

A Choreography Of Architecture For The Dancing Hills Of Martha's Vineyard

By Kitty Finstad



Conceived as inspiration specific to the site—among the highest points on Martha's Vineyard—Tim Stewart's conceptual design for 38 Fire Tower Road draws on local vernacular materials such as cedar. OUTLANDS DESIGN

Long before the island of Noepe—"land between the streams"—was renamed Martha's Vineyard by the British explorer Bartholomew Gosnold, who landed here in 1602, the Native American Wampanoag Tribe had a poetic name for a particular ridge in the north west stretch of the island: the Dancing Hills.

Today, if you were to stand on that same ridge at [38 Fire Tower Road](#), you'd see why the island's indigenous inhabitants bestowed such a name. The topography here rolls and dips and sways, giving way to views of trees, slopes, sky, water—ever-shifting with the seasons.



Views from the Dancing Hills take in the grassy white-sand dunes of nearby Lambert's Cove Beach. DAVID WELCH

One of the highest points on Martha's Vineyard, this unique 3.1-acre parcel of land offers a buyer with vision the opportunity to create an extraordinary contemporary home in harmony with its environment.

“This is a visionary lifestyle investment,” says [Elle Lash](#), a broker at [Tea Lane Associates](#), which is listing the land at just under \$1.6 million, inclusive of a generous 1.4-acre building envelope, an installed well and cleared access paths. A rare proposition in a market where residential inventory has nearly halved since pandemic-fueled transactions peaked in 2020-21.



Outland Design's bold plan for a contemporary family home at 38 Fire Tower Road uses the natural elevations of this unique site on Martha's Vineyard. OUTLANDS DESIGN

Lash asserts that a well-executed completed property, built to discerning specifications, could end up being worth multiples of the original purchase price. “If you buy the land for \$1.6 million and put \$3 million into a quality build, you’ll have an exquisite prime property in a singularly prime position when you’re done. Whereas if you bought a finished house with these kinds of views, you’d end up spending at least \$7 million.”

To demonstrate the site’s potential, Lash and her client put a creative idea into action: they commissioned an architect. In Tim Stewart, principal at [Outlands Design](#), an architectural firm rooted on the island and intimately familiar with the nuances (and regulations such as height restrictions) of building on the Vineyard, they found a visionary dance partner. Lash describes the collaboration as “deeply researched, creative and joyful.”



The staked site has a generous 1.4-acre building envelope—plenty for 3 bedrooms, primary living space, outdoor infinity pool and a tucked-away garage that connects to the main entry via covered walkway. OUTLANDS DESIGN

“I took my brief from the site,” says Stewart. “It’s a very special place here on the Vineyard. It occupies one of the highest points on the island and the views are just incredible, especially down to Lambert’s Cove Beach [an idyllic expanse of grassy, white-sand dunes]. The view here is the primary feature of the site and that’s really what drove our design.”

Designing for an imaginary client and in the absence of prescribed design criteria (which Stewart describes as “totally abnormal”) had its challenges. Without answers to the questions he would typically ask of a client—year-round residence or vacation home? family bolthole? lifestyle needs?—Stewart and his team made up a fictitious narrative for how a client might use the property as a second summertime residence. The process, he says, was a fun and creative one that resulted in a striking contemporary visualization, presented in a series of realistic 3D architectural renderings to help stimulate the imagination of a potential buyer.

The “not fun” component of the design addressed regulatory restrictions—those that apply across the island and to the 38 Fire Tower Road site specifically—ensuring square-footage requirements and height restrictions informed the parameters of the three-bedroom, two-story plan.



The primary bedroom suite (right) features a sloped roof and balcony, where views stretch to the north and west over Vineyard Sound. OUTLANDS DESIGN

“It was challenging to get a second story into the structure,” Stewart admits. The solution? A clever sloped roof that rises to accommodate a primary bedroom suite with a view-capturing balcony. “We try not to fit the whole building into one mass, so we took the two guest suites and pulled them apart into their own ‘pod’ to effectively make a mini guest house that’s accessed by a covered walkway. We thought it would be fun to have a walk outside if this is going to be a summer residence.”

That same unique approach to working with the site also applied to pragmatic design elements like the garage. “You want to park in a logical place where you’re not schlepping groceries across to the other side of the house. So we’ve

nestled the house into the topography and used the site's different elevations to our advantage, tucking the garage underneath. We've also designed a very cool external staircase that cuts underneath the covered connector walkway and brings you back to the formal entry—it's a way of connecting the 'informal' [garage] way in with the central court."



A signature of the architect is to create a "moment" as you approach the entrance that invites views through the house before even entering. OUTLANDS DESIGN

Materials-wise, Stewart's largely glass and timber design cleaves to the local vernacular. "Around 95% of the material we use here is cedar: Western Red, Alaskan Yellow, Atlantic White, which is all very weather- and insect-resistant. It all starts out as one color but eventually morphs into a rich, silvery gray."

Seeing the view *through* the house on arrival at the door is, says Stewart, "a very special moment, and an experience that we try to integrate into many of our designs, with large glass panels part of our signature style."



The indigenous Wampanoag Tribe referred to the region surrounding the site at 38 Fire Tower Road as the Dancing Hills. MARC FAIRSTEIN

“So much about living on the Vineyard,” Lash adds, “is about interacting with the natural beauty here. I love that we have a mix of historic and contemporary architecture. And what Tim and his team have done with this bold design gives a buyer a tool to truly envision the experience of the landscape through the shape, the footprint, the materials and the beauty of the Dancing Hills.”
