



# Classical Reinvention

Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders puts a new spin on Classicism. *By Nancy A. Ruhling*



Chatham, MA-based Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders was founded in 1996; today the firm is led by architect and design principal John DaSilva (left), architect and president Peter Polhemus (center), and builder and COO Aaron Polhemus. *Photo: courtesy of Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders*

Top: This 1938 house, called Hydrangea Walk – an icon on Shore Road in Chatham, MA – was renovated and added to by Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders. *Photo: Brian Vanden Brink*

**W**it, whimsy and eclecticism. These are the building blocks that keep popping up when the principals of Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders describe the common thread they weave through their body of work. “We like to reveal the unexpected,” says architect John DaSilva, design principal of the Chatham, MA-based firm. “We try to do it in clever and inventive, as well as thoughtful, ways. Our work is simultaneously traditional and modern. We treat architecture and construction as a unified practical art where beauty and function are inseparable, and in this sense, we are ‘New Classicists.’”

The traditional with a twist of modern, adds architect/builder and firm president Peter Polhemus, gives the opportunity to create “fresh, up-to-date designs that feel right in today’s world – and in their immediate cultural and physical context.”

“We can’t help but be a part of the continuum of architectural history,” says DaSilva. “That doesn’t mean that we replicate history but that we live within in.”

Polhemus Savery DaSilva was established in 1996 when Polhemus, who studied as an undergraduate at Harvard and Goddard and earned an M.Arch. from MIT, and Cape Cod builder Leonard Savery (now retired) decided to put their talents together. In 1998, DaSilva, who has a B.Arch. from Princeton and an M.Arch. from Yale, joined the team. Aaron Polhemus – Peter’s son – who grew up in the construction end of the business and is a graduate of the University of Vermont, is the firm’s chief operating officer.

Polhemus Savery DaSilva has built its reputation by designing and building award-winning residential, commercial and institutional projects, notably throughout Cape Cod and southeastern New England. Their projects are featured in several books, including Michael J. Crosbie’s monograph *Architecture of the Cape Cod Summer: The Work of Polhemus Savery DaSilva* (Images Publishing Group, New Classicists series).

Polhemus Savery DaSilva is a modern-day pioneer of the one-stop design-build practice, integrating architecture and construction approaches of the historical



Built as a vacation home for a family with four children, this house, on Lake Wequaquet in Centerville, MA, is reminiscent of Victorian summer cottages and 1920s bungalows. Photo: Randall Perry

"master builder" scenario. Today, its permanent staff is augmented with consulting interior designers and landscape architects who are brought on board when things are still on the drawing board.

The majority of the firm's projects are residential, many of them vacation, summer or retirement homes that lend themselves to the more leisurely style of "New Classicism" upon which the firm's reputation is founded. Polhemus Savery DaSilva is also known for its resort work, notably the waterfront development of Wequassett Resort on Pleasant Bay. "Our work is eclectic," says DaSilva. "Each of our projects grows out of the specific client's needs and wants – out of the character of the client, the site and the broader context – not out of some predetermined canon."

Regardless of style, sustainability is a mainstay. "A lot of green practices are good design practices," Peter Polhemus says. DaSilva adds, "It's important to realize that there's an emotional component to sustainability. If the building is not beautiful, it's not sustainable because it won't survive the test of time – it won't be cared for and beloved through generations."

### The House on Lake Wequaquet

Polhemus Savery DaSilva describes a home on Lake Wequaquet in Centerville, MA, as a "fun house." Although its style recalls that of the Victorian summer cottages and 1920s bungalows that are common in the region, the overscaled interior and exterior features of the new, two-story cedar-shingle house look as though they were drawn from Disney as well as from history's notepad.

"Our client – a family with four children – wanted a low-maintenance playhouse where they could spend weekends and summer vacations," says DaSilva. "We wanted to create a house of enchantment that evoked a child's relationship to built forms and spaces." Thus, the Gothic-style hip roof and the front porch have a Grimm's fairy tale look. The flaring chimney belongs in an imaginary land, and the living room's Moorish-style inglenook conjures up tales from *The Arabian Nights*.

"Inside, the fantastical is evoked in the stair and adjacent columns," says DaSilva, "where twisted Baroque columns and bridges crossing soaring space – à la Piranesi, the great 18th-century engraver of Roman ruins and impossibly grand and complex imaginary spaces – are playfully recalled with Carpenter-appropriate materials and details."

The house, which is reached by a romantically winding dirt road, was sited to take in the lake views; the front façade is centered on the property, and the rear façade is positioned to allow views through the trees to the lake.

Of course, a fun house isn't any fun if there's much work, so Polhemus Savery DaSilva made sure it was low-maintenance. The exterior is unfinished cedar – no painting allowed – and the floors of the interior are tile instead of wood so the kids can bring in all the sand they want. "It's not overly formal although it's rooted in tradition," DaSilva says. "It's a pure reflection of the owner's character and wishes for the house."

### A Playful New Classicism

The summer house that the firm built so that Cape Cod's Oyster River wraps around it is a prime example of what DaSilva labels "playful Classicism." In this case, classic Shingle Style ideas were combined with the Cape Cod vernacular. "We used gray shingles and white columns and window sash," says DaSilva. "Our white, however, is a creamy version to soften the contrast and allow the grid of the windows to be strong but not overwhelming."

The property contained a house, a guest house and office, which were razed to provide room for the new home. In this case, less turned out to be more. "Under the zoning laws, the footprint of the new house could not exceed the combined square footage of the footprints of the three



This Shingle Style house, which features a tower that brings in light and provides views of the river, is on the Oyster River on Cape Cod. The front entrance faces the street. Three sides look out over the river and the sound beyond. Photo: Brian Fanden Brink

The open floor plan also offers well-defined spaces and exploits natural light. In this space, the living room and dining room share Classical and contemporary columns and transoms, a design decision that implies separation between the spaces yet visually leaves them quite connected. *Photo: Brian Fanden Erink*

buildings that were there," says Peter Polhemus. DaSilva adds, "This forced us to come up with a compact plan that led to opportunities for interesting architectural elements."

Within the allotted 4,700 sq.ft., Polhemus Savery DaSilva had to find room for a two-car garage and a gracious front porch that frames a striking bay window. That challenge presented the opportunity to exploit and accentuate Classical elements. "The owners didn't want to give up much interior space, but they liked the symbolism of a porch, so we designed a porch that is just deep enough to give the feeling of a traditional front porch, and the porte-cochere is just big enough for a car to pass through," says DaSilva. "Despite these constraints, the feeling is still that of a grand seaside country estate."

With this solution, the visitor approaches a welcoming, classic entry façade un-marred by garage doors. Under the porte-cochere, there is a side entrance that leads to the mudroom and another that leads to a small stair up to a private guest suite. A charming and functional old-world-style scenario is created for both pedestrian and car traffic.

Inside, defining elements like bracketed boxes holding window shades at the heads of the windows in the double-height tower, and the columns with flat shafts, exemplify the firm's commitment to the Classical-contemporary look. "The detail doesn't cry out formality, but it makes the spaces warm and comfortable," says DaSilva. "This is a relatively large home, but each of the spaces still feels intimate."



### Adding to an Iconic House

Hydrangea Walk is an icon of Chatham's Shore Road, so when the new owners decided to renovate the 8,000-sq.-ft. home built in 1938, the firm was called upon to come up with a plan that would maintain the fabled Colonial front façade yet reorganize the unwieldy existing plan and add some 3,000 sq.ft.

The solution was to rebuild the telescoping end wings on the front and increase the size and formality of the house by adding a pair of westward-projecting Palladian-style wings, complete with cupolas in the back, forming a three-sided courtyard that serves as an entertaining space on the five-acre property. "The back was a Cape, which is fairly small scale, and the new wings are bigger than this central feature," says DaSilva. "It was tricky with the smaller scale center to still make it important."

Inside the main house, the chopped up rabbit warren of rooms and the poor layout were opened up and altered to improve traffic flow and aesthetics.

Polhemus Savery DaSilva's signature "New Classicism" is seen in the newly built carriage house/guest house, which is less formal than the main house and is topped with a vintage cupola from the neighborhood.

"Many of our projects are second homes, like this one," says DaSilva. "We want to make them special because we want the owners to long to return to them — to keep happy images with them when they're back at their primary home."



This storybook Cape, a vacation home on Cape Cod, was sited to get the best view of the distant water. *Photo: Randall Perry*



A circular drive of crushed white shells leads to the main section of Sand Dollars, which features eight-in.-exposure Alaskan yellow cedar shingles, a red-cedar shingle roof and deep red window sashes and doors. Photo: Brian Vanden Brink

### Winging It

The push and pull of contemporary and Classical needs is illustrated in the renovation of Chatham's Sand Dollars. The original house, an early-19th-century Cape that had been moved in the 1940s to the property overlooking three harbors, two lighthouses, a river and Nantucket Sound, was added on to throughout the decades.

The new owners wanted to retain the original structure but also to build a house based on American Georgian architecture that was large enough to accommodate their collection of art, pottery and glasswork. Polhemus Savery DaSilva removed the additions and rotated the 1,500-sq.-ft. antique structure, making it a wing of the completed 8,500-sq.-ft. house. The new centerpiece, which features a Georgian façade, a hipped roof and four large chimneys, looks out over the water. "It's a year-round house, not a summer home," says DaSilva. "The owners wanted it to be historically rooted yet to also be of our time. They sought variety in the character of the spaces — both grand and cozy."

The wings enclose an entry court. A bridge over the drive that provides access to the court connects a new guest room to the old Cape. There are two front doors: The one in the original house faces the road; the other, in the center of the new portion of the house, faces the courtyard. "On the water side, the broad expanse of the house is articulated by porches and bays added to the underlying Georgian form," says DaSilva. "The central bay pushes toward the harbor to capture the panorama and bring in the light from multiple directions."

The resulting design is defined by its eclecticism: The land side has a Georgian façade; the water side is Shingle Style, with a nod to the nautical in the central bay — it references the sterns of antique sailing ships that used the adjacent Stage Harbor before their cross-Atlantic travels; and the original portion is a tried-and-true antique Cape.

"Our goal was to synthesize those eclectic elements into a unique whole well suited to its dramatic Cape Cod location," says DaSilva. "We did change the original a bit. The back now has continuous high windows reflecting circulation spaces within. And like the rest of the house, we clad it in Alaskan yellow cedar shingles, which are similar to the white cedar that is typical to the region but are available in longer lengths, allowing eight inches of exposure. If we had used five inch, the house would have looked larger; the longer lengths are more in scale. The entire mass has weathered to silver-gray, softening the home's relationship to the extraordinary and wide-open land and seascape." ■

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In the interior of Sand Dollars, the main entrance has a contemporary Baroque feeling, with the flaring walls and deep perspectives of the windows giving a sculptural look to the space that is in sync with the owners' art collection. Photo: Brian Vanden Brink