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# Patrick Ahearn

Catching up with the celebrity architect and *Weekends with Yankee* guest.

**P**atrick Ahearn may have grown up in suburbia—Levittown, Long Island—but he made his name in the 1980s as a leading player in the revitalization of Boston's Back Bay neighborhood. Today he's best known for helping to transform the Martha's Vineyard community of Edgartown from a slightly down-at-the-heels tourist spot into the penultimate New England seaside village. Look for him on the new season of *Weekends with Yankee*, where he takes us on a walking tour of some of his most noteworthy island projects.  
—Amy Traverso

**Q** What are the origins of New England architectural style?

**A** When the Pilgrims arrived, they had to adapt English designs to a colder winter with more snow, so the steep pitch of the roof became a signature design element. The indigenous material was wood ... and glass was difficult to get or make, so windows were small. Then they needed a large center fireplace to heat the house. So there's your basic saltbox design. And if the farmstead grew, then maybe the barn was eventually incorporated into living space and they built another barn. So the ensemble of buildings we think of as classic New England architecture is really reflective of 400 years of history, of uses changing.

**Q** How did you get started working with traditional architecture?

**A** After grad school, I moved to Boston and ended up working in the Architects Collaborative, founded by Walter Gropius. So I know how to do modern houses.... [But] in Boston there was this rich architecture, albeit falling into disrepair. Beacon Hill was filled with rooming houses; Newbury Street was a ghost of what it is today. I started looking at these abandoned houses in Back Bay and saw you could make condominiums out of them so young people could afford to buy into these neighborhoods.

**Q** What drew you to Martha's Vineyard?

**A** My wife knew James Taylor's father, Ike, and when we visited with him on the island, we went to look at real estate. I found a little house in Edgartown that was in foreclosure. For the first five years, it was just a retreat. But I began to understand the community and saw an opportunity to get rid of the T-shirt shops and neon lights and revive it as a commercial and residential district. Since then, I've done more than 200 houses in 12 square blocks.

**Q** How did you achieve a coherent look among that many projects?

**A** It's complicated. Zoning dictates design. But I don't give



Patrick Ahearn, author of *Timeless: Classic American Architecture for Contemporary Living*.

up—that's my Long Island upbringing. If it's not plan A, then it's plan B, or C, or D. I also try to represent what's best for the town. It's not just about what the client wants, but the collective whole. What's the style of the houses on the block? What's the right scale for the streetscape? How can you allow a neighbor to retain their water view without compromising the design?

**Q** Can you describe your perfect day on Martha's Vineyard?

**A** [Laughs.] Not having to go in front of the zoning board.

*Season four of Weekends with Yankee, which features our interview with Patrick Ahearn as well as conversations with other notable New Englanders, premiered this spring on WGBH, WGBY, and New Hampshire PBS. To search your local listings, go to [newengland.com/weekendswithyankee](http://newengland.com/weekendswithyankee).*