

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Custom-home builder found a way to follow his heart

Peter Polhemus isn't a sappy sort of guy, but his advice to the Youth of America is simple: Follow your heart.

That's what he did back in the 1970s, when he shocked his father and everyone else who was paying attention by taking a leave his sophomore year at Harvard College. He never went back.

The '70s being what they were, Polhemus could have gone in any number of directions. Instead, he focused his energies on architecture and engineering, enrolling in a little-known college in Vermont and later graduating with the skills and motivation to carve out his own niche in the design-build industry.

Flash forward to the present, and Polhemus runs one of the most successful custom-home design and building companies in the Northeast. He recently met with BBJ Real Estate Editor Craig M. Douglas to talk about his business, career choices and the challenges of catering to the rich and famous.

Did you start out with high-end clientele in mind?

Yes. The nature of the industry on the Cape is it's mostly second homes, retirement homes. We were definitely in the high end, and then the high end got higher. We kind of climbed that scale.

Do you ever turn down projects, due to design or budget constraints?

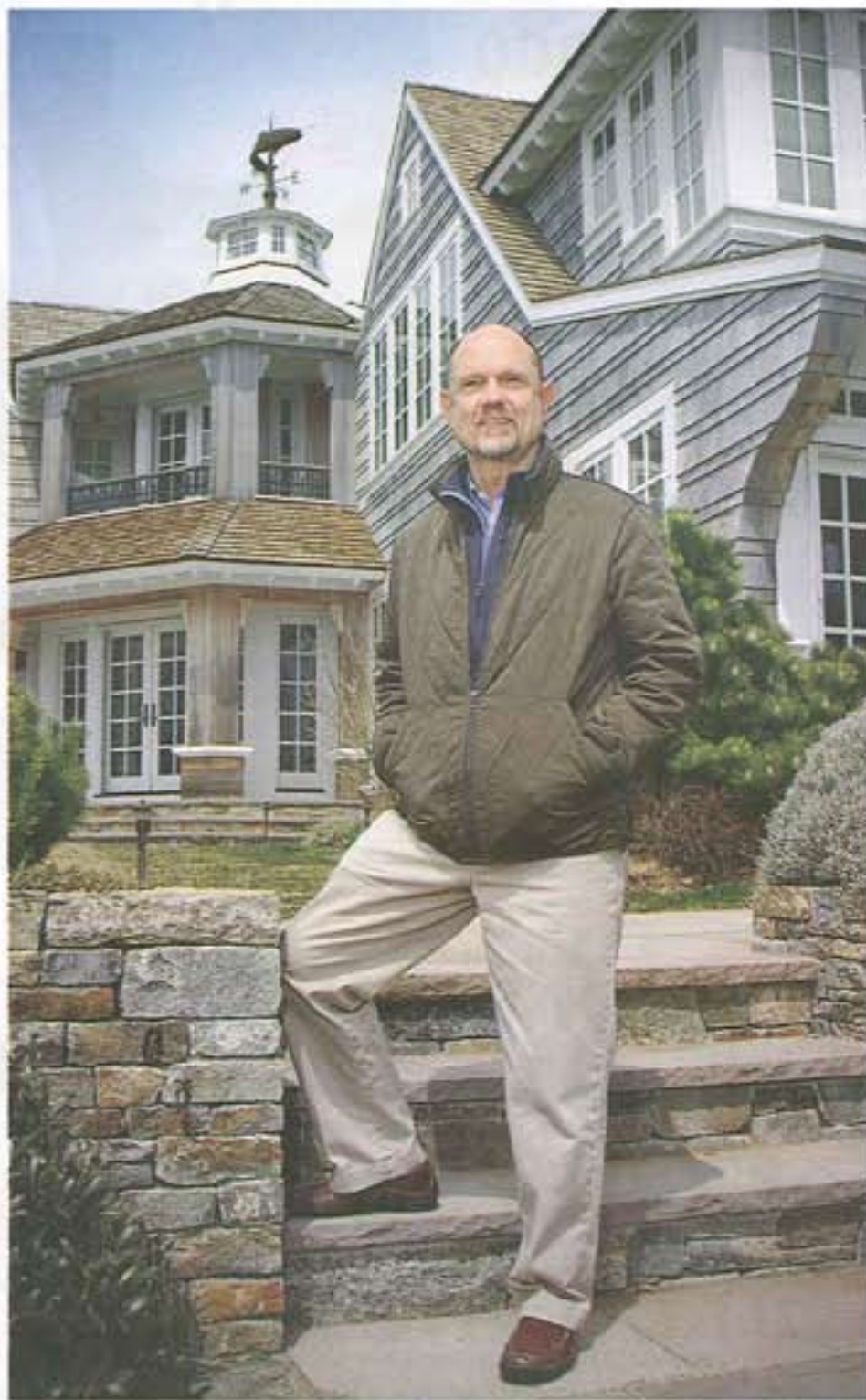
Not really. One of the things that's really nice is that the people who want to do these kinds of things on the Cape, versus East Hampton or, say, Florida, tend to be people who are very successful but are not trying to make a statement. It's going to be a respite for them, for their family, for their friends. They want high quality and they want it really well done, but they specifically don't want it to be in your face. Which is to me, really nice because it's much closer to my sensibilities.

And that's pretty much who always comes through your door?

One guy. There was one guy who wanted a house in Orleans, and I had met primarily with his wife, and I thought that we had pretty much nailed it. And we were going through the presentation and he said, "No, no, no. You don't get it. When somebody walks into this house, I want them to think, 'mansion.'" He ended up selling the property.

Given the amount of detail in projects of this scale, how do you handle a budget?

What we do, right from the start, when we meet with a client, we try and get a sense of what they want, because we have a whole range of things we can do and at different cost levels. But we take all of that information and we tell them what we think is a reasonable number, something that we can work with. ... But we'll work together to make sure it's going the



W. MIRC BERGAL | BUSINESS JOURNAL

PETER POLHEMUS

Title: President, Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders

Age: 60

Education: Bachelor of Arts, Goddard College, 1973; Master's degree in architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1978

Residence: Chatham

way they want it to go.

So the ultra wealthy have budgets?

Oh yeah. You know, these are really good business people. They didn't get to where they are by being loose. ... When we say what we do, we say we manage relationships. We manage expectations. So they don't all of the sudden find out that their \$1.5 million home is now \$3 million or \$4 million.

How do you deal with clients when you're over budget?

It's often times not a comfortable conversation to say, "this is going to cost you

more money." As an architect, it's not something you do.

How long does the custom-home process take?

Design can take anywhere from five months to a year, depending on how extensive it is and the number of revisions.

What's the longest job been, from a design standpoint?

I think it was a year and a half.

Were you ready to roll up the blueprints and burn them at that point?

No, because at least we were making

progress. But, oh, my word.

Aside from Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, you don't hear of many Harvard dropouts going on to have successful careers. What was it that prompted you to leave?

I went through my freshman year at Harvard ... my younger son would refer to me as a nerd. But I had worked for a year before, so I was really excited to be in school. It was a luxury. I cleaned bathrooms for 20 hours a week. That was my work study. It kept me humble, particularly on Fridays when guys' girlfriends would be arriving for the weekend and I'd show up with a knock: "I'm here to clean your toilet." But I was fine with that. It wasn't until I came back sophomore year and had to pick a major.

You weren't ready to pick a career path?

Nothing jumped out at me, and if I wasn't totally engaged, I didn't want to be there. So I took a leave of absence and went to work for a builder in Chatham, ironically.

How did that work out?

We were framing houses, conventional houses, and I kept a journal at that point and I was writing that when we would frame a house, before the sheet rock went up, you could look through the house and see each of the rooms and how it was laid out. And then the sheet rock would go up and I'd get really depressed. And I kept writing that there must be some sort of way to preserve this sense of openness and light. Then we did a house that was designed by an architect, which was open and had lots of light. And that got kind of interesting.

So you enrolled at tiny Goddard College in Vermont? That must have gone over well back home.

Well, what I did is I went up to the admissions office and told them I wanted to enroll and they said we're full for this year but you can try and enroll in the fall. I talked to the head of the program and he said there was a space for me, but then the admissions guy still said no. So I called up the president of the college and I pulled the Harvard card. I said I'm on a leave of absence at Harvard and I'm interested in transferring.

So Harvard wasn't a waste after all?

The president said come on over and we can have coffee and so on. So I ended up, much to my father's chagrin, leaving Harvard and going to Goddard and graduating from their design-build program.

For more with Peter Polhemus visit bostonbusinessjournal.com

