



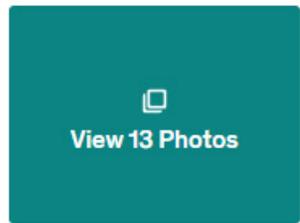
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Two Lifelong Friends Teamed Up to Build This Glassy Catskills Cabin

“Mike described this as a 30-year interview process,” jokes Architect Tom Gluck. “I didn’t realize freshman year in college that I was interviewing for a profession that I didn’t even know I was going to have.”

Text by

Ameena Walker



In the late 1980s, Michael Cooper and Tom Gluck were roommates at Harvard University—and they became lifelong friends. Gluck went on to become an architect and principal at GLUCK+ and Michael became a lawyer. When Michael and his wife, studio manager Ailsa Wong, began searching for their forever home in the mid 2010s, there was no question in their minds as to who would design it.

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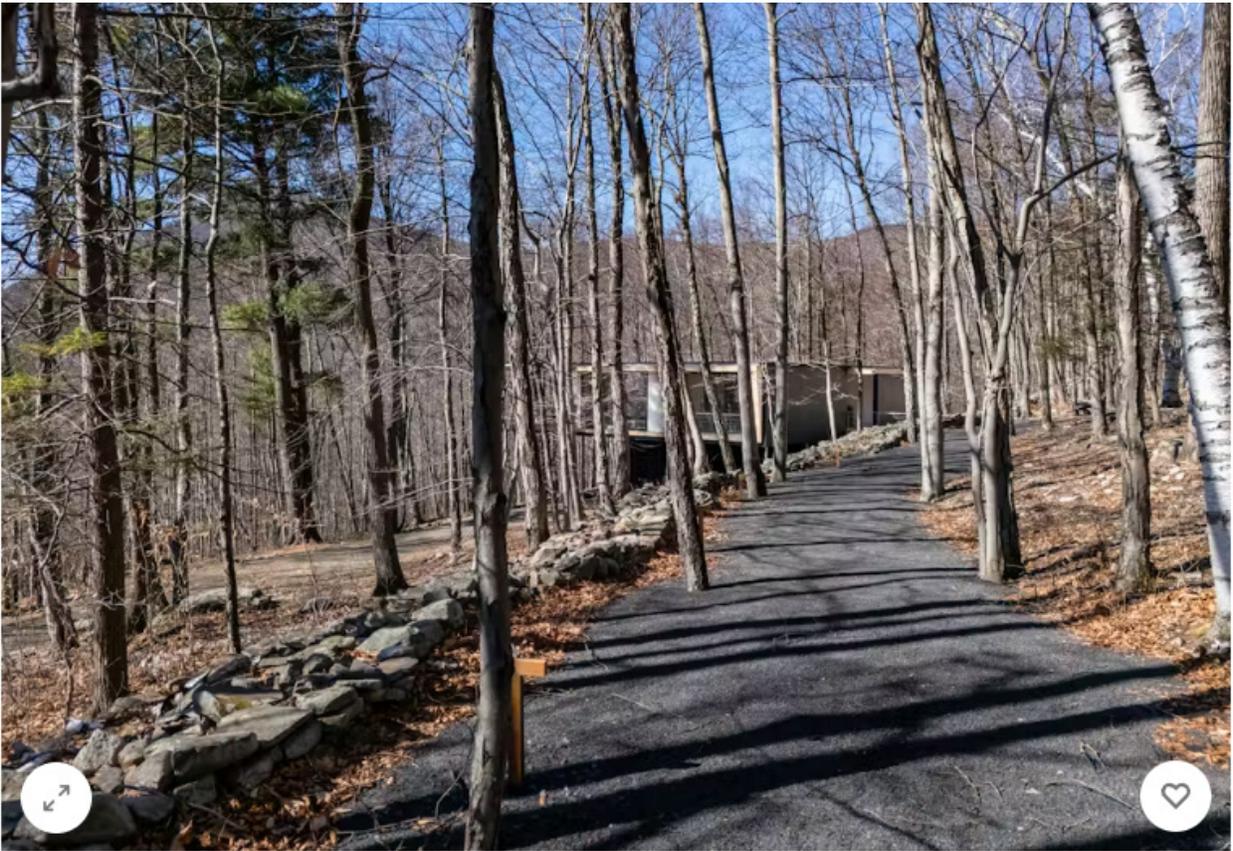
Michael Cooper and Ailsa Wong commissioned GLUCK+ to design a low-impact Catskills home that feels like it's floating in the forest. The home's stained pine exterior blends in with the tree trunks, while its inner liner gives a sense of the warmth that awaits within. The couple found a piece of lichen on-site and had the home's columns color matched to it.

Photo by Here and Now Agency

Photo Categories: [exterior](#), [cabin building type](#), [house building type](#), [wood siding material](#), [flat roofline](#)

For years, the New York City–based couple spent weekends trekking upstate to unwind in the forests of the Catskills, and to visit Gluck's family compound in the area, which includes the [Tower House](#). They looked high and low for a fixer-upper, although they later shifted their search toward vacant land that would afford more creative control.

"We saw what Tom and GLUCK+ had done with their property and others up there, and there was nothing remotely comparable, in terms of existing stock," Michael explains. "So we decided to just do the whole thing from scratch, with Tom's guidance." After viewing dozens of different parcels, they stumbled upon one that they fell in love with. Set on a heavily wooded, stone-walled slope in the Catskills foothills, the 40-plus-acre property had been held by the same family since the 1800s.



The home is intentionally distanced from the long driveway. "The car dominates a lot of the experience of what it's like to live in a house, so it was important here to counter that and allow for a transition between where the car stops and the foot path toward the front door," explains architect Tom Gluck.

Photo by Here and Now Agency



"As you move through the living room, all of a sudden you realize that you're up a story and a half, in this midstory world within the forest," says Gluck.

Photo by Here and Now Agency

Photo Categories: windows

Michael and Ailsa purchased the land in early 2017, but they didn't wait for a house to begin making it home. Though they weren't campers prior, the couple spent two summers roughing it and hiking on-site, familiarizing themselves with the terrain. "We would go up almost every weekend, pitch our tent, and then spend time walking the land and getting ideas for build sites," said Ailsa. Eventually, they upgraded their tent to a small shed with windows and a woodburning stove, located next to the site they ultimately chose for their house.



The living room is outfitted with custom cherry millwork and a woodburning stove. A cozy blue sofa by Cini Boeri for Arflex is paired with a Shell chair by Hans Wegner.

Photo by Here and Now Agency

Photo Categories: living room, sofa, chair, ceiling lighting, wood burning fireplace, light hardwood floors

The pair wanted a contemporary home that felt cozy and grounded in the forest. "I think that the time they spent camping on parts of the site, and us walking it several times together, contributed to the design process as we were starting to figure out where they wanted the house to be and what they wanted it to be about," notes Gluck. "We were trying to keep the building form simple, but provide as much spatial richness and complexity as possible."

The project broke ground in March 2022, and it was completed in the summer of 2024. The single-story structure is set on slender stilts so that it hovers above the ground and below the forest canopy. "We tried to have as little impact as possible," Michael says. "The driveway, albeit long, follows existing logging roads, and we avoided clearing a flat pad to minimize tree cuts." The stained pine exterior blends into the landscape, the house is heated and cooled by heat pumps, and all systems and appliances are fully electric, except for a propane-powered backup generator.



In the dining area, a rectangular table from Modernica Studio is accompanied by Rey chairs by Bruno Rey for Hay.

Photo by Here and Now Agency

Photo Categories: [living room](#), [wood burning fireplace](#)

The approximately 2,500-square-foot main floor has three bedrooms and three bathrooms and nearly 1,000 square feet of outdoor decking that extends the interiors to the outdoors. There are no stairs—to accommodate them and their families as they age—and only a compact utility and storage zone touches the ground below.



The living areas flow seamlessly out to the home's large covered deck.

Photo by Here and Now Agency

Inside, maple floors and ceilings exude warmth while walls of glass encapsulate the feeling of a tree house, framing views of the mountains and surrounding landscape. In the kitchen, cherry wood open cabinets add richness alongside integrated appliances and stainless-steel finishes.



The kitchen's open shelves—made of stainless steel and maple—are both practical and picturesque. The integrated appliances are by Fisher & Paykel.

Photo by Here and Now Agency

[Photo Categories: kitchen](#)



The primary bedroom has a woodburning stove, an en suite bathroom, and a private terrace with an outdoor shower.

Photo by Here and Now Agency

[Photo Categories: bedroom](#)

For Ailsa, the appeal is as much about the site as it is about the architecture. "It still feels very special every time we walk in the house," she says. "Even to just sit in the living room and stare out at the woods, watching different animals like deer, turkeys, and chipmunks come by is magical." Michael also gravitates to the living room, as well as the sunken library. "There's really nothing like getting a fire going in the woodburning stove at dusk and watching the glow on the mountains," he says. "We've had some family reunions and birthday get-togethers," adds Ailsa. "They were in awe."



In one of the guest bathrooms, earthy green tiles mimic the verdant hues found in the forest outside.

Photo by Here and Now Agency

Photo Categories: [bath room](#)



The primary bathroom features industrial-chic double sinks and mirrors, alongside pendant lights by Pablo Design.

Photo by Here and Now Agency

Photo Categories: [bath room](#)

For Gluck, the project's success will be measured over time, as the house and its owners continue to change through the seasons. "I hope that the house will continue to support a complex series of ongoing, evolving experiences," he says. For now, those experiences are well underway, somewhere above the ground and below the canopy.



"At dusk, you look outside and you can see the glow of the mountains, and that's what's keeping you warm," says Michael. "I love the solitude. When I'm having a difficult time dealing with the constant noise in the city, coming here is a great safety valve for my sanity."

Photo by Here and Now Agency

Photo Categories: [exterior](#), [house building type](#), [cabin building type](#), [flat roofline](#)

• **Understory House** N ⓘ

ARCHITECT [GLUCK+](#)
 LOCATION [The Catskills, New York](#)



Floor plan of the Understory House by GLUCK+

Illustration by Lohnes+Wright

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Project Credits:

Architect of Record: Thomas Gluck, GLUCK+ Architecture / @gluck_plus

Builder/General Contractor: Brandon Walsh, Upstate Precision Builders

Structural Engineer: Nat Oppenheimer, TYLin

Lighting, Cabinetry, & Interior Design: Thomas Gluck, GLUCK+ Architecture

MEP Engineer: Lev Zvenyach, IBC Engineering

Corrections on 3/25/26: Michael Cooper and Tom Gluck met as roommates at Harvard University, not Yale. Ailsa Wong is a studio manager, not a project director. The Understory House is set on a 40-plus-acre property, and the Gluck family's compound is composed of the Tower House as well as several additional buildings.

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