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Historic Homes and Record-Breaking Deals

The Story of Nova's Ark:

Bridgehampton's Most Creative Home



Message in a barrel When the house was being built in the '70s, neighbors dubbed it "The Ark of Scuttlehole" because its foundations resembled an ark. Romanian artist Nova Mihai Popa adopted the name, taking inspiration from Noah's Ark.

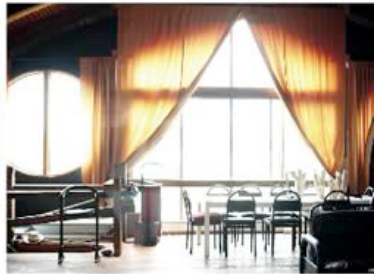
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About six months ago, a Prudential Douglas Elliman "For Sale" sign went up in front of Nova's Ark Project, an eccentric elliptical house that looks like a human face carved into a blue barrel, on Millstone Road in Bridgehampton. The yard is scattered with grazing sheep as well as large steel sculptures created by the property's owner, Romanian artist Nova Mihai Popa, who lives in the house with his partner, Tundra Wolf, and the property's general manager, Luna Shanaman. (He bestowed both with their first names.) It's a hard property to overlook.

In smaller type, the bottom of the sign reads "Moving to the Farm" because the owners wanted the community to understand they weren't going very far. Their intention was to move the iconic Hamptons house to the adjacent farm, where Mihai Popa owns 100 acres. On that property, interns work and live while creating his sculptures, many of which are installed on the rolling landscape. It's a kind of sculpture camp, ruled by Mihai Popa's passionate theories about architecture and philosophy.

The neighbors pretty much missed the fine print on the sign and started freaking out, worried that their wacky touchstone—which attracts several curious trespassers every weekend—might be sold or knocked down.



Art imitates life Inside the elliptical house, clockwise from above left: the rustic front door; an interior porthole window in the kitchen; floor-to-ceiling windows in Nova Mihai Popa's studio.

"People love us," said Mihai Popa on a recent afternoon, while taking a break from sandblasting a sculpture. "They don't want us to move out of here." They took down the sign, but the 2-lot, 2.82-acre property is still on the market for \$1.75 million--not including the house or the 4,000-square-foot barn next door, which would both be moved to the farm area if the lots sell.

"Most people are fascinated by the house, but know they are looking at the land," said broker Enzo Morabito of Prudential Douglas Elliman, who thinks the entire property could sell for up to \$15 million. "I think it's the most artistic house in the Hamptons. It's very, very unique."

But for now, Mihai Popa and Wolf are happy to stay put and focus on creating a sculpture park that will be open to the public on Saturday afternoons, from August through November. On July 28, they'll also open up the property for Super Saturday, the ovarian cancer benefit bonanza. The Southampton Polo Club is already playing on Mihai Popa's fields, which they have leased for over a decade.

It all started back in 1973, when Mihai Popa and Wolf bought a small house in Southampton. In '86, they moved to the 4-acre lot where they now live. It only had a potato barn on the property at the time, and Mihai Popa started building the elliptical house. According to Wolf, the community started calling it "the Ark of Scuttlehole," because the structure resembled an ark and was off Scuttlehole Road, a main artery from Water Mill to Bridgehampton and Sag Harbor. "I adopted it," said Mihai Popa, who finished the house in 1990. (They also had a loft in the Garment District which they recently sold.) "The symbol of Noah's Ark keeps the classical values of art and architecture and life, which are integrated in the house."

The house has an 800-square-foot base and 2,600-square-feet of living space. Mihai Popa wanted his home to leave only a small footprint on the earth. He believes in living in a round structure and has built mock-ups for what he calls "cities of the future," where everyone will live in connected pods--with terraces. Those models are stored in a barn next to the house which doubles as an art gallery, and individual models of the pods are scattered all over the house.

The house has three small bedrooms, a large art studio, and a variety of quirky features, like a Japanese gate hiding the fridge. A pendulum swings in the center of the main room--Mihai Popa calls it "the heart of the household." "It's a great deal of fun to live with art as part of your daily life," said Wolf, who was wearing leopard-print Guess jeans. "There's a real sense of pleasure and variety."

The dwelling is quite modest considering the amount of prime real estate the couple own. At least two people have recently tried to buy the parcel, but Mihai Popa would never sell it.

"The Ark Project is a visionary project. It's intended to create integral art, a new form of expression," said Mihai Popa. "We live inside a sculpture." Adds Wolf, "It could be a Spanish galleon ship 500 years ago, or a space ship. It's an atemporal house."

In 1993, they expanded their property to include a total of 100 acres, much of it preserved agricultural land where they keep horses. It also has several barns. Mihai Popa calls the largest barn Transylvania Castle. It has a stage and a long table that has been used for many weddings and photo shoots. (Bruce Weber is just one photographer who has shot on the property.)



Stonehenge East Nova's Ark Project sprawls 100 acres featuring Mihai Popa's large sculptures. Left, "The Settlers." Right, Mihai Popa and Tundra Wolf in front of "Embrace of the Sun."

Mihai Popa likes to give a golf-cart tour to properly show off his sculptures, many inspired by Stonehedge. They cost upwards of \$20,000 apiece, and two were recently installed in front of a new international center near Shanghai. The ones in Bridgehampton have New Age names like "Orion," or "Aphrodites," and "Trilogy" which he says, "could be called 'A Threesome' because it's sensual." He wanted "Astronauts" to be declared a national monument, in honor of Americans being the first to land on the moon, but that goal got tangled up with some government red-tape.

Mihai Popa has lots of other unconventional ideas, like how we should choose our families, instead of accepting what we are born into. There is really no one else like him in the Hamptons—or maybe anywhere.

"We came here because of the tradition of this place," said Mihai Popa. "We liked that it was a combination of farmers, artists, and political leaders. But now the Hamptons is becoming more of a place for business people. We are making an example by staying here and creating public art for people."

[Back To Index](#)