

# Wellesley Weston

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# Homes That Escape Time

ALBERT MCKEON **writer**

**his career as** an architect has spanned 45 years, but Patrick Ahearn's stated goal is to design homes that escape time. His creations learn from the past so they can shape a future that balances preservation with innovation.

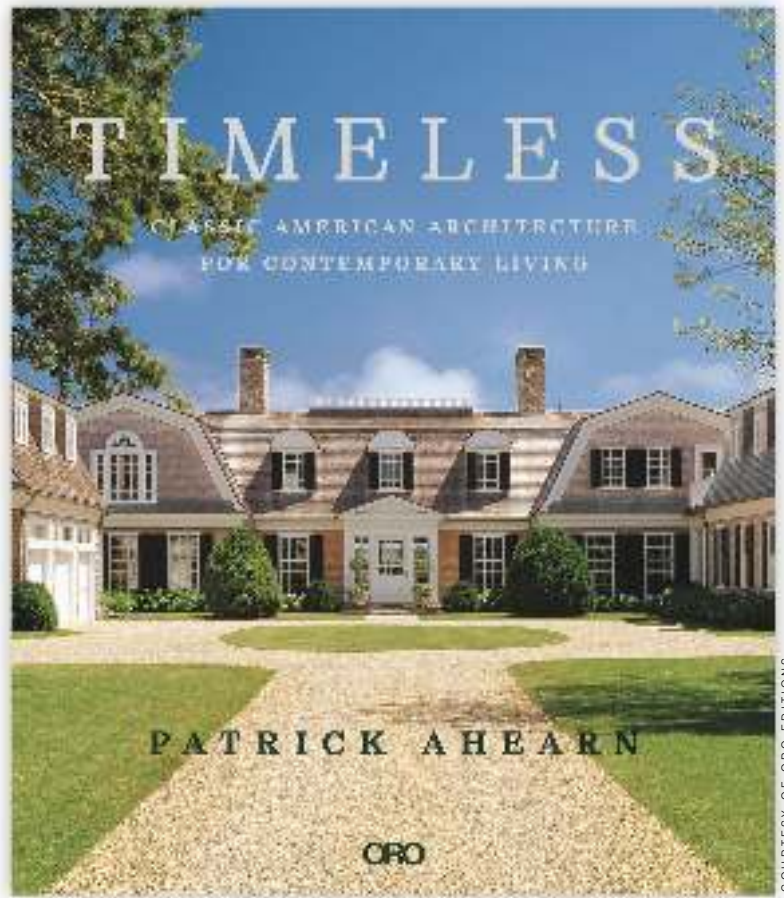
It's fitting, then, that Ahearn's first book, a monograph that explores in words and pictures 18 homes he restored or created, has the title *Timeless*.

The 160-page book, which was published by Oro Editions in December, shares how Ahearn approached his favorite projects—a list that includes a Greek revival on Martha's Vineyard and the renovation of a 1910 shingle-style “jewel in the Chatham crown.”

The book also details his work on three homes in Wellesley. One of those houses is his own, a cottage in Wellesley Farms designed by Boston architect Royal Barry Wills, whose penchant for refinement earned him renown as a preeminent Cape Cod-style designer.

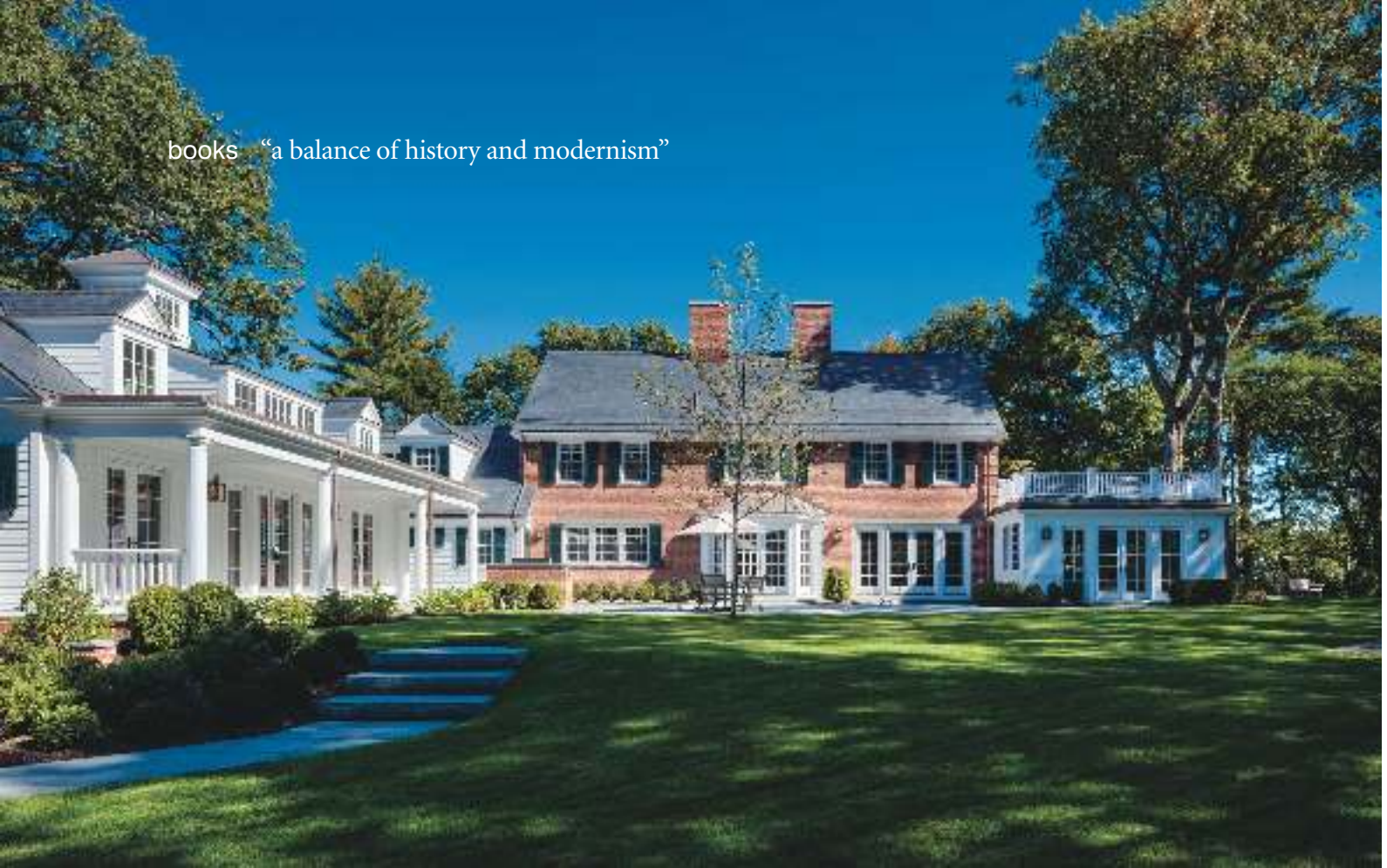
Ahearn's style aims for “the greater good,” he said in an interview before the publication of *Timeless*. In his eyes, the greater good is “all about scale. The spaces between buildings become as important as the houses themselves. You need to think about character and environment and carry it throughout the whole project.”

Ahearn grew up in Levittown, New York, where the seeds for his architectural style took root. He created model houses and village surroundings for his train set, striving even then for a proper balance of space.



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books “a balance of history and modernism”



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*The topography of the property was altered to minimize the addition's impact to the classic character of this Wellesley home, designed by Royal Barry Wills*

He earned degrees in architecture and urban design from Syracuse University in 1973, and then packed up his Volkswagen Beetle and made his way to Boston. Ahearn didn't want to start a career in New York City; he preferred Boston. "It's such a walkable city, and there were so many opportunities here for people to succeed in my profession. It made sense."

Ahearn began his career working for Benjamin Thompson & Associates and The Architects Collaborative, where, among a variety of projects, he contributed to the redesign of Faneuil Hall. In 1978, Ahearn decided to open his own firm. His firm's conversion of a

condominium in Back Bay kick-started that movement citywide, and its introduction of retail spaces and sidewalk cafes transformed Newbury Street into the pedestrian spot it is today. Ahearn eventually turned his firm's attention to high-end residential projects.

Now in his fifth decade as an architect, Ahearn sees a renewal in the importance of design, with architects and homeowners striving to build and restore houses that reflect, through their design, a balance of history and modernism that ultimately befits their surrounding community.

"It's not just what (the homeowner) wants but also what fits the appropriate context," Ahearn said. He added, "When someone's new to a community, and they do their home the right way, they are embraced by the community. If you build a McMansion... it's not going to go over well. That's the challenge in Wellesley, with all these teardowns. What do you replace them with? Not every house is worth saving, but in the context of a neighborhood, it's worth looking at what is there."

Ahearn believes the three Wellesley projects featured in *Timeless* respect the aesthetic and expectations of their respective neighborhoods. Two of them, including his own, were renovations of old structures in Wellesley Farms, while the third was a complete creation in Wellesley Hills. That one had to convey grandeur, on a large scale that would include the amenities of a modern resort, such as gathering spaces and room for

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books “good design changes how people live their lives”



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family and friends to stay for long periods without having to leave the property.

“I developed a double-gabled scheme clad in stone and shingles, with stepped-back wings, all of which helped de-emphasize the home’s heft. Keeping the building’s proportions internally consistent, if not quite human scaled, I designed substantial exterior details, like 14-foot-tall columns, 10-foot-high doors, a monumental 12-foot-high Romanesque archway at the entrance, and weighty trim and moldings. Inside, ceilings are 10-feet high, and one commodious space gives way to another along two central spines,” Ahearn wrote in *Timeless*.

Ahearn and his wife bought their Wellesley Farms cottage in 1989. Then, as he is now, Ahearn was enamored of the concept of the neighborhood, an “anti-suburbia” that has the character of Beacon Hill in a country setting. “The houses are intimate in scale and attuned to the topography and landscaping,” he said in an interview. “At the time, we had three kids with a fourth on the way. I wanted to take the train to work (in Boston) and have a country house.”

*When expanding and renovating his 1936 English-countryside-inspired house in Wellesley, Ahearn worked with the themes, materials, and scale of the existing building.*

As he explains in his book, in 1989, weeds had surrounded the cottage and the previous owners had replaced the original wood-shake roof with asphalt shingles. Despite its disrepair and the smallness of the home’s three bedrooms and two bathrooms, Ahearn knew he could build upon Wills’ feeling for scale and nostalgia, interests he shares with the architect, and still enlarge and renovate the cottage.

After finding the original plans in the attic, Ahearn at the time asked himself, if it were 1936 and he’d had a larger program for this house, “What would Royal Barry Wills have done?” He decided to expand the structure in a way that it would appear as if it had grown over time. He doubled the size of the building, to 4,000 square feet, by adding wings to both sides, extending the entrance, and creating a carriage house from the base of the one-story garage. In 2016, Ahearn bought a neighboring barn that he said seamlessly meshes with the property.



## books “romantic nostalgia”

*An archway marks the transition between the reception hall and the living space in this Wellesley home.*

lost its charm with the addition of bay windows from the 1960s and the stripping of nearly all of its molding and trim. Using photos of the home before its first renovations, Ahearn borrowed from Wills’ original vision to replace two wings from the 1950s with gambrel-roofed, white clapboard, and red brick additions. He also restored the original windows, framing them with bluestone lintels and brick soldier courses. A pair of new chimneys and a white-painted portico elevated the entry and “honored the past.”

“Inside the home, Wills’ signature knotty-pine paneling, now painted, extends beyond the dining room into several other spaces, including a new mudroom and kitchen. Adorned with rebuilt balustrades that exactly replicate those from 1941, the original staircase leads to a reconfigured second floor. There, a new four-foot-wide beamed corridor connects bedrooms and bathrooms

“Thanks to our work’s sensitivity to appropriate proportions, authentic craftsmanship, and romantic nostalgia—all inspired by Wills himself—the enriched home looks as natural in its setting as ever,” Ahearn wrote in *Timeless*. In an interview he added, “It’s a communal place for holidays and events, when we have 25 to 30 people here . . . People think my house is one of the most loved houses in Wellesley. It has a Currier & Ives notion of living in New England.”

The other Wellesley Farms restoration highlighted in *Timeless* was also designed by Wills and built in 1941. But the Georgian Colonial had

that both preserve Wills’ sense of proportion and accommodate the needs of twenty-first-century living—just like the rest of the house,” Ahearn wrote.

*Timeless* is out during a time of great interest in design, not just in homes but also in consumer products, Ahearn said—also noting, “A good design changes how people live their lives.” And in architecture, design that matches the need for a strong community is sought after, he added. “Hearth and home are really important. Architects who practice that greater good are doing a service for our country.” **W W**

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