsday.



In the master bath, a series of compartments is finished in mahogany and slate.

