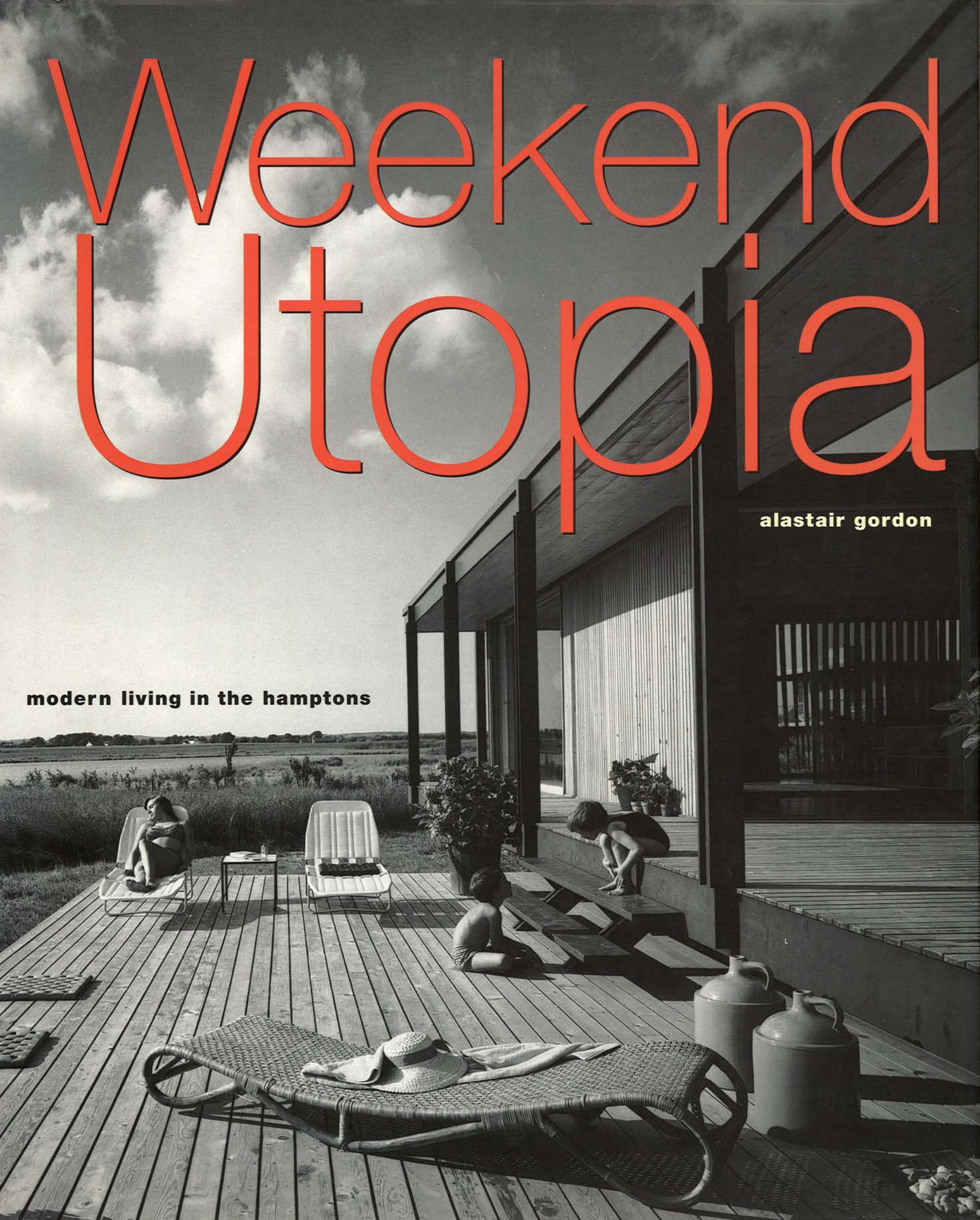
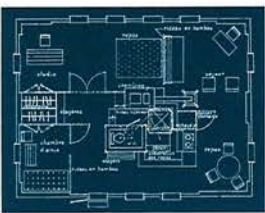
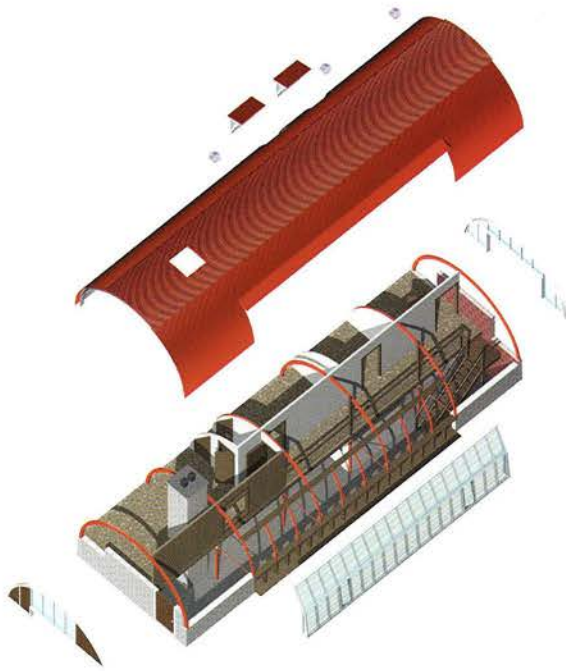


Weekend Utopia

alastair gordon

modern living in the hamptons





ABOVE:
Pierre Chareau, Chateau de la Vierge, East Hampton, 1945, exterior and floor plan.

TOP:
Pierre Chareau and Robert Motherwell, Motherwell House, East Hampton, 1946 (demolished 1985), exploded view and exterior. Renderings by Paul Domzal, Edge Media.

Chareau was destitute. He and his Jewish wife had been forced to flee Paris with no possessions and hardly any money. He had been able to get a small job designing the Free French canteen at the French Consulate in New York, but it wasn't enough. So when Motherwell asked him if he would be interested in designing a house in East Hampton, Chareau eagerly accepted. As part of the deal, Chareau would be able to build himself a small, concrete cottage on the property.

The Motherwell House had few similarities with Chareau's earlier projects. He worked with industrial elements, as he had in the *Maison de Verre*, but there the comparison ended. The house for Motherwell was raw and rudimentary, designed out of immediate necessity. There was no extra money for the kinds of elegantly crafted details that Chareau had used in his glass house. To be sure, it was an improvisation conjured up from the most readily available materials of the period. The Quonset hut was a prefabricated building system developed early in the war by Navy architects at the Quonset Point Naval Air Station in Rhode Island. Throughout the war years, engineers and architects had adapted the squat, barrel-vaulted structure to every imaginable purpose, from barracks and field hospitals to machine shops, garages, air bases, and storage depots. The semicylindrical shelter was easily demounted and could be shipped as a kit of parts with an outer membrane of corrugated steel, a

lining, and a layer of insulation.¹⁶ Chareau was fascinated by the possibilities of the Quonset hut system and encouraged Motherwell to incorporate it into the design of his house. (The idea of living in one of these metal huts wasn't as radical as it might have seemed. During the postwar housing crisis, as many as 50,000 people in the U.S. used Quonset huts as temporary shelter.)¹⁷

Motherwell was able to purchase two surplus Quonset kits from the government for a total cost of \$3,000. One kit was to be used for the house, and the other for a separate studio building. All the metal parts arrived one day heaped in the back of a truck. The basic framework went up very easily but construction turned out to be much more complicated than either Motherwell or Chareau had anticipated. "Building any house is an ordeal," said Motherwell, "but this was a nightmare because everything had to be custom made and no one wanted to do it."¹⁸ All the foundation work, windows, doors, and interior walls had to be crafted by hand. Motherwell had originally allocated \$10,000, but the construction budget soon escalated to \$27,000 and he had to ask his mother for help in covering the extra costs. At one point he even threatened to scrap the whole project and only reconsidered after pleas from Chareau.

When finished, it was an eccentric looking structure—the last thing you'd expect to find in the refined estate section of East Hampton. It was a complete subversion of the standard American house.