

IT'S HIP TO BE SQUARE



by Chris White

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Huey Lewis was a kind of working class rock singer who played with a variety of musicians in the San Francisco area, toiling in bars in semi-obscurity until he splashed into MTV as one of the “adults” of the 1980’s pop scene in his Wayfarer sunglasses and signature suits that he sported with t-shirts. In some ways, Lewis played the “straight man” of the day, the regular Joe amid the iconic and rarified talents of Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, and Prince; it’s no mistake that one of his subsequent hits was 1986’s “Hip To Be Square.” Study the lyrics on that poppy anthem, and the irony is easy enough to detect, but on the surface, the song appeared light, safe, and, for lack of a better word, perfectly square — easily digestible, like one of those lemon custard treats that always seem to come in that four-sided shape, all innocently sweet and dusted in wholesome powdered sugar. “Hip To Be Square” topped out at number 3 on the charts, but like other Lewis hits, it was a perfect encapsulation of a genre while simultaneously hiding a playful kind of subversion and gentle satire of its musical era. Seapine Gables, a new home by Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders (PSD) bears more than a little in common with “Hip To Be Square.”

First of all, the home is square. And second, it’s hip as all heck — only its roof has eight gables rather than a, pardon the pun, “hip” on top. The house is hip as in cool, but in a somewhat understated way; if you only looked at its site plan, you’d just see a square slightly off the vertical center of a rectangular lot, a box set between a road and the water. The plan looks neat and simple, like a Huey Lewis suit, but the final three-dimensional product, the actual home in which a family moves about and lives, offers the classical cool of those Wayfarer sunglasses and belies a complexity and transcendence of its four apparently equal sides.

PSD Design Principal John DaSilva and his architectural team developed a plan for Seapine Gables that would capitalize upon the advantages of the square and bolster the shape with further symmetry while incorporating elements that would transcend those very confines. “It’s not a huge site,” DaSilva explains, of the 3,665ft² house. “The square footprint is the most efficient plan — other than circular, which is impractical — it affords the most volume per square foot.” It also enabled the team to effectively hide the garage in a corner. They placed the garage doors on the left side of the house; from the front, one sees only a pair of windows, in symmetry with those on the opposite side of the home’s main entrance. DaSilva notes, “The two-car garage is the biggest space in the house; the square footprint allows it to be articulated as a part of the home. There’s no difference in articulation between this space and the downstairs bedroom.” The house is set on a quiet peninsula, on a lollipop lane, so when people drive from town through the neighborhood, they leave it on their left before looping around. It would



Previous page: Stout columns, oversized windows and shutters, and wide rake boards make a traditional house friendly and less formal. This page: Paradise enhanced—free-form pool, waterfalls, small boat harbor, and a story-book sky set the scene for a perfect Cape escape.

have been easy enough to run the driveway directly from the road to the garage, but instead the owners first pass their house, then turn in and follow the driveway past it again before turning the corner and ducking into the garage around the far side. This allows them to savor their home rather than simply return to it. Says DaSilva, “You’re engaging with the front of the house.” With a parking space for guests and delivery vehicles directly in line with the main entryway, there’s no need to even know a garage exists. It’s an effective disguise that further emphasizes the formal parameters of the footprint. The layout of the walkways — built with variegated blue stone surrounded by granite — reinforces these lines, as well, with two square “landings” flanking a rectangular one that previews the front entry porch. PSD designed the home so that it would fit in appropriately with other houses in its neighborhood, especially from the street, so it includes elements that one sees in full Capes and classical buildings without pigeonholing itself into a particular type. The use of an American foursquare element was also important. “This allowed us to give every room at least two exposures to the sun,” says DaSilva. “These multiple exposures cut glare and lengthen the times of day with direct sunlight. They help the rooms feel more open and airy.”

While PSD mined the square for all of its advantages, the firm also worked to de-emphasize the home’s formality and to creatively de-boxify its lines and appearance. In fact, it’s unlikely that a visitor would have any awareness

Top: The kitchen, by Classic Kitchens & Interiors, sits across a screen wall from the living space—open enough for socializing but closed enough to imply separation. Middle: Water view, fire, and classic movies in a cozy but accommodating living space. Bottom: The screened-in-porch is another room—part interior and part exterior.





Top and left: The master suite has a spectacular view with access to a balcony just big enough for a couple to retreat.

of its basic building block shape. The most dramatic de-cubing device is the way PSD set the second storey back from the first, so the front of the home features two large gables conjoined by the gently sloping roof of the entry porch. “This brings the scale down, rather than having a two-storey facade,” says DaSilva. A third gable rises over a large picture window centered above the porch, further fracturing the square footprint. Two pairs of columns rise on the sides of the porch, but they serve an atypical function. DaSilva explains, “They are traditional and round but intentionally overscaled to deformatize them. When they are robust like this, they become more endearing, more playful. I want to give them a hug; when it’s a spindly column, it’s not quite as friendly. They’re ‘correct’ in terms of being classical, but they feel like they are jostling for attention.” In a similar vein, the entrance itself lies tucked into the back right corner of the porch; a pair of windows occupies the space where the door normally would go. “This was in part a planned maneuver to accommodate the size of the garage,” says DaSilva, “but, like the columns, it deformatizes the house by providing something a little unexpected. This is clearly still the entrance but the actual door is not revealed until you get to the porch.” PSD also applied a deformatizing approach to the shutters and windows. They provide symmetry and also imply squareness, but they are fully functional, too. That it’s unlikely the owners will ever choose to close them is beside the point, which is that they’re scaled correctly. They’re also nearly touching their neighbors. “This is the result of wanting windows that would be as big as possible,” says DaSilva. “All the windows on the front and side are six-lite windows with bigger and bolder muntins that reference traditional window grids. The shutters’ louvre blades are overscaled, too, making them more playful.” On a few tiny windows there’s only one shutter, which if closed would cover the entire glass surface. Taken individually, these create a break with the symmetry, but taken as a whole, they also line up perfectly, like



The regular rectangle that defines the house footprint is evident at the southeast corner. The roof, chimney, and bracketed hood roof over the patio doors, however, don’t follow a simple box geometry—they add just the right amount of complexity to make it interesting and fun.

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bookends at either side of the house. Each side of Seapine Gables has its own character, features, and gables. On the left side, the gabled garage gives way to another gable that peaks above the mudroom and screened porch, on the water-facing corner. An archway connects these two sections on the ground level, and an outdoor shower stands out, marking the approximate midpoint of this side of the home. The water-facing side of the house offers perhaps the most dramatic contrast with the front, in part because the concerns about scale are different. “People perceive this side of the house from out on the water,” says DaSilva, “so we could build the full two storeys and allow for nearly continuous windows.” Another gable with a screen wall rises above the second floor balcony — accessed from the hallway and directly from the guest and master bedrooms — and a hood roof shields three sets of double doors on the ground level. The windows on the water side have large undivided panes but, DaSilva notes, “there are little referential grids at the top” that connect them thematically with the home’s other windows. The fourth side of the house is the least complex with bulkhead basement doors and a chimney bisecting the gables over the living area and bedrooms. A freeform pool burbling from two waterfalls abuts this side of the home.

Throughout the home, DaSilva points out, “subtle details make things a little different and a little more special.” For instance, the interior of Seapine Gables circulates around another square, a central switchback staircase that rises from the finished basement, up past the living area to the bedrooms of the second floor. A large, spherical pendant lamp hangs from the ceiling above the staircase and aptly conveys a sense of rotation, of movement. Back on the ground floor, the front door opens to a view of the water, directly at the end of the hallway, and the interior of the screened porch is finished with smooth cedar boards rather than the shingles of the exterior. This was deliberate to signal the hybrid nature of this transitional space. At the



It is hip to be round too, when it comes to ideal arrangements for al-fresco socializing at the water’s edge.

kitchen, DaSilva notes, “the screen wall implies separation but does nothing to impede socializing. This allows the family to live within an open floor plan while avoiding a vast feeling.” The v-groove in the screen wall is used almost like wallpaper, he says, which is “more contemporary, more consistent with its actual materials.” Likewise, the molding for the mantle projects only forward rather than out to the sides, another nod to the traditional but a statement about its “own era.” While the home is traditional in many respects, DaSilva concludes, “it’s detailed appropriately to the materials and methods of today.”

design, but the firm bears less in common with Huey Lewis than it does with more visionary talents such as Prince or David Bowie. One reason for their platinum-level success is that they do everything in house, as it were. “We are a full-fledged high design architecture firm,” states DaSilva, “and also craft-oriented custom builders.” In this Lower Cape home, they have scored another resounding hit by transcending the square, and they’ve done so by pulling up in a little red corvette and proclaiming, “Let’s Dance.”

Chris White is a contributing writer of Cape Cod Life Publications.

Ultimately, PSD created Seapines Gables and delivered both classical cool and refined hipness to its square

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