

southern new england

HOME

YOUR GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HOME



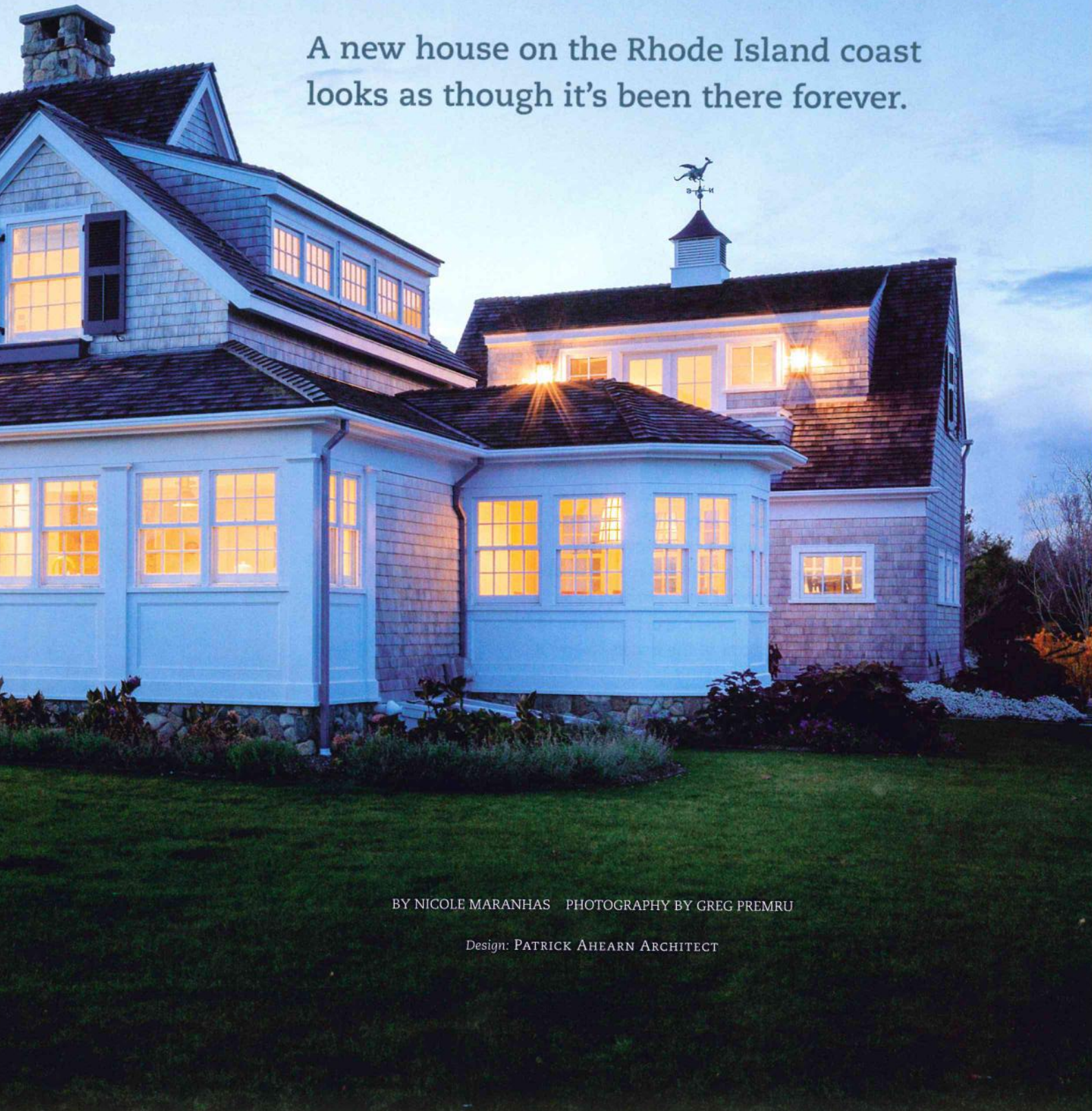
TIMELESS



A T FIRST GLANCE, THE HOUSE IS DECIDEDLY SNUG. Clematis vines climb toward a weathered pergola, while twin chimneys are classic New England vernacular, hallmarks of a house that has been loved through coastal Rhode Island winters. Upon further consideration, the house begins to unfold. The enclosed porches look as though they could have been later cozy additions to the main house. A glint of copper winks from the roof of a carriage house, perhaps recently annexed as a space for guests.

CHARM

A new house on the Rhode Island coast
looks as though it's been there forever.



BY NICOLE MARANHAS PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG PREMURU

Design: PATRICK AHEARN ARCHITECT



“The homeowners wanted to build a seaside cottage that would appear to have been there for many years,” says Boston and Martha’s Vineyard-based architect Patrick Ahearn. Overlooking the ocean in Charlestown, on the southern tip of Rhode Island, the house indeed feels as though it has evolved over generations in the historic coastal community, where a 17th-century trading post and an octet of 19th-century schoolhouses are landscape characteristics that are as treasured as stretches of secluded beach. “It was important for us to establish the scale and character of the house, to give it a sense of implied history,” he says.

To create the illusion of a more intimate cottage, Ahearn conceived a façade that appears as two enclosed porches—with the front entrance nestled in between—beneath gabled dormers. “The ‘porchy’ look breaks the scale down, so it’s a petite house volumetrically,” he says. Above the portico, the vine-covered pergola is an ode to the sweet, rose-covered cottages of Nantucket, cited by the homeowners as inspiration. Similarly, explains the architect, multi-paned double-hung windows “harken back to an older time when you couldn’t get bigger pieces of glass.”





The fieldstone fireplace, antique pine floors, and custom woodwork give the home its sense of warmth and character.

On the inside, however, the 5,897-square-foot house reveals its modern roots. “They didn’t want it to be a rabbit warren inside, but airy and open,” says Ahearn. With four bedrooms, five full and two half baths, the house is spacious and filled with light, with high ceilings that belie the exterior—an architectural sleight of hand partly achieved by repositioning the floor joists. “Rather than placing the floor joists on top of the foundation, we create a notch so that they are inset. From the outside, it looks like a seven-foot ceiling on the first floor, but in fact, it’s eight and a half,” says Ahearn. “It’s a nice way to keep the vertical scale of the house down but give more meaningful ceiling height on the interior.”

Enhancing the sense of openness, the expanse of windows gives way to pastoral views: “In the kitchen, the band of glass looks out to the ocean in the distance and wraps around the corner to bring out that wonderful light,” says Ahearn. In the dining and living areas, French doors open to the outdoors, while a fieldstone fireplace grandly divides the spaces. “This is their year-round weekend house,” says Ahearn, “so we needed [it] to feel [like] a winter house as well, where you can curl up or stay for the holidays.”



Throughout the interiors, heart pine floors and timeless details give the home its distinct warmth and character. Ahearn is an architect noted for his restorations (his work in Edgartown on the Vineyard has been credited as a revitalizing force in the town), and his incorporation of thoughtful details throughout the house—down to the custom-designed door hinges—further suggests a home with a past. “We designed all the cabinetry to look like old cupboards and pieces of furniture, an ode to a cottage in a different time,” says Ahearn. Wooden countertops in the kitchen recall an old-fashioned country kitchen, while bead board and built-in bookcases are traditional cottage touches. In the master bath, a built-in medicine cabinet and furniture-style legs on the vanity are both tailored and classic. Each room, from a finished basement playroom to the connected guesthouse with separate entrance (“it’s like a house within a house,” says Ahearn), was designed with minimal materials—the heart pine, honed granite, fieldstone—that could belong to another century.

And perhaps they did. “I write a history for all my houses,” says Ahearn. Just as he would research a restoration, he takes inspiration from the setting (perhaps there was a hurricane that came through, or the original house was owned by a midshipman) to imagine the history and inform the details of a new house. “The client and I work together to build the chapters of the story, then we use historical references—What kind of doorknobs might have been used in 1936?—to create the future.” In this way, he says, a new house doesn’t need to age before it becomes part of the family. “Like a family heirloom, the house feels multigenerational, something that will stay in the family,” he says. “From day one, it is a well-loved house.”



A large dormer makes a cozy space for a bed. Left and below: Thoughtful features, from a built-in medicine cabinet, in the master bath, to the twin fieldstone chimneys give the house its sense of timelessness.

