

# DISSOLVED AT THE EDGES



## NANCY OWENS ANSWERED THE CALL OF A CHILDHOOD FRIEND TO BLEND A BARE YARD INTO ITS WOOLLY SURROUNDINGS.

BY JONATHAN LERNER / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL MORAN/OTTO

“This e-mail comes to you out of the blue,” Nina Lannan wrote to Nancy Owens, ASLA, in October 2003. She went on to describe her and her husband Tim’s property—92 hilly acres of second-growth forest, wetlands, and streams, skeined with overgrown logging roads and tumbled stone fences in upstate New York, two hours north of Manhattan—which was “not about sweeping views of the Catskills,” Lannan wrote, “but about winding through nature.”

Lannan and Owens had known each other as children in California. Owens’s father owned a remote hunting shack, and the girls sometimes went there with him. For Lannan, who grew up in a suburban apartment, those trips had been her first encounters with the great outdoors. Owens says, “She told me that those times my father took her out into nature had inspired her to buy this place.” Lannan says the upstate New York house, with a high, vaulted central room opening

### ABOVE

The ruins of a stone foundation were softened with spills of vegetation and randomly set stone paving that leads from the house.





#### LEFT AND BELOW

An island of trees and shrubs now creates a conceal-and-reveal upon arrival.

#### BOTTOM

Fieldstone walls and a simple woodshed set off a courtyard from the entry drive.



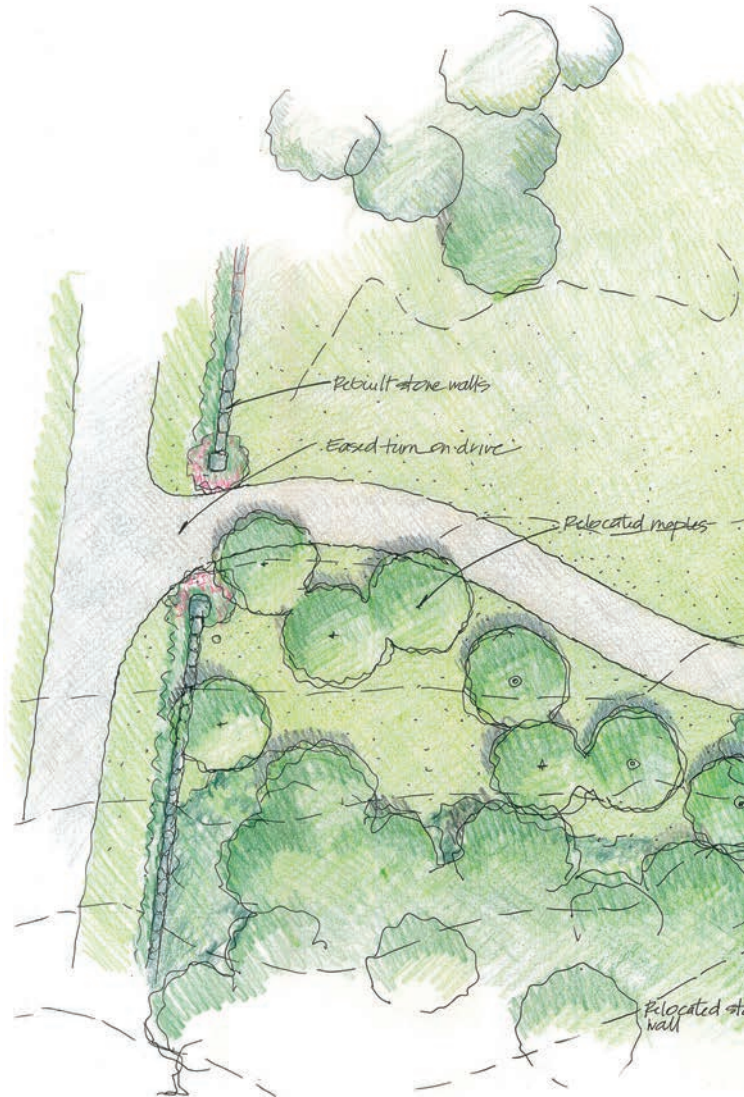
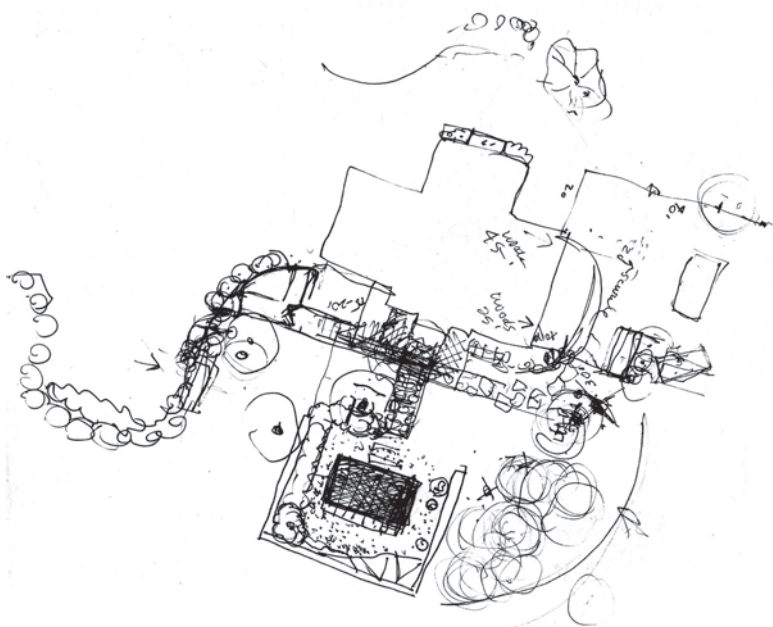
to the outdoors on opposite ends, flanked by a carport on one side and a pair of bedrooms on the other, reminded her of the California shack, a single room with a sleeping porch on either side.

The Lannans were looking for a rural retreat when they found the property, the house buffered from the site's wilder areas by a patch of naked lawn approached by a gravel drive. "I'd always wanted to garden," Nina

says. She's a theatrical manager who shepherded shows including *Cats*, *The Color Purple*, and *Billy Elliot* onto Broadway. Tim advises nonprofits on leadership and strategic development. "I'm a big believer in 'I can

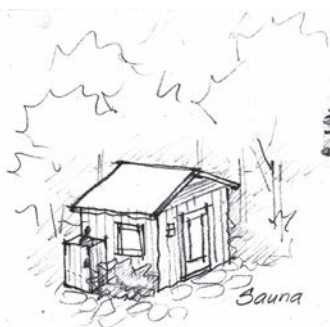






read a book and do anything,” Nina says. So she read: articles on Deborah Nevins, Affiliate ASLA, and Michael Van Valkenburgh, FASLA; Stevie Daniels’s *The Wild Lawn Handbook*; a book about forests; books about plants appropriate to the region. “But then I realized, this is way beyond me. This is a lot more than planting a couple of extra bushes.”

Owens answered the e-mail and signed on to do a master plan for the property and a detailed design for the several acres surrounding the house. She found herself working with an unusually engaged client. Lannan wrote a few months later, in a six-page letter neatly printed on blue-lined paper and amply illustrated with freehand diagrams: “Some



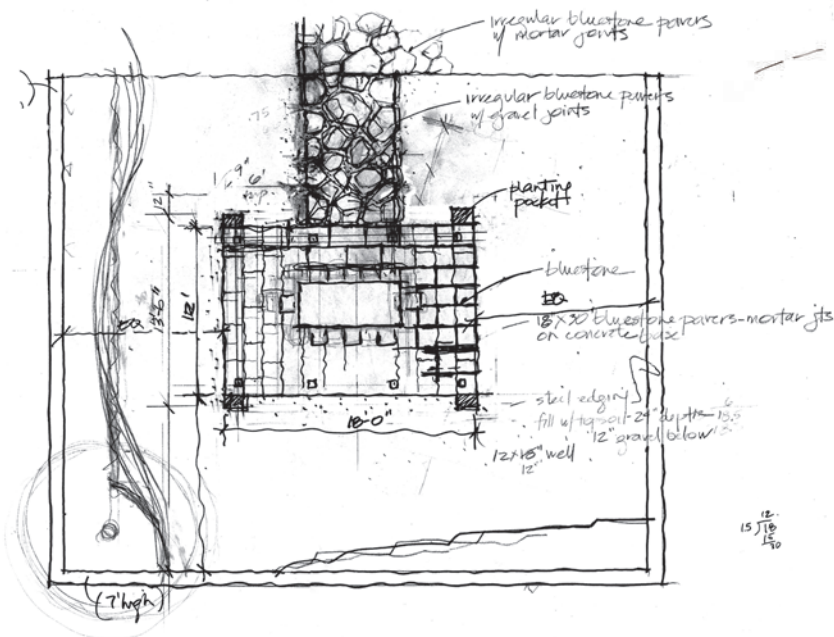
Wood Shed



Garden Shed

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

An early concept sketch; the final site design; a concept treatment for the ruined foundation; Owens’s sketches for the three outbuildings.







landscape items have become more evident as I have sat and looked through the windows and read my gardening books." Among many other considerations, she suggested where to site planting beds, an herb garden, and some blueberry and blackberry "for eating and also to attract birds (attracting bears is something to think about, I suppose)." How to open up certain views, but

mask a propane tank. Could a wetland area visible below the house become a pond? Should they plant grasses, or a small nursery of Fraser fir, for Christmas trees? For a stone wall with a gap in it: "Do you think I should get a big boulder dropped there à la Andy Goldsworthy or save such a statement for a better spot?" She closed with a long list of plants "recommended for our area that are

somewhat natural." Owens says, "She kept me on my toes."

Nina "was really interested in gardening," Owens says. "My whole thing was spatial organization around the house, which didn't relate to the topography or the woodland." She calls what she created there a series of rooms that "dissolve at the edges" into the surroundings. But that phrase





**ABOVE**  
The west facade of the house, as the Lannans found it.

**BELOW**  
A trim lawn and an orthogonal walkway lead to a relaxed and rusticated space within the ruin.

might equally depict what happened to the normal boundaries between architect and client. “I’m not the most linear thinker,” Owens says, adding with a grin, “Nina was a difficult client because she does everything so perfectly.” For her part, Nina felt right at home. “It was almost like working in the theater,” she says. “I’m always dealing with designers—what do they need, what have they got, what do I need to do to keep them moving forward? I understand that there’s integrity to a design. I get the balance of technical versus artistic.”

Owens’s design, which won a 2014 New York ASLA Merit Award, first presents itself in a reconceived arrival sequence. Before, the driveway led from the road onto the property and

then made a sharp right turn. Lined on both sides with young maples, it then headed straight for the carport, which took up the entirety of the house’s otherwise featureless north facade. Once you parked, it wasn’t clear which direction would lead to the front door, and even if you correctly walked to your right it wasn’t clear which the front door was, since there were identical double doorways at either end of the west facade. Now that right turn has been softened into a curve. The drive then arcs gently around an island of plantings, including some of those same maples, relocated; red osier dogwood; and bottlebrush buckeye, which screens the carport, now enclosed as a garage. A formerly too-visible parking area was cut deeper into the sloping





**BELOW**

Nina Lannan's garden shed marks an edge where design merges into woodland.



terrain and is now largely concealed behind shrubs and a stone wall. An entry garden is demarked from the driveway area by a woodshed and another low stone wall. Leading through an opening in the wall is a slightly formal bluestone walk—orthogonal, with mortared joints—which takes you to the now unmistakable front door; the second doorway has been enclosed within a small screened porch that allows views and ventilation to pass, but not people. A corresponding hierarchy is reflected in the stone paving, which as it passes the front door becomes random in shape and pattern, with planted joints, and spreads apart into a stepping-stone path as it rounds the corner of the house.

On the east side of the house a slope was leveled out, creating space for a patio, also randomly paved in bluestones. It serves as a gathering place, but below its fieldstone retaining wall, on a sloping lawn, is an area for

separate and solitary use defined by a cluster of trees that support a hammock. Farther down that slope is the wetland Nina had considered turning into a pond, thinking it would be a focal point from the patio above. That idea was abandoned because of regulatory complications, but judicious pruning has opened a pleasing long view into the shadowy, fern-filled hollow.

On the south side of the house where the grade rises there was a perennial drainage problem. That was resolved by laying a channel of stone, above which is planted what Owens calls “a river of ferns,” including cinnamon fern, sensitive fern, and ostrich fern. A stepping-stone path crosses that with a big rectangular slab, giving the illusion of a bridge. This path follows the rise to an area where there are a hot tub, sauna, and outdoor shower, secluded by both its elevation and screening shrubbery. The structures for the sauna,

**PLANT LIST**

**TREES**

- Amelanchier canadensis* (Canadian serviceberry)
- Betula papyrifera* (Paper birch)
- Carya ovata* (Shagbark hickory)
- Cercis canadensis* (Eastern redbud)
- Cornus florida* ‘Cherokee Princess’ (Cherokee Princess flowering dogwood)
- Cornus kousa* (Kousa dogwood)
- Quercus rubra* (Red oak)

**SHRUBS & VINES**

- Aesculus parviflora* (Bottlebrush buckeye)
- Clematis terniflora* (Sweet autumn clematis)
- Clethra alnifolia* (Summersweet clethra)
- Cornus sericea* (Red twig dogwood)
- Daphne x burkwoodii* ‘Carol Mackie’ (Carol Mackie daphne)
- Deutzia gracilis* ‘Nikko’ (Nikko slender deutzia)
- Fothergilla major* (Witch alder)
- Hydrangea anomala* ssp. *petiolaris* (Climbing hydrangea)
- Hydrangea quercifolia* (Oakleaf hydrangea)
- Ilex verticillata* (Winterberry)
- Parthenocissus tricuspidata* (Boston ivy)
- Pieris floribunda* ‘Brouwer’s Beauty’ (Brouwer’s Beauty andromeda)
- Vaccinium corymbosum* ‘Northsky’ (Northsky highbush blueberry)
- Viburnum dentatum* (Arrowwood viburnum)
- Viburnum x rhytidophylloides* (Viburnum)

**PERENNIALS**

- Asarum canadense* (Canadian wild ginger)
- Baptisia australis* (Blue false indigo)
- Campanula persicifolia* (Peachleaf bellflower)
- Coreopsis verticillata* ‘Moonbeam’ (Moonbeam threadleaf tickseed)
- Dennstaedtia punctilobula* (Hay-scented fern)
- Echinacea purpurea* (Purple coneflower)
- Eurybia divaricata* (White wood aster)
- Galium odoratum* (Sweet woodruff)
- Helictotrichon sempervirens* (Blue oat grass)
- Hemerocallis* ‘Stella de Oro’ (Stella de Oro daylily)
- Heuchera americana* (American alumroot)
- Heuchera villosa* ‘Purpurea’ (Purpurea hairy alumroot)
- Lamium maculatum* (Spotted dead nettle)
- Matteuccia struthiopteris* (Ostrich fern)
- Onoclea sensibilis* (Sensitive fern)
- Osmunda cinnamomea* (Cinnamon fern)
- Pennisetum alopecuroides* (Chinese fountain grass)
- Phlox divaricata* (Woodland phlox)
- Phlox paniculata* ‘David’ (David garden phlox)
- Phlox stolonifera* (Creeping phlox)
- Rudbeckia gloriosa* (Gloriosa daisy)
- Symphotrichum cordifolium* (Blue wood aster)
- Tiarella cordifolia* (Heartleaf foamflower)





the woodshed, and a garden shed were constructed, following simple sketches Owens drew, by the builder who had put up the house, and with the same palette of materials. So in addition to their functional value, they give structure and visual cohesion to the area around the house.

A particularly dramatic existing feature of the property was the ruined foundation of a vanished building, close to where the new one was built. It is just three sides of stone wall, cut into the rising ground and sitting partly on a bedrock outcrop. Not unlike a theater's proscenium facing the audience, the missing fourth wall is the one toward the new house. The old foundation created a wide, embracing courtyard. It

was actually too wide for comfort—the walls too blank, the pea gravel floor too harsh, the whole thing lacking nuance—an empty stage. Owens enclosed the view behind it with a grove of paper birch, softened its interior margins with mixed planting on one side and a spill of Virginia creeper on another, and punctuated the gravel surface with an extension of the random bluestone paving that leads into the center of the space where a pergola now shades a picnic table. This is an outdoor room of civilized utility and exceptional definition—an exception, too, as the only space here that does not dissolve gently into the landscape. One afternoon last summer, Nina and Tim Lannan and Nancy Owens were enjoying a

long, winey lunch under the pergola. Recalling the Northern California cabin, the ultra-sophisticated Broadway theater powerhouse grew wistful. “We’ll never be able to go there again,” she said. “Yes,” Owens replied, “but now here you are splitting wood.” ●

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#### Project Credits

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT** NANCY OWENS STUDIO LLC, NEW YORK (NANCY OWENS, ASLA, PRINCIPAL; ANNE BERMAN, ASLA). **ENVIRONMENTAL CONSULTING** BAGDON ENVIRONMENTAL, DELMAR, NEW YORK. **SURVEYING** CLARK ENGINEERING & SURVEYING, P.C., LEBANON, NEW YORK. **GENERAL CONTRACTOR** WEMPLE'S LANDSCAPING SERVICE, OLD CHATHAM, NEW YORK.

**ABOVE**  
Outdoor rooms encircling the house blend seamlessly into surrounding woods.