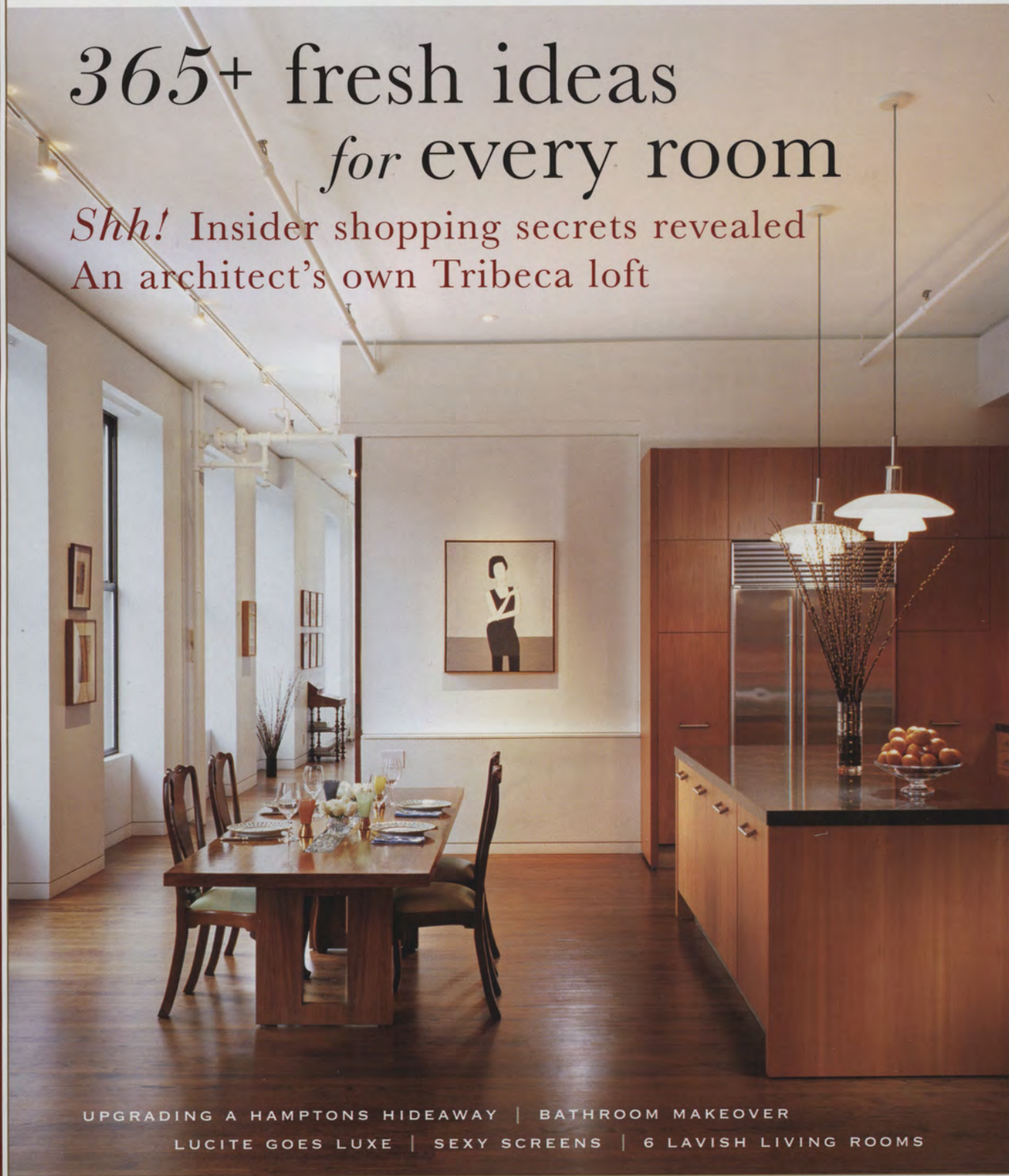


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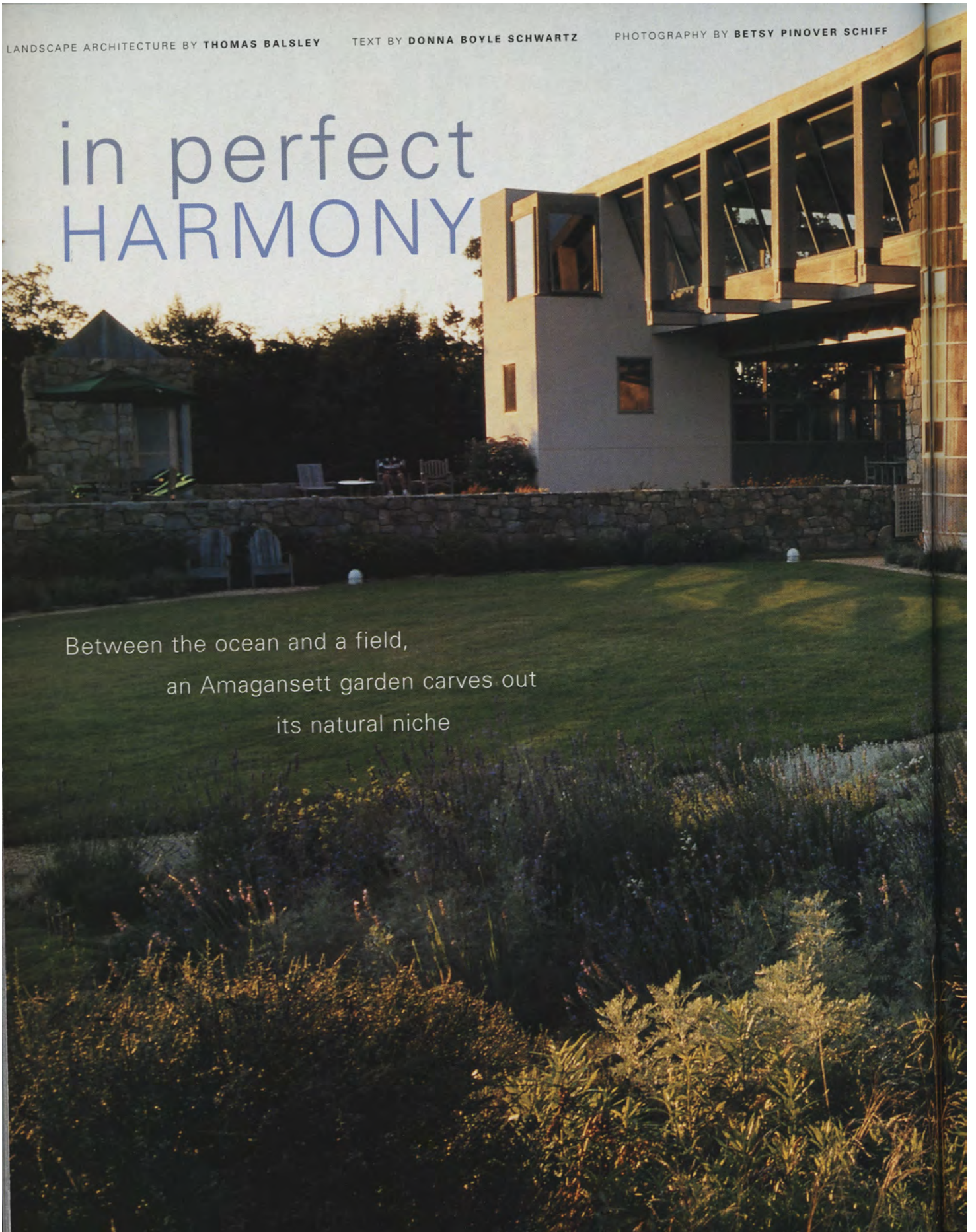
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE BY **THOMAS BALSLEY**

TEXT BY **DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BETSY PINOVER SCHIFF**

in perfect HARMONY

Between the ocean and a field,
an Amagansett garden carves out
its natural niche





Working with native plants and trees, landscape architect Thomas Balsley created a Long Island property that is at one with nature.



NESTLED IN A FIELD OF LAVENDER AND WILD GRASSES at the end of a winding garden path stands a crumbling stone tower covered in moss, its falling arch topped with vines of blooming wisteria. The scene could easily be mistaken for Tuscany or Normandy instead of its Amagansett, New York, locale—and that's exactly the idea.

It was on a trip to southern France that Bob and Margo Alexander met landscape architect Thomas Balsley through mutual friends. They would later hire the principal of Thomas Balsley Associates in New York City to design the grounds for the new home they were having built in Long Island.

The husband, a sixtysomething owner of a marketing firm specializing in the entertainment industry, and his wife, a retired senior executive in financial services, make their primary residence in upper Manhattan but have maintained second homes in the East Hampton area since 1973. In 1990, they purchased the 1.5-acre Amagansett property after falling in love with its location on a bluff overlooking the bay.



The home's floor-to-ceiling windows, top right, offer expansive vistas of the fields and bay. The natural beauty is complemented by a lily pond, above, which serves double duty as a pool enclosure.



Balsley calls the parcel “an extraordinary site, caught in a wonderful dialogue between ocean and field, and [the Alexanders] cherish the field as much as the ocean. The property is very much in tune with nature.”

Design and construction of the house and the garden proceeded jointly, with the total cost of the entire project coming in at more than \$2 million. Architect Robert Barnes, principal of Barnes Coy Architects in Bridgehampton, designed the 3,500-square-foot, five-bedroom home to be the perfect respite for the Alexanders along with their two sons, Nichol, 29, and James, 24, who are frequent visitors, and the couple's six-year-old Maltese, Oliver.

The contemporary structure comprises several towers joined at the second level by an enclosed glass platform, which grants views of both the bay and the field. Below the second floor, a terrace leads to the pool deck, creating an easy flow from the interior living area to the outdoor space.

Crafting a pool area that would satisfy safety codes—which require a 4-foot-high enclosure—without obstructing the panorama was a challenge,



Balsley admits. The solution: Elevate the pool deck and surround it with a low natural stone wall that sits about 18 inches above the terrace but is actually four feet above ground level. On the one corner where the ground slopes up to meet the pool, Balsley added a lily pond, creating a barrier that is both attractive and effective.

The deck wall is lined with stone planters that overflow with an ever-changing variety of annuals and perennials, although this year the Alexanders filled the boxes with lettuces and other edible plants. On the ground side, the wall is edged by masses of lavender, which grow well in the sandy soil. This purple border transitions into ground-hugging junipers and a grassy garden path, which meanders toward the artfully constructed “ruined” tower at the edge of the property.

The vista remains clear beyond that border, with the adjacent two acres under a conservation easement and a five-acre field behind the house that is deeded to the town of East Hampton. The Alexanders worked with the town and with Balsley to integrate these segments into



The terrace leads out to an elevated pool deck, above, which is surrounded by a natural stone wall. Trailing away from the house, a garden path, bottom right, winds its way to a wisteria-covered arch.



the overall design. In fact, the reclamation of the natural field, although technically not part of the property, was incorporated into the project.

“It was overgrown with more than 2,000 cedars, which we dug out and distributed to the community,” Balsley explains. “We then replanted the field with all of the native grasses, including butterfly grass and bearberry.”

Some of those cedars also went toward helping screen the front of the property from the road, while several old rhododendrons were replanted near the pool tower and in front of the house. These were complemented with even more native plants, such as catmint and American holly, for ornamental effect. The result is a spectacular vista complete with roaming fox, pheasant and herds of deer.

“So often, gardens and landscapes are manicured to perfection, but we wanted this home to be at one with the natural environment,” explains Alexander. “We don’t fool with Mother Nature—we just help her along a bit.” □