

A man with dark hair, wearing a white short-sleeved button-down shirt and patterned shorts, is kneeling on a sandy beach. He is smiling and holding a long wooden stick vertically in his right hand. The sand in the foreground is intricately patterned with circular, ripple-like designs. In the background, the ocean waves are visible under a clear sky.

residential
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A HANLEY-WOOD PUBLICATION / JULY 2002

prince *of* tides

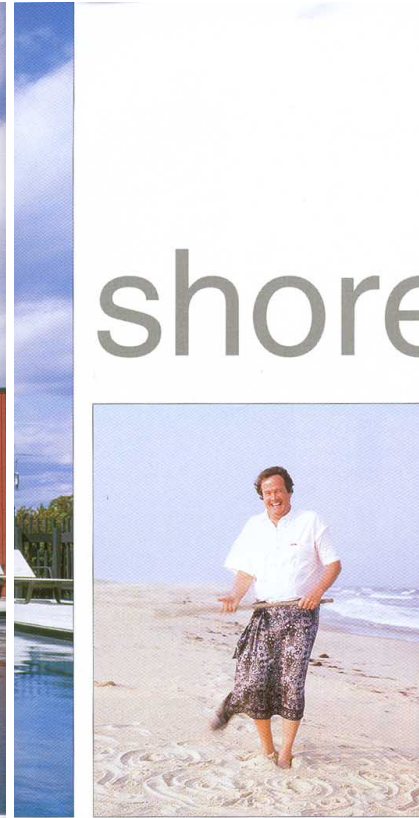
michael ryan
rules the jersey shore

sofa so good / wilderness training
getting paid / quiet time
high fenestration / casa mizner

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Carefully chosen exterior materials protect Ryan's beach houses from the salt-infused air. This 2001 oceanfront home in Loveladies, N.J., defends against the elements with cedar cladding and a concrete-block privacy wall. Inside, Ryan and project designer Chris Jeffrey selected Australian cypress for the floors and the second-floor bridge.



Photos: portrait by Bill Cramer; all others: © Paul Warchol

michael ryan's blank canvas
is a spit of land
on the jersey shore.

shore calling

by meghan drueding

When architect Michael Ryan spied a 1950s commercial building in the beach community of Loveladies, N.J., he knew he had to have it. He learned that the building's 80-year-old owner still went to the office every day, so he began to drop by once a week with coffee and pastries. "This was a really interesting man," says Ryan. "He was a local developer who wanted to make the area into an arts community. He gave no-interest home loans to artists and writers during the 1950s and '60s, and some of those families are still coming here."

After months of getting to know the developer, Ryan worked up the nerve to ask about renting the building for his newly formed architecture firm. The older man acquiesced, and soon Ryan and his staff of three were renovating the office. They moved in March 1989, leased the space for five years, and bought it in 1994. The firm, now six people strong, still occupies the building.

This focused, personal approach to getting the results he wants is still Ryan's hallmark. Each house he designs ends up a small gem, tailored exactly to the clients' needs and budget. Whether it's an oceanfront home on Long Beach Island, the 18-mile-long strip of land off New Jersey's southern coast that contains Loveladies, or a permanent residence farther inland, Ryan's attention to detail is borderline obsessive. "He knows every project inside and out," says Brian Smith, a Bucks County, Pa., builder who's worked with Ryan on several houses.

soup to nuts

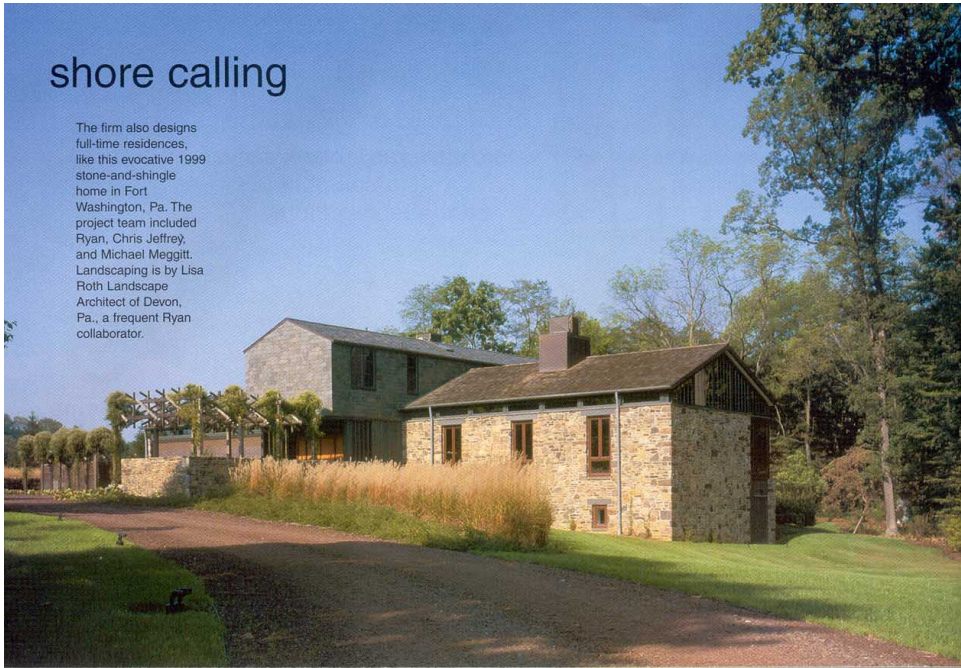
Part of this meticulousness is simply Ryan's nature. It's also the consequence of the way he's set up his business. Michael Ryan Architects is an uncompromisingly full-service firm. He and his staff of interns design the projects. Then Ryan's wife, interior designer Randee Spelkoman, helps the clients choose finishes and furniture. The architects create much of the furniture themselves, and what they don't design, Spelkoman finds, buys, and resells to the client.

In fact, the firm purchases most of the nonstructural products that go into each home—from light fixtures to countertops to faucets—and resells them at an appropriate markup to the homeowners. By



shore calling

The firm also designs full-time residences, like this evocative 1999 stone-and-shingle home in Fort Washington, Pa. The project team included Ryan, Chris Jeffrey, and Michael Meggitt. Landscaping is by Lisa Roth Landscape Architect of Devon, Pa., a frequent Ryan collaborator.



Photos: © Paul Warchol



taking on the role of procurer, one that's usually reserved for the contractor and subcontractors, Ryan exerts complete control over the execution of his projects. "It makes things a little messy around here because we have to check everything in and sometimes store it at the office," he says. "You have to establish a system, and it does take time. But it saves time down the road because there are fewer mistakes and change orders. We're basically stripping out the subjectives." The method only applies to local projects—long-distance jobs necessitate a more typical supplier arrangement.

Contractors don't seem to mind the unusual process. "It's always a challenge," says Tom Tallon, a Long Beach Island builder who frequently teams with Ryan. "But the projects always turn out looking very good." And it can be cost-effective for clients, who benefit from Ryan and Spelkoman's experience in finding the best available prices. The firm makes enough money from the procedure that it doesn't have to charge a separate interior design fee. "It's one-stop shopping," says Barbara Kaplan, a suburban Philadelphia client for whom Ryan's firm designed a beach house in Loveladies. "You don't have to mediate between a third party and the architect."

Ryan's method of painstaking, comprehensive architecture also weeds out potential clients who may not want to take design as seriously as he does. That's all right with him. He limits the number of active projects to about 15. (Most of them are residences, but he does take on some light-commercial work.) The self-imposed cap enables him to keep the office small, which makes for a relaxed atmosphere.

on holiday

Relaxed atmospheres are even more important in the beach houses that make up a large percentage of Ryan's portfolio. Most of his vacation-home clients fit a similar demographic profile: They're empty-nester couples from Philadelphia, northern New Jersey, or New York City with grown children and possibly grandchildren. They still have active careers but are beginning to spend more time telecommuting rather than working in the office. Many opt to own a city apartment plus the beach house, rather than keep up the big suburban homes where they've raised their families. Their vacation homes must accommodate overnight guests and facilitate large parties and gatherings, but they also must suit the couple when it's just the two of them.

So Ryan makes a point of isolating the master suite from the children's and guest bedrooms. "It's like a really great one-bedroom apartment," he says of one master suite in an oceanfront residence. "The owners don't feel like they're rattling around in this big house." New beach houses by the firm average 4,000 square feet; Ryan often finds himself talking clients into smaller houses than they'd originally requested. "I try not to design a lot of 'dumb space,'" he says. "We usually make the bedrooms pretty small because you're not using them a lot when you're at the beach. We try to maximize the space in those rooms with built-in furniture."

The space saved on the bedrooms gets applied to the homes' public areas, such as wide-open kitchen/living/dining rooms. "That's another thing that makes vacation homes different," says Ryan. "They're much

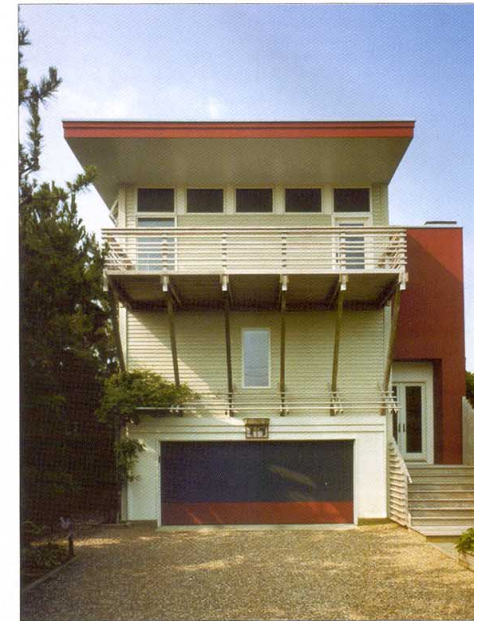


Photo: © Catherine Tighe

Ryan is fond of employing dashes of color to punch up lower-budget projects. Here, an earthy red enlivens a 1993 beach house in Barnegat Light, N.J.

"that's another thing that makes vacation homes different. they're much more of a magnet for family and friends."

—michael ryan

shore calling

Public and private spaces receive equal attention in a Ryan-designed house. This 1999 bayfront home in Loveladies, by Ryan, Chris Jeffrey, and Bill Bloomfield, includes both an expansive central living area and a restful master-bedroom suite.



"i like to use materials that will weather. it helps them gain a little soul."—michael ryan



Photos: © Catherine Tighe



more of a magnet for family and friends. You really need a large public space where people can gather, more so than in a traditional house."

The quiet north end of the island, where the majority of Ryan's vacation-home commissions are located, has few restaurants or bars; much of the residents' dining and entertaining happens at home. Ryan's projects contain many sight lines between the central living space and other rooms, making everyone in the house feel part of the action. The main rooms are often double-height and large enough to hold a pool table or other rainy-day amenities.

deep roots

Except for a couple of years spent working for Philadelphia firms, Ryan has practiced in the Long Beach Island area since graduating from the University of Pennsylvania's architecture school in 1980. And the Chester, Pa., native grew up spending summers in Avalon, N.J., another beach town south of the island. His commitment to the southern New Jersey shore shows in the choices he's made—to locate his business there, to live there (he and Spelkoman bought and remodeled a 1960s kit house on the island a year ago), and to embrace the local environment with his designs. Each of his firm's houses artfully smudges the line between indoors and outdoors. Some have large sliding windows that open entire walls to sea breezes. Others contain walls of pocket doors leading to porches or decks, connecting those outdoor spaces to interior rooms.

He chooses interior and exterior materials that will age gracefully in salt-laden air, among them cedar shingles and steel sealed with linseed oil. "I like to use materials that will weather," he says. "It helps them gain a little soul." Many of the new houses on the island are built atop timber piles for support against hurricane winds, but Ryan goes the extra mile: He designs shear walls sheathed in plywood that extend through every floor and down to the foundation, for even greater stability.

Due to the firm's full-service approach, Ryan and his colleagues have established relationships with dozens of craftspeople in Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. Contacts from his and Spelkoman's undergraduate years at Penn State and from his time at Penn have helped them find collaborators like Boston architect Brian Healy, with whom they designed several beach houses in the mid-1990s. Those same contacts prove handy when it comes to landing interns who might otherwise look to big cities for places to hone their talents. "One of the interns in my office, Rich Villa, came at the recommendation of one of my former Penn State professors," Ryan says. "People generally hear about us through word of mouth. If someone gets in touch with me, I interview them—even if I'm not hiring. That way, I always have people I can call when I do have an opening."

Ryan's refined, Modern buildings are an exception to the rule on the island, where clumsy mega-houses are gradually replacing the modest beach cottages that once lined the orderly streets. But the visual cacophony doesn't bother him. His desire for quality control stops at the property lines of his projects. "The island is kind of like a campground," he says. "Everyone has picked their spot here and can do what they want with it. I like the diversity of it." ra