



SWIM PICKINGS



THE RIGHT CHOICE OF POOL AND OUTDOOR ENTERTAINING AREA CAN TURN A HOME INTO A WEEKEND RETREAT FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS. TWO AREA EXPERTS WEIGH IN ON WHAT MATTERS MOST.

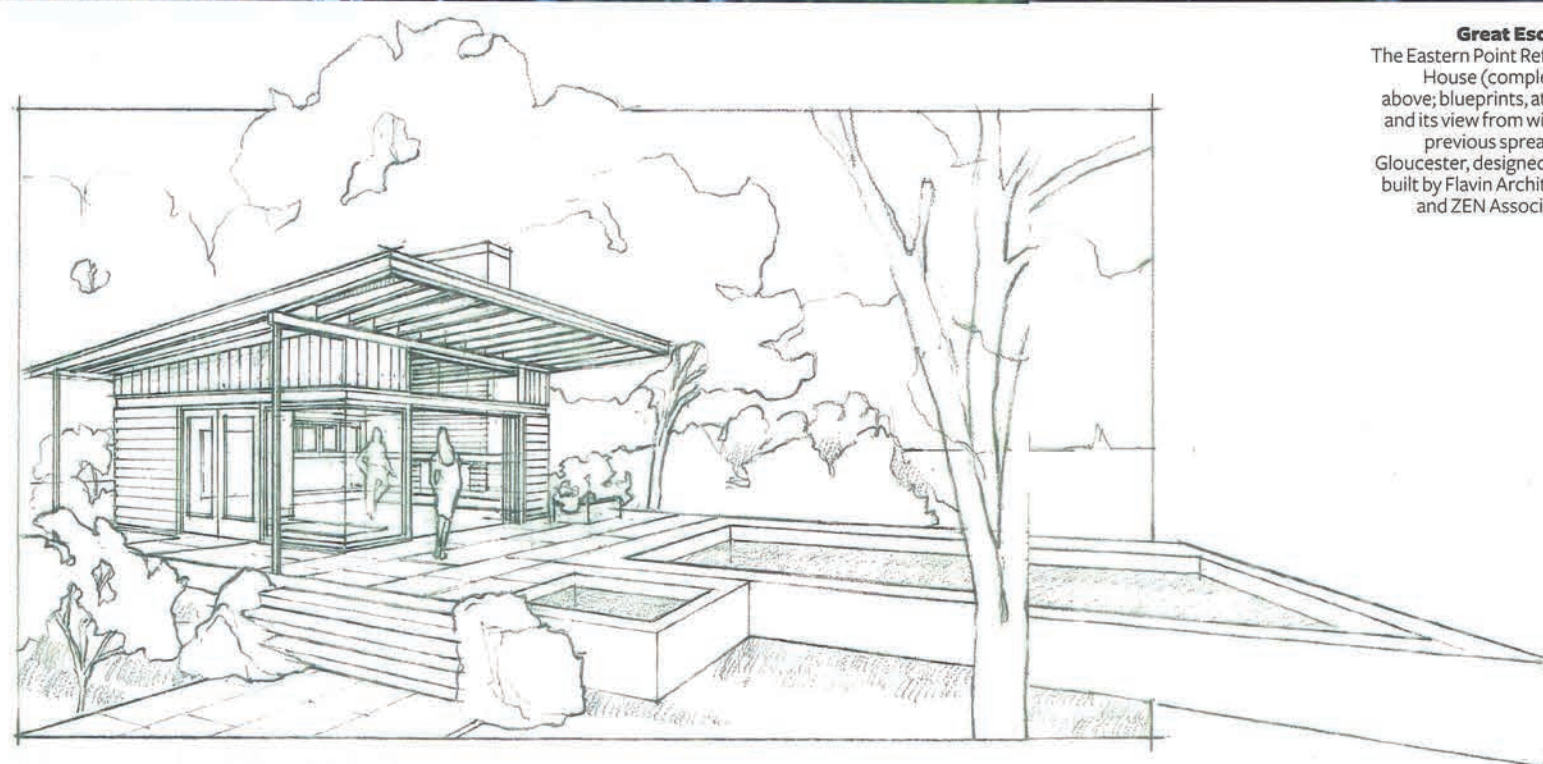
BY ANDREW CONWAY

ADMIT IT: How many times have you stared at your patio or backyard on a sultry summer's day and wished you had a swimming pool? Not just a pool to swim in, but also an outdoor entertaining area, where a lazy weekend can feel like a mini-vacation at a luxury resort?

For many North Shore home owners, it's the ultimate dream—a sparkling pool where the kids can swim or splash around from sunrise to sunset, a heated spa where adults can lounge with a chilled cocktail, comfy sun loungers for catching a few rays, a grill or pizza oven for alfresco meals, and a roaring fire pit for evenings under the stars.

Well, you can stop dreaming. Assuming you have the right space and a carefully managed budget to fund the project, modern pool and landscape architecture design have become so sophisticated in recent years that there are virtually no limits to creating poolside perfection. Everything from the form and function of swimming pools to the countless options for fully automated and resort-style outdoor entertaining areas has been given a cool and contemporary makeover to meet the demands of today's relaxed and casual lifestyle.

Cutting-edge square or rectangular splash or lap pools, stylish granite and



Great Escape
The Eastern Point Retreat House (completed, above; blueprints, at left; and its view from within, previous spread) in Gloucester, designed and built by Flavin Architects and ZEN Associates.

bluestone pavers, and automated covers that slide over the water at the touch of a button have replaced traditional kidney-shaped pools, old-fashioned patio tiles, and those tiresome leaf- and insect-netting chores.

Updated in-ground heated spas have eclipsed classic Swedish-style hot tubs, and water lovers can now dive into an ever-deeper pool of new technologies, from underwater spa jets to funky LED lighting. There are now even resistance water current options for hardcore swim fanatics. And when it comes to safety, clever architectural design can eliminate an unsightly pool fence and still keep the swimming pool fully compliant with our country's rigorous rules and regulations.

The choices multiply if you opt for a multifunction outdoor entertaining area. Do you want a cabana or pool house as an additional relaxation room separate from the main house? What about a fire pit, pizza oven, barbecue area, and heaters—or even a widescreen TV and audio system for an alfresco movie night?

“You don’t have to settle for a pool in a yard with a fence,” says Peter White, a principal of Woburn-based ZEN Associates, an award-winning landscape architectural company that offers full design and build services. “You should expect your designer to stretch [his or her] imagination and produce something outstanding.”

Combining sophisticated design infused with Japanese sensibilities and razor-sharp technical expertise, ZEN offers a one-stop service, from conceptual and schematic design to construction, interior design, and long-term maintenance for pretty much everything under the sun—and in the water.

“One of the tenets of Japanese design,” explains White, “is breaking down the barriers of architectural building, so that the inside and outside spaces have a strong connection both physically and visibly and flow seamlessly from one to the other. Each of our designs starts with the philosophy that every aspect of your

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life—the land, the architecture, the environment, and your lifestyle—is inextricably linked. Our goal is to expertly balance all of these elements to create a memorable space that engages the senses and evokes an emotional response.”

This delicate balancing of art, science, and nature in contemporary pool and pool house design and construction is never more apparent than at Eastern Point Retreat House, a classic oceanfront estate in Gloucester. The owners commissioned ZEN Associates in the spring of 2011 to design and build a swimming pool, pool house, and entertaining area separate from the main house that would capitalize on the dramatic views across Gloucester Harbor.

Eight months later, the family was splashing around in a stylish rectangular pool with a cool gray plaster interior, bluestone pavers, and a separate in-ground heated spa. White and his team cleverly raised the pool edge by 4.5 feet, keeping the pool fully compliant with strict safety regulations but eliminating the need for a



view-obstructing pool fence.

For the pool house, White turned to Boston-based Flavin Architects, one of New England's leading residential architects, to design something that complemented the pool but also acted as a counterpoint to the classic New England-style residence.

"The owners were both very enthusiastic with the modern concept," says principal Colin Flavin, who designs each project with a variety of media—including freehand sketches, wood models, and 3-D computer graphics—to "walk" clients through a building while it's still being imagined. Flavin and project architect Howard Raley designed the contemporary wood-and-glass structure as a simple but welcoming relaxation and entertaining space featuring a central lounge, kitch-

enette, indoor and outdoor shower, and gas fireplace. With client approval, ZEN Associates then built the pool house according to Flavin's design. The result is a sleek but comfortable family retreat built with robust materials to withstand New England's harsh winter weather.

White remains mum when asked how much his clients invested in the pool project, but he does say that a basic, well-designed pool could cost between \$60,000 and \$75,000—a price that can rise rapidly to \$150,000 with additions like autocovers, special insulation, and sanitation equipment. Add on resort-style facilities—like a pool house, hot tub, barbecue area, pizza oven, fire pit, outdoor TV and audio equipment, and high-tech automation—and the costs can spike as high as your budget and imagination allow.



On Deck: Above, ZEN Associates completed the transformation of this Rockport home's outdoor space in 2011. Left, another example of ZEN's landscape work.

Unless you opt for a cookie-cutter commercial pool option, White says working with a full design-build landscape architecture company like ZEN Associates can make sound financial sense. "The client can get a very good handle on costs because everything is centralized," he says. "We can quickly turn to our team of designers, estimators, construction managers, and foremen and ask them instantly about any changes and cost implications. It also allows for very fast decision making at every stage of the process."

Aside from the considerable financial investment, adding a pool or entertaining area can be a complex and challenging prospect for any homeowner. An array of technical details all factor into the equation, including the analysis of existing site conditions; views; sun and shadow patterns; topography, soil composition, grading, erosion control, and storm water management; and mechanical, electrical, filtration, and sanitation systems.

With a team of 45 expert craftsmen and access to a small army of outside consultants, ZEN handles everything from permitting, budgeting, planning, and scheduling to the full extent of landscape architecture, design, construction, engineering, and horticulture, as well as ongoing maintenance once a project is complete.

"The best clients are the ones who are interested and involved in the project, who know what they want, and how it functions

Pond Ambition
An Asian-inspired water feature created by ZEN Associates.



for their lifestyle," says White. "The precise details may not be apparent, but they know the overview of what they want." Furthermore, he says, "The perfect client hires the right design team and has confidence in its ability to get the details right, to know what works aesthetically and functionally, and to deliver within budget and on time. And the best designers listen to their clients; good communication is crucial to the success of a project."

White cautions against adding too many elements, especially in the dizzying world of high-tech wizardry. "It's easy to get carried away with home automation,

but you have to get the mechanics right, and for many people, it's a big learning curve," he says.

Of course, too many options and choices can backfire. "We try to tone down the number of options people have," White says. "Having controls in the house for outdoor systems is really nice, but to have 80 options can be overwhelming." And some options just won't cut it in the backyard space, according to White. "We care not just about the aesthetic, form, and environment, but the design also has to function well...and be coordinated and understood properly.

It's important to ask whether you need everything that's available and whether it fits your lifestyle."

White believes a pool is worth the investment, even with New England's variable climate, as long as people use it for more than just swimming.

"I don't think you'll get as much use from it if you don't build the surrounding entertaining space," he says. "But if it has a good connection with the inside of the house and you're prepared to maintain it properly, it can really complement your lifestyle and bring in the weekend retreat." zenassociates.com; flavinarchitects.com