

Laissez-Faire

Imbuing a laid back vibe, Polhemus Savery DaSilva imagines a home that is both energizing and calming.

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“Laissez-Faire” greets the neighborhood as a Cape Cod cottage of today. The back overlooks a serene salt marsh and creek.

The sands of Chatham are notoriously fickle. One year they'll form an island, the next they'll rejoin the mainland. Channels shift like moods. Before the age of computers, nautical charts were often works of fiction even as they were printed. If the old saying about God's humor—"Want to make God laugh? Well, make a plan"—holds true, the freewheeling spirit of Chatham's sands is a mere variation. The ocean and the sandbars certainly seem to laugh as they dance unfettered, almost taunting, with an attitude of "Go ahead, chart me up." The freedoms enjoyed by the forces of nature here in the elbow region of Cape Cod extend from Nauset down to North Beach Island, around the tip of Monomoy and into the estuaries of Oyster Pond and the marshes of Chatham. Although the wild nature of change can sometimes prove catastrophic to residences in the area, much of the time this unbridled freedom is fascinating to behold. As long as the shifts are relatively harmless, it can be delightful to discover their transformations if you're in a position to just go with the flow.

One particular home along the marshes and a tidal creek in Chatham embraces the area's nature both by its vantage point and its name: Laissez-Faire. Completed in 2012, this creation of Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders (PSD) appears from the road to be a traditional Cape shingled cottage; yet it most certainly does its own thing, and the face it presents to the estuary on which it stands reflects this theme of individual freedom. As with many PSD homes, the name



Laissez-Faire is more than just a name, it's a title that offers a window into its meaning. The name derives from a fairly literal translation of its original French concept; "It means 'Let it be' or 'Let it remain,'" the owner explains. "We think of it as 'Let things be the way they should be.' This is our second home, so it's a good name for a place where we come to relax."

The story of Laissez-Faire begins near the turn of this century, in 2003, when the owners purchased

a home with the intention of renovation. The existing structure, a somewhat generic Cape built in the 1960's, was less than ideal, and it did little to maximize the potential of its perch above the marshland. But the site's potential was obvious. "The location and view drew us here," says the owner, "and we immediately started working with PSD." Through consultation with senior designer Sharon DaSilva, they decided that to meet their needs, it would make better sense to tear down the existing house and



The interior spaces (master bedroom opposite top, mudroom opposite bottom left, master bath opposite bottom right, kitchen this page top and bottom) are designed to take advantage of light and views from multiple directions. The kitchen design is by Classic Kitchens & Interiors of Hyannis.

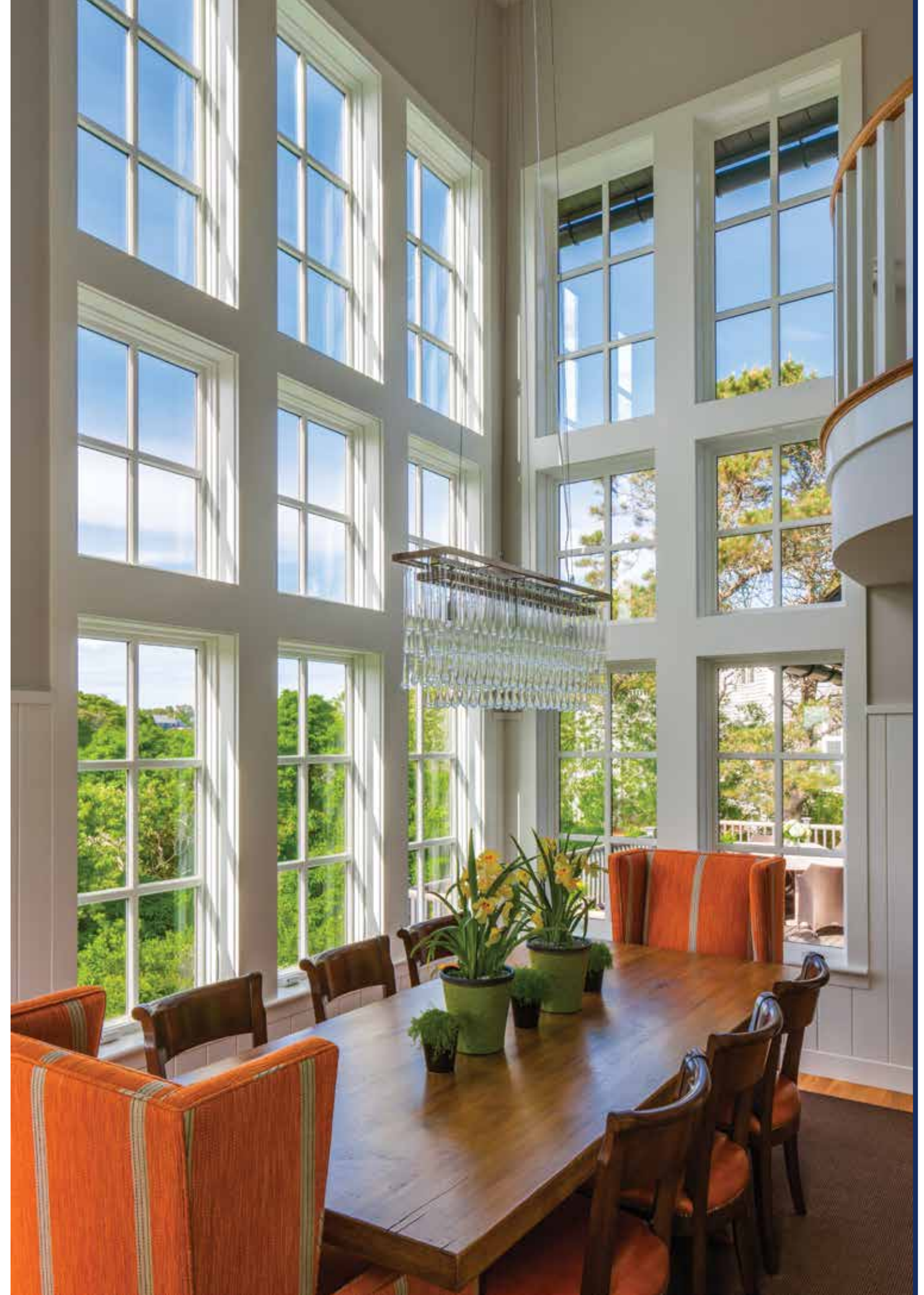
create something new. DaSilva says, "It was in pretty bad shape." It had been built rather shoddily, and its orientation and layout of windows did little to take advantage of either the light or the views. "We were limited by conservation and zoning laws," she continues, "and needed to stay within the same footprint. We could move things around, but we couldn't add to it." The owners met with Sharon DaSilva to discuss possibilities, and Peter Polhemus joined the party to provide examples of features that had been successful in some of the firm's other projects. DaSilva recalls, "They were great clients; they had imagination and interest, and they were completely on board for something a little different, something unique." The team tried out a few different ideas



for the design and then settled on a plan in 2005. Then the owners' lives became too busy, and they decided to put the project on hold.

The design plans lay mostly dormant for six years, until 2011. Fortunately, says the owner, "Sharon got everything right the first time." While the goal was to create a home where residents can just "let it be" and go with the ebbs and flows of relaxation, rejuvenation, and leisure, the actual design and build process would prove to be anything but "laissez-faire." DaSilva's vision was precise, the owners' needs and wish list were specific, and SLC Interiors of Hamilton, MA would contribute another layer of purposeful detail. PSD and SLC have collaborated on a number of projects and brought the experience of synergy that facilitated the entire process. SLC works within a system of five stages which include: programming, schematic design, design development, specifications and drawings, and installation. As with PSD, the interior designers pride themselves upon remaining involved with a project even after its initial completion. This was the owners' first building project, so they appreciated the fact that PSD takes care of both architectural design and the actual construction of homes. "We joke about this," says the owner. "In over thirty years of marriage we've always lived in high-rises and townhouses; we've never lived in an actual house, never owned dirt."

For Laissez-Faire, Sharon DaSilva would serve as both designer and project manager throughout





The exterior's warm gray painted trim and window sash are more emphatic than weathered wood, but less bold and common than bright white. The house is well suited to the subtle but dynamic beauty of the property.

construction. The owners brought a comprehensive list to the design meetings and arrived with a clear idea of how they wanted their new home to work and how they wanted to use it. As a second home, they planned to spend time here as a couple with their dogs, but they also wanted the ability to host guests. They work in Boston, so they wanted to be able to shoot down for a weekend or a holiday at any time during the year. Therefore, the home would need to serve multiple purposes and be ready to take on a variety of personalities—all within the limits of a relatively small footprint. The owner says, "PSD did a great job of packing a lot of features into a constrained area." Thus, the upstairs guest room doubles as a home office, including the computer monitor that's also a flat screen television; another guest room doubles as a sun room. PSD seized on the owners intentions and incorporated a theme of duality throughout the program. In the process, they created a home that's representative of a traditional Cape shingled cottage, but one that's simultaneously modern. "It's actually a little playful," DaSilva says, "with unique details and this dual personality."

If one viewed an aerial photo of Laissez-Faire, the home would appear quite symmetrical, with the lines of its roofs forming a cross. In an approach from the street, this illusion holds, too, as a visitor can easily see the gambrel at the front and another at the side. The marsh-facing side breaks the rules however, as a two-story wall of windows rises up and interrupts

one of the gables. DaSilva says, "It's a little perverse to slice off a gambrel, but there were good reasons for doing it, and it worked well in the end." The owners wanted the first and second floors connected in an atrium, and the double-height wall created space for a dining room below and a second-floor seating area—or reading nook, as the bibliophile owners most often use it. While providing a modern touch, the windows also allowed DaSilva to maximize space. "We wanted to let more light into the entire house," she explains. The space is elegant enough to provide a formal dining area, yet it has the comfort and warmth that one associates more with a breakfast nook. The owner says, "We were looking for a room you could live in more than just to use for eating dinner." Working with SLC Interiors helped create this dual nature, as the rectangular icicle chandelier provides a cool contrast to the warmth of the heavy wooden table and chairs. In an embrace of the dining space, but one that practically radiates throughout the room, rich orange armchairs bookend the table. The cushions on the side chairs share this upholstery, and the color reappears in the living room, creating a continuity throughout the home.

Through various pairings, a sense of flow and connection permeates Laissez-Faire. One of the more striking features is the single column that, Atlas-like, carries the weight of the front gable at the home's entrance. This monolith bears the suggestion of pillars, and symbolizes a Classical facade without fully developing that particular design



element. Usually columns appear at least in pairs, but in this case, the missing one can be found in the living room, beside the fireplace, flattened into a wooden panel with only the hint of structural necessity, as though it might be holding up the mantle. The built-in cabinetry, mantle, and facade that surround and frame the fireplace terminate in an arch, the highest point of which nearly reaches the ceiling. This overall structure, which is really one set piece that includes the aforementioned flattened column, lines up exactly with an archway cut out from the kitchen. If one stood facing the sink, it would be easy to believe that the archway and the arch once fit together, which in turn creates the sensation of an arcade with its implied repetition of form.

Despite the visual connection, DaSilva was also able to pull off the creation of a core comprised of the kitchen and stairwell. "This came from my studying the work of Mies van der Rohe," she says. One of the most influential modernist architects of the Twentieth Century,

Mies had introduced the Core House in 1951, a project that he envisioned to be participative, one that its inhabitants could finish as they wished. Not only is the kitchen of Laissez-Faire a modernist element within an outwardly traditional home, it also references the collaboration that took place amongst the design-and-build team and the owners.

Although Laissez-Faire sits in a residential neighborhood, the back side of the house, which contains many of the crucial design features, gazes from its many glass eyes north-northwest across marshes and a wide tidal creek. Once entering the home, its position and views create a sense of true isolation, a connection much more with nature and wildlife than with the bustle of even Chatham, itself far removed from Boston. PSD meticulously designed each room to receive natural light and to access portions of the view. Even the basement multi-purpose room opens to vistas of water and marsh grasses. "It's a great house to be snowed in at," says the owner.

"We've spent several hard winter stretches here."

After its extended design process and six-year pause prior to construction, the owners moved into Laissez-Faire in 2012, and they appreciated the streamlined experience of working with Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders for a number of reasons. "We ended up with everything we could have hoped for; we give major kudos to PSD for creating a home so unique and distinctive, but at the same time respectful of its neighborhood," the owner concludes. "It was really beneficial to have Sharon as project manager and knowing that she, as the designer, was working directly with the team that were driving in the nails. It's a testament to Sharon's design that seven years after we moved in, we're still in love with our house."

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