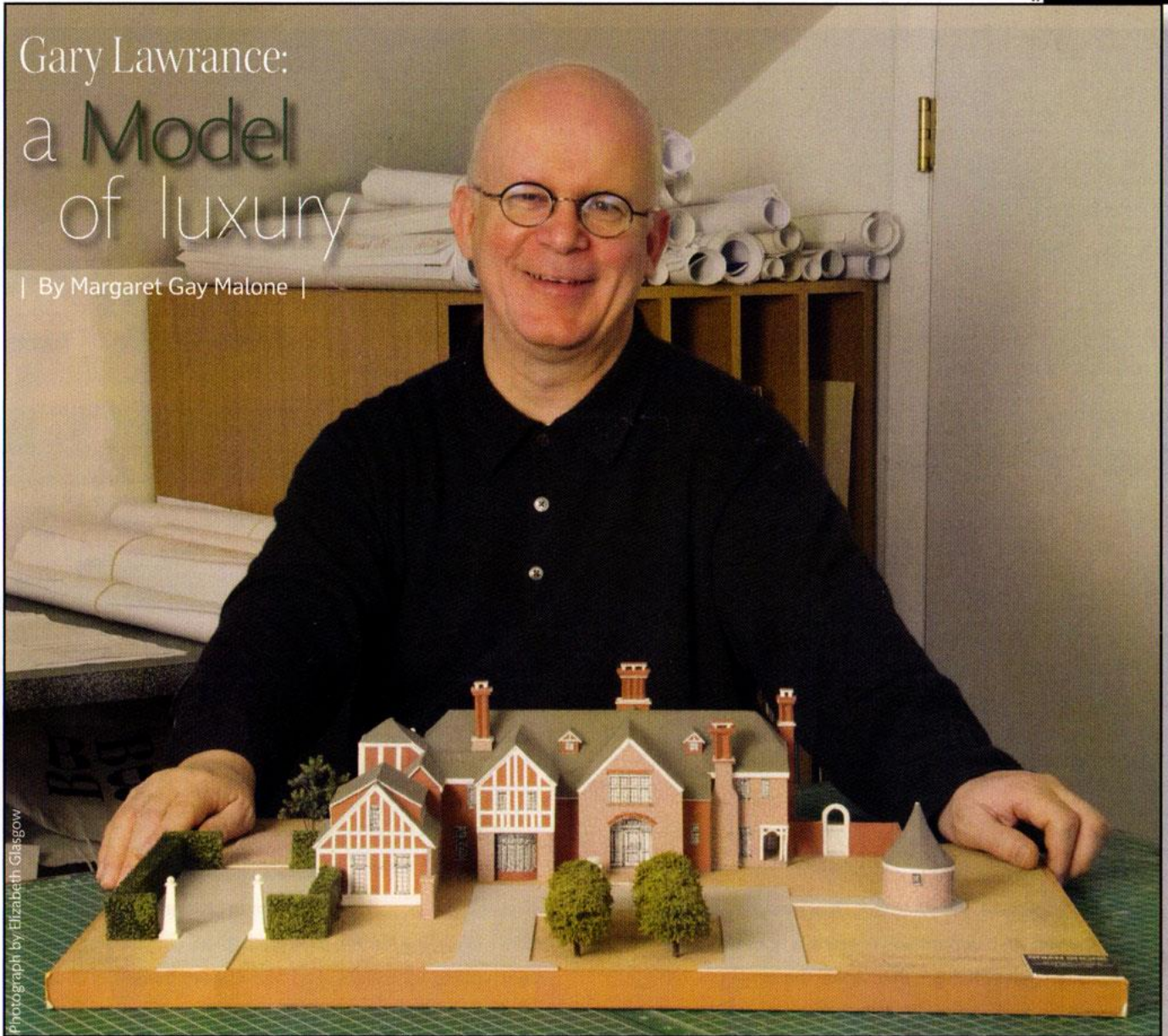


Gary Lawrance: a Model of luxury

| By Margaret Gay Malone |

Photograph by Elizabeth Glasgow



“As a child, I was fascinated by large, old houses like the manor house at Old Westbury Gardens and Manderly, the house in the movie *Rebecca*,” says architect Gary Lawrance. “I had every building toy in existence. I’d build with Legos, blocks, playing cards; I’d even build in the mud. But I never dreamed I could make a career from building mini-houses.”

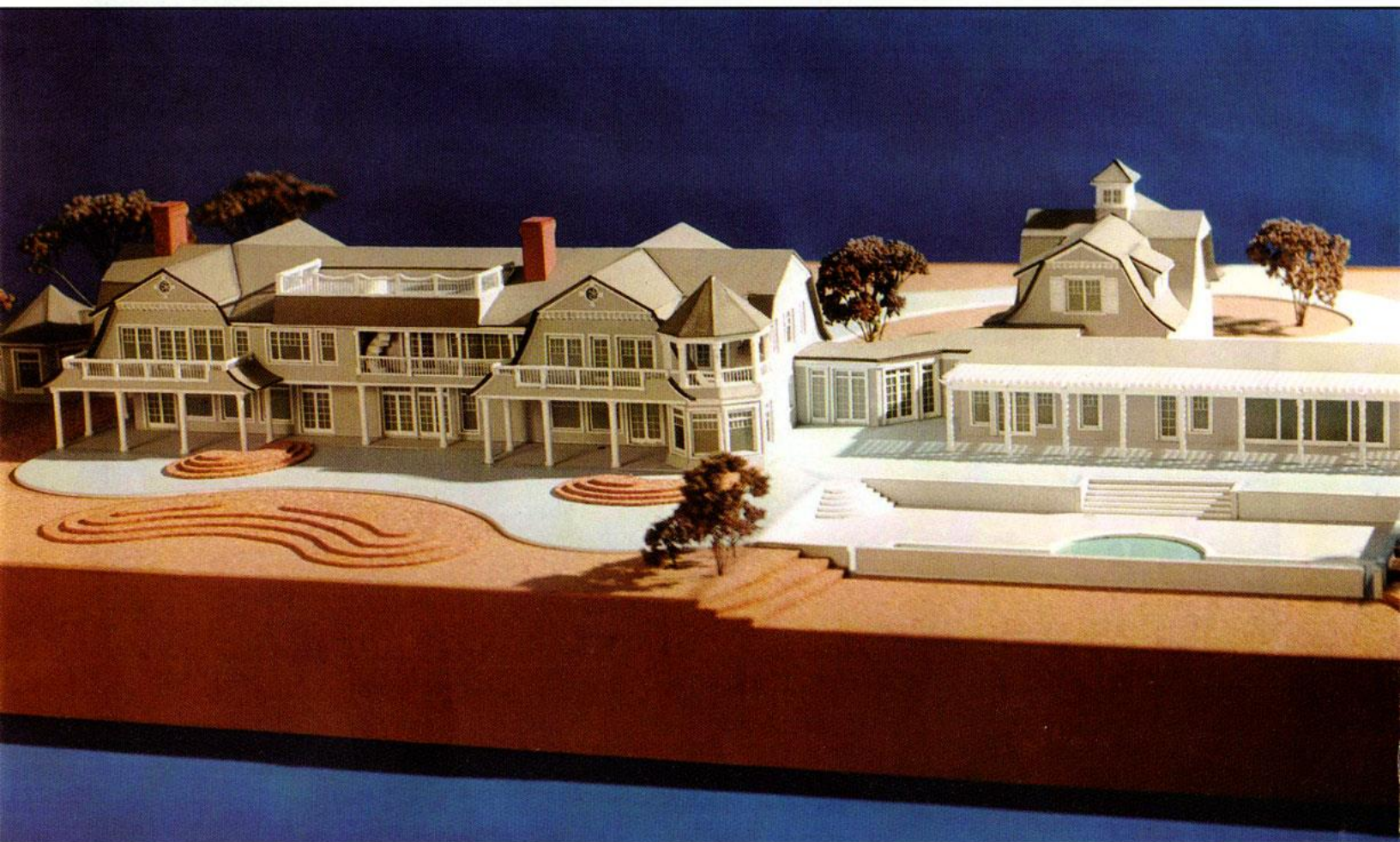
That’s exactly what Lawrance, who builds scale models of large custom homes, has done. “I provide a luxury service,” he explains. These homes are generally 8,000 to 10,000 square feet, though they can be as large as 30,000 square feet (think half a football field). Costs begin at \$3 million and zoom skyward to about \$40 million. With that much money in play, no wonder architects want a three-dimensional model to show their clients

in advance of digging foundations.

“I consider the model a working document,” Lawrance says of the models he makes of mat board, museum board and paper. He usually has music playing when he’s doing a 10- to 16-hour “charette,” architect-speak for pulling an all-nighter. His cocker spaniel accompanies him while he works — a good diversion from the detailed work he does. “I throw paper balls to her,” he says. “She loves tearing the crunched-up paper.”

Being his own boss and working at home means making his own hours. Lawrance, who likes to work at night, is definitely not a nine-to-fiver. That’s not a problem when his “commute” means walking a few steps into his kitchen or bedroom.

Attention to detail is essential to his work. Lawrance often creates tiny windowpanes and, where needed, interior



fireplaces, bookcases and staircases. "Not everyone can look at a [two-dimensional] blueprint and envision a house," he says. "Clients often make changes after seeing the miniature, changes like raising the roof, shortening an overhang or enlarging a dormer." Usually the changes are minor, but there are exceptions, such as the client who wanted the whole house redesigned. He has made as many as five models for one house. The fact that Lawrence is an architect, not simply a model maker, helps him in suggesting and making changes.

The requirements keep growing. While some clients request just the house, others want a complete landscape — trees, boxwoods, tennis court, guesthouse and pool. "I order endless supplies of the proverbial privet hedge," he chuckles. "I order it by the yards and store it in boxes here." His designs can take anywhere from two or three weeks to three months to complete. Most models are for homes in the Hamptons, on the North Shore and occasionally in the Five Towns.

While studying at the New York Institute of Technology, Lawrence interned at the Spector Group, which designs large

office complexes such as EAB Plaza in Uniondale. The company had a job waiting for him after graduation, constructing models of such office complexes. He's also created models of churches and schools. Working for the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities (SPLIA), he made models of a proposed bridge between Long Island and Connecticut, and a streetscape of original Levitt houses. Finding a Levitt house that had not been renovated was an impossible task, so he made the models from blueprints. "I always liked the creative side of the business," he says. "For me, it's artwork."

Fifteen years ago, he went into business for himself. While there are architects who do models in New York City, Lawrence has carved a niche for himself on Long Island. His home office/studio in Stony Brook is halfway between the North Shore towns of Nassau County and the Hamptons, a perfect location for his client base. With the demand for increasingly larger homes, he says he is busier than ever. He never advertises; business for the laid-back architect comes by word of mouth.

Five or six models in the works fill his upstairs studio, a

second floor aerie large enough to afford separate spaces for each model, along with storage for blueprints, X-acto knives, pre-made trees and grass, Elmer's glue, a metal straight edge and double-sided tape.

"My work has to look beautiful, but it has to be put together quickly," he explains. "Decisions can't be made until the client sees my final product." He does no painting; the models are of white or colored mat board which represent realistic materials. Photographed against the sky, a Lawrance model looks like a real house, especially when a miniature BMW or Mercedes is parked in the driveway.

Since young architects are now being trained in computer modeling, which creates a house in two dimensions, fewer are following in Lawrance's footsteps. "In many ways, it's a dying art," he admits – which gives Lawrance a robust workload of about 40 mini-models a year. Because of deadlines, he takes infrequent vacations. But when he can get away, it's usually to a special place with beautiful architecture, such as Newport, Rhode Island; London; Paris; or St. Petersburg, Russia.

Lawrance is a member of the Long Island Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. His direct clients are fellow architects, who want the models for their clients. Seeing a house in three dimensions can eliminate misconceptions, save remodeling time, and ultimately thousands of dollars. His models cost upwards of \$3,000. As Lawrance notes,



Photograph by Elizabeth Glasgow