

DESIGN DESTINATION: THREE BOUTIQUE HOTELS ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD

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MARTHA'S VINEYARD & NANTUCKET

The COLOR issue

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REIMAGINING HISTORY *on Pleasant Bay*

PATRICK AHEARN AND PLATEMARK DESIGN CONCEIVE A NARRATIVE OF FAMILIAR AND FANTASTICAL IN REDESIGNING THIS CHATHAM HOME

Dawn erupts in a lava flow of oranges, pinks, reds and purples across Pleasant Bay. Viewed from the western shore, the colors pour across this watery canvas, igniting the morning. Gray shadows in the slight undulations of waves appear as reflections of the gossamer altocumulus clouds. According to the old saw, sailors should take warning on a day like this—the early warmth and high humidity portend later thunderstorms—but in these ephemeral moments as the moon clings to the vanishing night, as the sun showers the eastern shoreline and the outline of Fox Hill Island with its tangerine, fuchsia, magenta and lilac hues, caution can wait. If there's a looming price for these minutes soaked in such a palette, then let the rains pour, let the winds squall.

There are safer places to build houses than the coastline, and Chatham is no stranger to shifting sands and mercurial weather. The possibilities of hurricanes landing in late summer always linger, and the near-certainties of nor'easters in the winter underline the risk. Yet courageous homes stand willing to brave the elements, primarily for their owners to experience the uninterrupted beauty and colors of the sea and heavens. Acclaimed architect Patrick Ahearn, FAIA, recently reimagined such a dwelling in an extensive rebuild of one Pleasant Bay Overlook. Due to conservation codes, the building team was constrained to the footprint of existing buildings on the property, but the finished home encapsulates once distinct structures into a unified family compound.

BY CHRIS WHITE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL J. LEE

As with all Patrick Ahearn projects, the Pleasant Bay Overlook begins with a story. Having designed over 200 homes and buildings in Edgartown alone, Ahearn and his team specialize in "historically motivated" architecture and interior design. Within this unique design philosophy, his projects include historic restorations and the creation of new buildings. The true wizardry of his work, however, is that, as he says, "People can't tell our antique renovations from new construction; you can't tell a 300-year-old house from one that we built five years ago." In order to accomplish the goals of these projects, Ahearn and his team turn to historical narrative; design decisions come about through an understanding of the ways that a home organically develops and takes on character over the years, the ways that it evolves to meet the needs of its inhabitants. The story of the Pleasant Bay Overlook also reflects some of the history of Chatham, and it goes something like this:

In 1656, William Nickerson purchased a parcel of Monomoyick land from its tribal sachem, Mattaquason, for a shallop, cloth, several kettles, axes, knives and wampum. The town was originally called Monomoit, but upon official incorporation into Plymouth Colony in 1712, the name was changed to Chatham. Soon thereafter, Nickerson's grandnephew Thomas arrived from England and settled on the shores of Pleasant Bay, on a point that would later become known as Nickerson's Neck. Here, he floated two small houses by barge across the



bay. One would serve as the family's primary residence, where Thomas lived with his wife Ada and their first five children, while the other would shelter their fishing shallop through the bitterest of winter months and double as a sail loft. Nickerson faced both structures south-easterly for maximum exposure to the sun. In addition, he and his sons constructed a shack close to the beach, which they used for shellfishing. Thomas stored the various tools and rakes necessary for oystering, clamming and scalloping inside; he also created a work area where he sorted his catch for market. As the family grew to nine children, the eldest son, Randall, moved into the sail loft and renovated it into a small home for his own family.

Thus the compound remained through subsequent generations until the mid-1800s, when Leonard and Ruth Nickerson, staunch abolitionists, became active in the Underground Railroad. Fugitive slaves would arrive by schooner in Chatham, and Leonard and Ruth would house them for a time before arranging transport to larger hubs within the system, such as New Bedford and Fall River. They added a bunk room in the shellfishing shack, and sometimes men would stay to help out with the oystering business, putting away some money before resuming their journeys to freedom.

Over the ensuing century, the size of the family ebbed and flowed. At one point, the compound expanded to eight separate buildings, but vicious storms claimed a few of

these. In the aftermath of the hurricane of 1938, the family rebuilt in a way that connected the boat shed directly with the main house. Sons and daughters answered calls to adventure out West and of enterprise in cities; in 1972, the Nickersons decided to sell everything to a land developer. The developer subdivided most of the 27-acre property but kept the main house, the adjoined boat shed, and the shellfishing shack/bunk room. He updated the home to fit the disco sensibilities of the time, and so it remained—somewhat classic, somewhat garish—until 2016, when the new owners contracted with Ahearn, Whitla Brothers Builders of Chatham, and Platemark Design of Boston to "lovingly restore" the property and to fulfill its original potential.

Or so one is meant to believe—something akin to the above story, anyway.

Because here's the twist: While a few of the details are true, and a couple of things even happened, most of the Pleasant Bay Overlook's story is made up, an elaboration based upon fragments from Patrick Ahearn's script for the project. This slant on design hinges on a concept that he calls "implied history," rather than one of real-life events. Surely many Thomas Nickersons have lived on the Cape, and maybe someone in the family ran an oyster company at some point. Outlying buildings like the shellfishing shack and the boat shed are nearly ubiquitous, and many families do connect their structures under one roof. Says Ahearn, "It's a fairly complicated



Vintage design elements give this home a feeling of history, while its bright and open spaces create a feeling of new.



“People can’t tell our antique renovations from new construction; you can’t tell a 300-year-old house from one that we built five years ago.”



Craig Tevoltz of Placemark Design infused the rich colors often observed over Pleasant Bay throughout the interior furnishings to play up the home's more traditional aesthetic.

design approach—to satisfy the history of the town and the goals of the clients.” Thus, because of the attention to detail, both in Ahearn’s script (which this tale only resembles) and in the actual architectural design, the compound reads as a work of historical fiction. Because of its non-fictional setting within a 1970s subdivision, it needed to plausibly answer questions. As Ahearn explains: “When you pull into the motor court, you have the feeling this was the original land in the neighborhood, the original house, and that the owners sold off the surrounding property. It’s new history. There’s a sensibility that the storyline is believable.”

In fact, the area called Nickerson’s Neck was first developed during WWI, when the U.S. Navy commissioned an air base here. A massive hanger housed dirigibles and airplanes; at its busiest, in 1918, the base was home to 600 men and has the distinction of serving as a key refueling point for the first airplane to cross the Atlantic, in 1919. The base closed in 1922, and by 1938, the final structures would be dismantled. A golf course and neighboring homes sprung up, in some cases upon the actual foundations of the airbase. Then, in the 1970s, further housing development took root, including a rather nondescript home with a large garage overlooking Pleasant Bay, replete with typical design characteristics of its time such as aluminum sliding glass doors.

To complete the Pleasant Bay Overlook project, Ahearn and Whitla Brothers, who have previously worked together on several Chatham projects, faced some significant challenges and opportunities. Three separate structures already existed, and the plans called for a pool cabana that would double as a garage where the owner’s vintage Porsche could winter. Because of zoning and conservation restrictions, tearing the buildings down and starting afresh was not an option. Likewise, the addition of the pool had to be sited close to the house to avoid encroachment upon wetlands. To address these concerns, “We reoriented the hierarchy of the house so the front door faces the street by making programmatic changes inside,” Ahearn details. “We improved the circulation pattern by establishing



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a primary spine along the water-facing side of the home, seamlessly connecting the three structures and nearly doubling the livable square footage and increasing water views, all within the existing footprint.” The fictional shellfishing shack at water’s edge is now the master bedroom; the made-up boat shed, once an actual garage, has metamorphosed into a grand living room framed by the kitchen and a fireplace constructed of reclaimed stone.

Upon arrival, guests first encounter the pool cabana, which behaves as a vignette, a “folly building” that, along with the pool itself, previews the house proper and the bay beyond. This miniature connects thematically with the way that the front door opens directly into the living room and its windows to the seascape just beyond the fringes of the lawn. The interior has a 1790s, almost Shaker style; the balustrade is a replica from an older home. The reclaimed antique flooring, the timbers and beaded board, the materials, and the finishes combine to evoke a bygone era. “All the things you touch and feel convey a different time,” says Ahearn. “The use of post and beam seems like an original feature.” While the interior of many traditional Cape homes contain, in Ahearn’s words, “a rabbit warren” of tiny chambers, the Pleasant Bay Overlook “lives the way people want to live today.” The overall plan is much more open, the ceilings much higher, and there’s far more natural light than what one would find in Chatham homes of even the 19th century. So here’s another plot twist in the story of

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the Pleasant Bay Overlook—despite the attention to antiques, Ahearn says, “The historical exterior hides a modern interior.”

While the owners of the Pleasant Bay Overlook sought vintage, classical and traditional Cape qualities in their new home, they wanted to punctuate these features with bright and unique color choices. Craig Tevolitz, principal at Platemark Design, says: “The owner was adamant about not wanting the blue and white ubiquitous coastal scheme. That was absolutely off the table. This was refreshing to me, because it’s interesting as a designer to not do the same thing everyone else is doing on the Cape.” Instead, Tevolitz brought in the colors of the dawn sky. “What helped was the couple wanted the space to feel ‘happy and joyful.’ Using vibrant colors brought that energy into the home,” he says. “As well, fashion-forward fabrics, like Missoni and Pierre Frey, brought in a contemporary vibe to upholstered pieces and window treatments, which imbue an overall lightness

to the home.” One of the most dramatic pieces in the living room is a double-tiered iron chandelier that hangs in complement to the stone fireplace. Isolate these two features, and they could appear at home in a luxury hunting lodge. Yet here, they dwell amongst patterns of vivid oranges, lavenders, and greens. “The chandelier is undeniably grand,” Tevolitz says. “But the room takes it in as naturally as the ocean view. Such is the brilliance of Patrick’s architecture—making it all look so effortless that a massive chandelier reclaimed from a New England courthouse can casually step into the room and not set it off balance.”

The Pleasant Bay Overlook is the first project Patrick Ahearn and Craig Tevolitz have collaborated on, and Ahearn says, “The transformation of this house is really significant.” The approaches of the two firms aligned like the elements of fiction. Where the former laid out the premise and plot of the home’s “implied history,” the latter developed its characters. While there’s overlap between

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these elements, Tevolitz explains: “My approach is very empathetic. I’m not necessarily telling a story; I’m discovering the clients through the interior, really figuring out how they live, their style; getting into their heads and figuring out all the moments and opportunities for them to live in different ways.” Ahearn relies upon “non-ego driven architecture,” which is where his narrative approach really comes to bear. “It’s all about scale,” he says. “We need to look at context and history so that the home fits and stays quiet. This is all part of ‘the greater good theory.’”

A paradox of storytelling is that humans dislike the unoriginal, but they love mythic structure, what Joseph Campbell termed “The Hero’s Journey.” Audiences relate to the hero’s call to adventure, to the road of trials, and to dark moments along the way, for inside each person resides a Luke Skywalker or a Katniss Everdeen, a hero working to achieve that next goal, to gain some measure of success and happiness. And yet, people want their stories to feel just as unique as they are familiar. Critics and audiences alike scorn books and movies that seem to pander, to wallow about in cliched ideas and characters. If a story feels too derivative, we discard it. Such is the mastery of the Pleasant Bay Overlook. Here is a work of art at once classic and known while simultaneously utterly fresh and original—just like the sunrise that the home invites inside each dawn.

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