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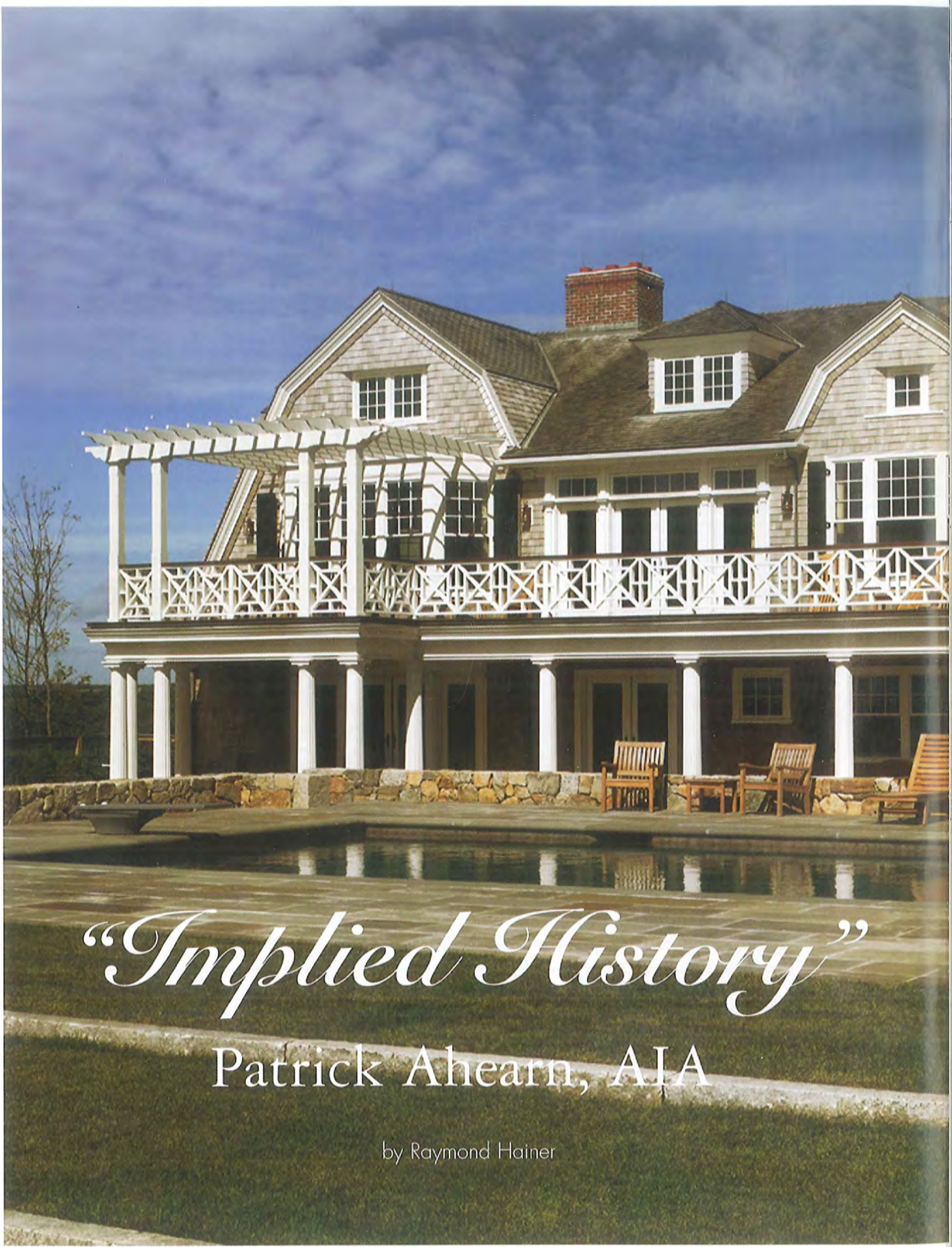
Historically Motivated Architecture
by Ahearn-Schopfer Architects



"Implied History"

Patrick Ahearn, AIA

by Raymond Hainer

In his office inside the old Hotel Vendome on Commonwealth Avenue, Patrick Ahearn talks at length of story lines and scripts, of re-creating history. He sounds like a novelist or an epic filmmaker.

He is neither. Patrick Ahearn, AIA, is an architect but he approaches his profession with the eye of a storyteller.

There was, for instance, the story of the CEO of a Fortune 500 Company who asked Ahearn to design a summer coastal retreat for his family on an island off Massachusetts. Ahearn tore down the 1970's-era contemporary house that stood on the lot, and began constructing a story.

"Let's pretend there were lots of houses like this along this shoreline at the turn of the century," says Ahearn, retracing his thought process at the time. "There was a hurricane a few years ago, and this was the only house left standing. What does it look like?"

The answer: A grand shingle-style house with a gambrel roof and gables, a spectacular if unassuming residence that suits the weathered landscape. Sure enough, the house looks as though it has survived a century of storms intact, but the interior gives its age away. Its 6,500 square feet are tailored for modern living, with 5 bedrooms and 6 1/2 baths, a separate wing for the master suite, a huge country kitchen and breakfast area, a media room, and an expansive third-floor office clad in mahogany beadboard that, on account of the curved gambrel roof, resembles the inverted hull of a classic sailboat.

Another project called for a different story. This time it was the renovation of a small postwar cape on a 17-acre estate in Dover. Rather than a storm survivor, Ahearn set out to create "a rambling country farmhouse that was added onto over time." The house, as he envisioned it, "had an original stable building, that was eventually converted to a garage, which was then attached to the main house," and so on.

The sprawling, asymmetric house that stands today could easily have followed that script, but the additions came all at once, rather than through generations. Ahearn converted the nearby garage into an attached "carriage-house wing," and added a second wing for the master suite with a kitchenette, private deck, and

outdoor hot tub. New chimneys and dormers, a barrel-vaulted dining room, a library, and a hidden staircase were among the other improvements. All told, Ahearn tripled the size, and to all appearances, the age of the house.

For more than 30 years, Ahearn has used this creative approach to design what he calls "historically motivated" residences. In 1978, he opened his own firm, Ahearn-Schopfer + Associates, with E. Kevin Schopfer, a specialist in hotels, commercial interiors, and contemporary homes. The market for Ahearn's "historically motivated" residences has only increased since then. Ahearn-Schopfer + Associates opened a second office on Martha's Vineyard in 2000, in large part to satisfy the demand on the island for Ahearn's classic homes.

Ahearn's body of work spans a remarkable range of sizes and locations. He just completed an 18,000 square-foot Grand French Country home in Weston, and is now designing an 800 square-foot cottage that will sit on the footprint of an old fisherman's camp on Chappaquiddick Harbor. He does much of his work on the Cape and the Islands and in the affluent suburbs west of Boston, but he has also recently designed homes in Colorado, California, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and off Bar Harbor, Maine.

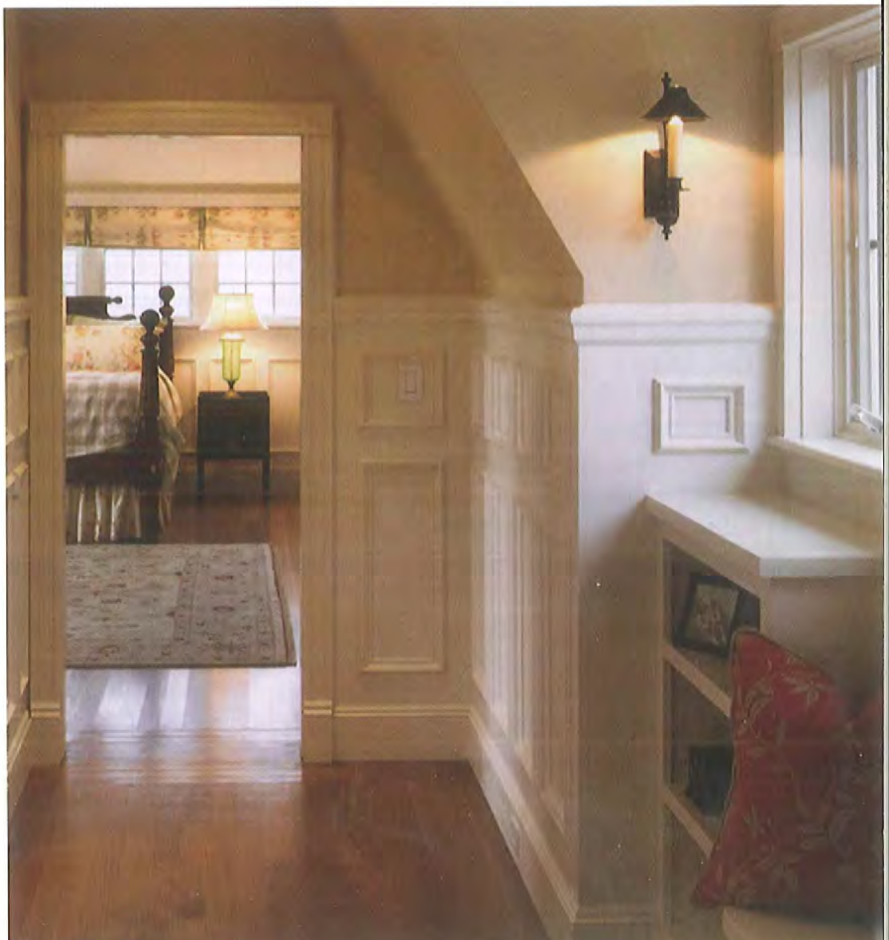
Despite the breadth of his portfolio, Ahearn's residences all bear a distinctive stamp: no trace of the man who designed them.

Ahearn takes pains to disguise his handiwork by making his houses look as natural and authentic as possible. He does not copy classic architecture in a strict sense, but rather interprets historical models to create what he calls "implied history." As a result, the homes he designs often look as though they have stood for a long time, and were designed by some long-forgotten architect.

In a profession that tends to attract outsized egos, Ahearn stands apart for his efforts to draw attention away from himself, and toward the inherent beauty of classic architectural styles.

He disdains what he refers to as "ego-driven architecture." When it comes to designing classic homes, Ahearn says, ego-driven architects often feel compelled to leave their signature by adding a discordant "contemporary twist," or some other self-indulgent flourish. All too often the finished house seems contrived, out of place in its surroundings, and "trite, not timeless," he laments.

By contrast, Ahearn considers his designs a success when he fades into the background. The CEO's island retreat is a perfect example. "People walk into



a house like this and say, "When did you finish the renovation?" Ahearn says. "They have no idea it's a new house."

As inventive as his approach is, Ahearn doesn't earn his keep with vision alone. They say the devil is in the details, and Ahearn's inspired story lines would mean little if they weren't backed up by superior technical skill.

Creating "implied history" in a new home presents some distinct challenges for today's architect. Chief among them is incorporating the amenities and living space that clients demand without compromising the integrity of a classic architectural style. "There is a great history of wonderful, charming and romantic architecture," Ahearn says, summarizing his task. "How do you adjust that charming and romantic architecture to how people want to live today, and to the sometimes significant size of the houses that we do today?"

Overcoming this challenge requires a mastery of classic vernacular architecture and the ability to navigate practical considerations, such as the limitations imposed by a site and the often idiosyncratic zoning codes that apply.

Ahearn is adept at finding creative solutions to such considerations. In the case of the CEO's summer home, for instance, Ahearn was constrained by a high water table that precluded a basement, a 30-foot height limit, and the client's request that the main living space provide expansive views of the distant beach.

To address this last issue, Ahearn designed an "upside-down" house (in which the primary living space is on the second floor) that doesn't look like an upside-down house on the exterior. This provided the desired views from the living areas without disrupting the overall architectural program. The house's gambrel design, meanwhile, allowed a full third story for the client's office, but kept the height of the house under 30 feet. And Ahearn compensated for the lack of a basement by designing a hidden utility room on the first floor.

The marriage of creativity and technical skill displayed in Ahearn's classic homes has been forged over a long and varied career, one in which the architect's passion for historical architecture hasn't always been reflected in the market.

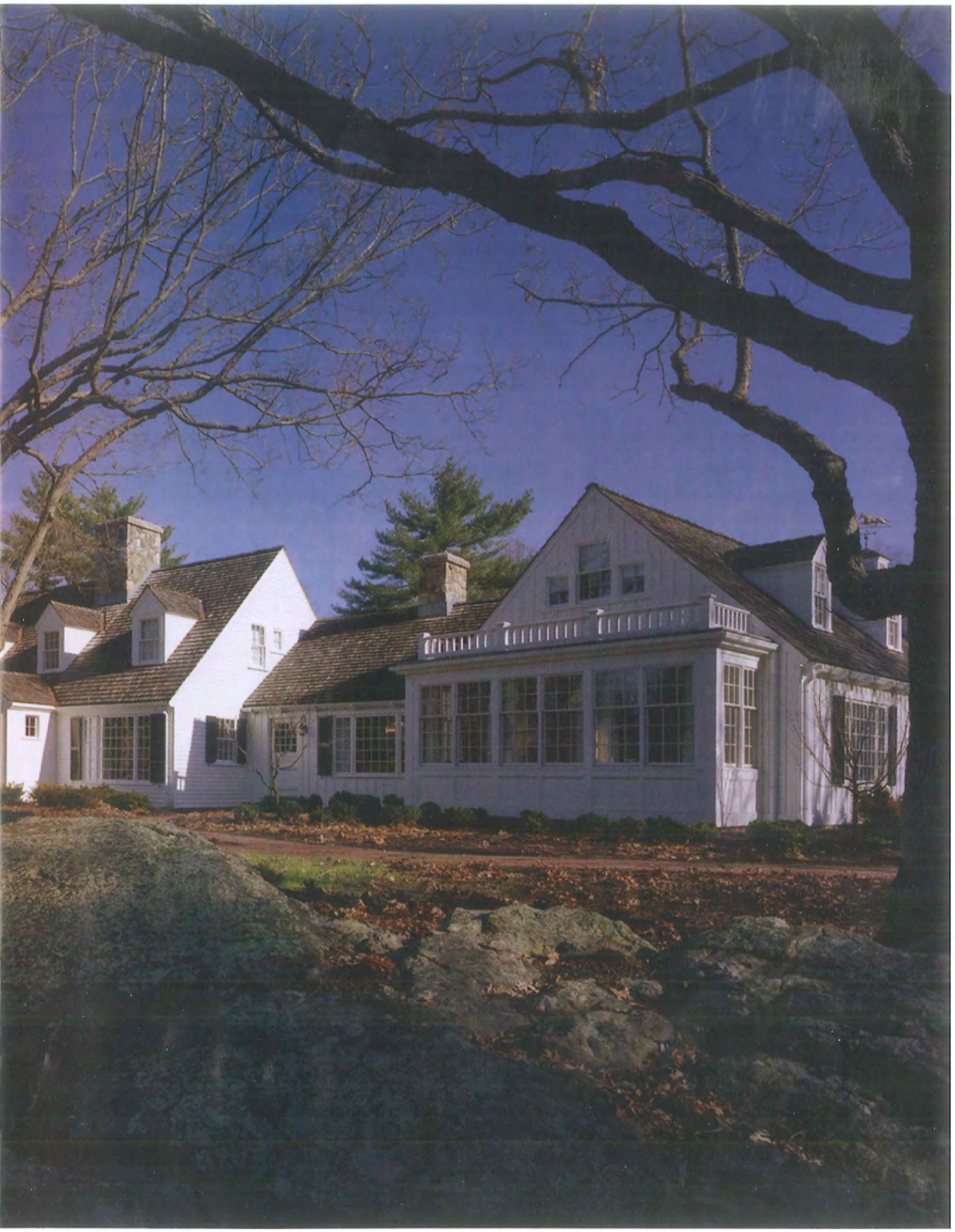
Ahearn, 54, has wanted to be an architect ever since he was a child. He grew up in one of the more than 17,000 mass-produced single-family homes of Levittown, N.Y, the iconic American suburb on Long Island, and he credits that experience in part for awakening in him an early sensitivity to space and architecture.

Following his boyhood dream, Ahearn studied architecture at Syracuse University in the late-1960s, a period in which modern styles dominated the field. Although Ahearn's tastes ran more to the traditional, by the time he moved to Boston in 1973, he was well-versed in the vocabulary of modern architecture.

For more than a decade after arriving in Boston, Ahearn had far fewer opportunities to design classic homes than he does now. As a project designer for various firms, and eventually as a principal architect in his own firm, he worked mainly on converting the interiors of historic Back Bay residences into the sleek, contemporary spaces which were fashionable at the time. The market gradually fell more in line with Ahearn's own tastes, however, and by the late 1980s his clients were discovering a new appreciation for classic architecture.

Although he welcomed the shift, Ahearn says the years of merging contemporary interiors with historic exteriors prepared him for the challenges he faces in his projects today. "The more I did, the better my understanding of how to integrate classic architecture into how people want to live today, and still be very respectful of the past," Ahearn says.

Respect for the past is an idea Ahearn returns to often when discussing his work. Unlike some architects, Ahearn views the tradition of vernacular architecture as a source of inspiration and ideas, rather than a straitjacket. Greek Revival, Georgian, Victorian, Federal—he loves it all, and never tires of the possibilities these classic styles present for new homes or renovations.

This isn't to say that Ahearn is a rigid traditionalist. Innovation will always have its place when interpreting historic styles, he explains, as long as it is not disrespectful. "You can get very playful," he adds. "As long as you take it seriously."

Ahearn has respect for contemporary architecture too, of course. After all, he has designed his fair share of contemporary spaces. But these days he is content to leave the envelope-pushing to others, secure in the knowledge that skillfully interpreting historical architecture is in many ways a neater trick—and one that few do better. •CRM•