

# Living Where Land Meets Sea

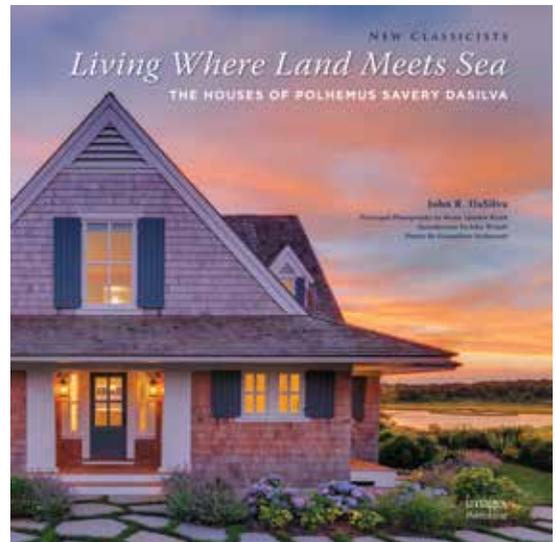
## THE HOUSES OF POLHEMUS SAVERY DASILVA

By John R. DaSilva

*The Images Publishing Group, 2016*

A BOOK REVIEW BY LAUREL KORNHISER

INNOVATIVE ARCHITECTURE gives pause for thought. It arises from the ground of tradition while multiplying perspectives and notions of the possible. *Living Where Land Meets Sea*, written by architect and author John DaSilva and published by the Images Publishing Group, opens the doors to thirty-five homes—both new and renovated, mostly on Cape Cod, a few as far away as the South Coast of Rhode Island—designed and built by Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders (PSD). In this book, the third book to exclusively showcase the firm’s work, what is revealed is that their architecture, while it realizes clients’ dreams and responds sensitively to its sites, is itself dynamic, three-dimensional art. It is sculptural as well as spatial, faceted as well as functional, literal and figurative. And like all meaningful art, these designs lend themselves to multiple interpretations.



ALL PHOTOS BY BRIAN VAN DEN BRINK

*Living Where Land Meets Sea* tells the love story of shore and sea and of shore-bound humans and the waters they are drawn to. The book is organized to explore the different ways that land meets water—by the harbor, from atop a bluff, at the edge of a kettle pond, in the country. Principal photographer Brian Vanden Brink animates these homes: fires are lit, coffee has been poured, televisions are tuned in to classic movies, dogs await acknowledgment, and we are invited to experience the artistry, thoughtfulness, and playfulness of these designs.

As with earlier books by PSD, the title of this one shares a principal phrase with a book that influenced the architects: *Where Land Meets Sea: The Tide Line of Cape Cod* (1954), by Clare Leighton, an English-American artist, writer, and illustrator. DaSilva discusses her work in his foreword:

She depicted the beauty and complexity of local scenes, objects, and people in deceptively simple graphic terms; curves are voluptuous, contrast between black and white shapes are maximized, large and small scales play off one another. . . . Her evocative text and artwork celebrates the old, the new, and the interaction between them—capturing but not mimicking natural beauty and eclectic spirit. The shell pattern on the end papers of this book is based on a pattern she designed, and her written and graphic work inspires us to choose creative goals similar to hers.

DaSilva’s introductions to each project are brief but telling, orienting us to the general lay of the land and calling our attention to the signature architectural details: a recurring motif, a lighthouse framed off center, the abstract sculptural quality

of a column. Just as painters flock to the Cape for the extraordinary light, architects chase light and channel its chameleon nature through a wide variety of apertures, such as clerestory windows, a small triangular skylight, eyebrow openings, arches, and French doors. Having written a previous book on PSD’s adaptation and variation of the Shingle Style (*Shingled Houses in the Summer Sun*, 2011), DaSilva is adept at adding up all of these elements with a sense of historical detail and imagination, as in this excerpt from his introduction for the home called “Bend in the River”:

Some of the best historic Shingle Style houses appear as if they were wrapped with shingle membranes cut like wallpaper to reveal openings. They also appear light, like balloons about to float away yet still tethered to the ground. These classic shingle-style ideas were combined with Cape Cod vernacular—weathered gray shingles and white columns and window sash. The house appears to billow up with the southwest breeze, ever-present on the site in the summertime.

This architecture pays homage to all of the vernacular styles found on Cape Cod, from the fisherman’s shack to Gothic Revival, quintessential Cape to experimental Modernist, but also borrows elements from these various traditions and synthesizes them, often in one home, in ways that are fresh, not slavish, surprising, not constrictive. A few of the projects reach further afield for inspiration, such as Cotchpicicut, whose design draws from the mountains as well as the sea, interior West and East Coast, Europe and the United States, to become, as DaSilva describes it, “a grand woodland cottage that, while



Cotchpinicut reflects varied architectural influences, including Gothic Revival churches and the Shingle Style.

atypical on Cape Cod, still sat comfortably on [the clients'] site specifically and in the region generally. They wanted a unique house in which their eclectic collections, including Modernist paintings, artist-designed furniture and lighting, art glass, and hunting trophies could coexist." Even when the style is "typical," there's an architectural twist, such as exaggerating details of the Cape-style home or making it feel a bit more urbane for year-round living.

Words that recur throughout the book define many of the design details: *playful*, *whimsical*, and *fanciful*. While this is serious architecture, clients are also willing to trust the imaginations of an integrated architecture and construction team. The interior styles featured in the book also disrupt traditional notions of what belongs in a seaside cottage. Clients and interior designers interpret the sites and the architecture through color palettes, textures, distinctive lighting, arrangement of furnishings, and the selection of fine art itself, with paintings by renowned artists such as Paul Resika, David Witbeck, Arthur Cohen, Wolf Kahn, Mercedes Matter, and John Ferren, as well as sculptures by Frank Lloyd Wright and Chatham's Tom Odell. Artists and artisans in other mediums add their distinctive accents, as in the soapstone sink carved by Tim Dibble of Brewster, the

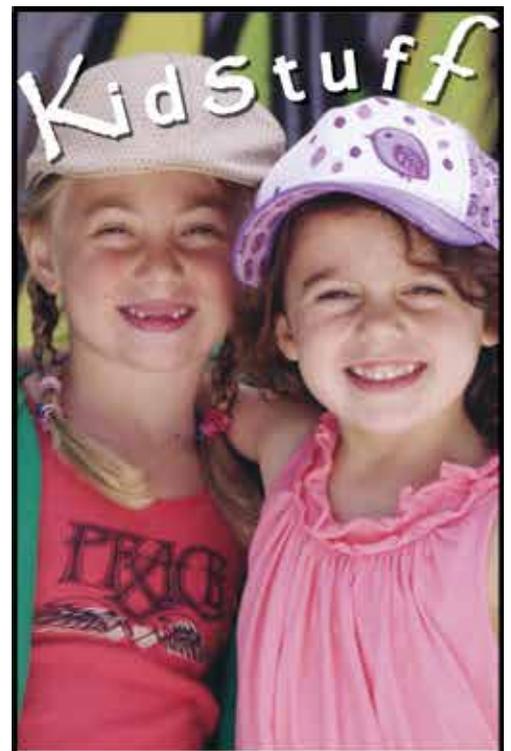
stone artistry of master mason Kenneth Higgins of Eastham, or the glassworks of Donna Mahan of North Truro and Christie Andresen of Provincetown. Architectural details, wall color, and art create their own unique composition.

The text in this book gives perspective to the images, including an illuminating introduction by architect and writer John Wriedt, in which he reflects on the enchantments of the sea, the theoretical underpinnings of PSD's work, and the innovations they bring to the field of architecture. Here he discusses the house called Ridge Rider:

The house sits on a high bluff, but only hints of the views are revealed during the approach. Like a tree, the narrow lower part of the house that contains the entrance is solid, while the second floor is articulated with windows separated by narrow mullions that emulate branches. . . . The most compelling vista, though, is the one from the side of the house opposite the entry: the tip of Cape Cod—Provincetown, the Pilgrim Monument leaving no doubt about the identification—lies visible beyond a stretch of forested hills and the bay. . . . These details suggest another reading of the building: a ship with a solid hull surmounted by rigging and shortened



Ridge Rider, in Truro, is set on a ridge that is one of the highest points on Cape Cod.



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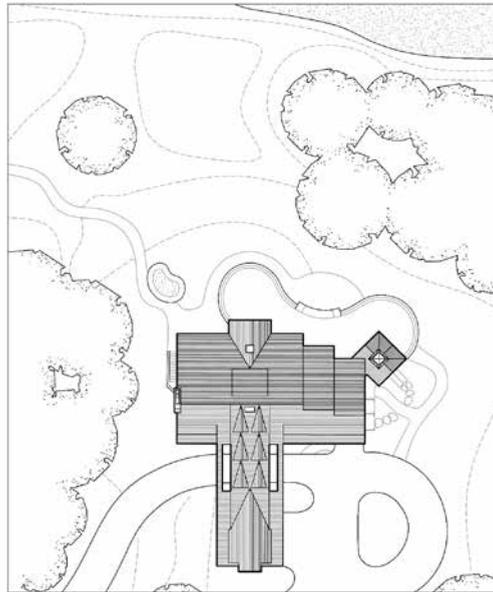


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The first-floor floor plan and topographical drawing for Cotchpicicut

sails riding the crest of a swell. What makes this reading so compelling is that the signs that point to it are not too literal. Tree or ship? Both-and.

In the concluding chapter, DaSilva reflects on sustainable building; the delicate balance between a space, the scale of the home that occupies it, and the human activity it satisfies; and the unique experience of living by the sea:

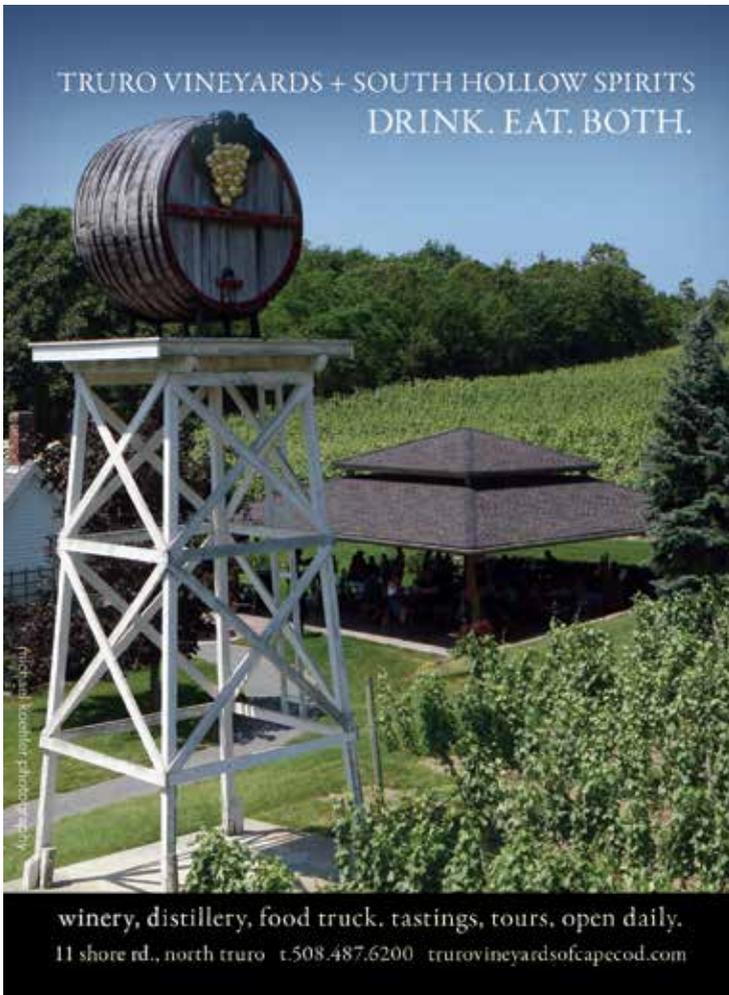
Where land meets sea is at once always the same, yet ever-changing. Here a complex environment exists where multiple natural systems, the passage of time, and the presence of human activity meet and often compete. There is unfathomable energy and sublime beauty that both excites and frightens. Geological and climatic change are evident in shifting sands, erosion, accretion, and ponds and marshes that form, disappear, and re-form, sometimes

during the course of a single storm. . . . Movements, sounds, and even emotions seem more intense.

What is uniquely enchanting about this book is the delightful and surprising poetry of GennaRose Nethercott, a Boston-based poet, performer, and folklorist. DaSilva discusses her poems, which were inspired specifically by his firm's work and ideas: "Engaging with a consistent creative partner in this book takes the conversation one step further. . . . [Nethercott's] poetry offers a new way to look at what we hope is a poetic architecture that translates the magic of the region into built form and space."

These nine poems, used to open each chapter, capture the essence of life near the water. They often tell the tale from the perspective of the house itself, which becomes a living entity in her writing, as in her introductory prose poem for the chapter titled "On the Harbor":

Readying for the party, the houses put on their finery. Baroque styling. A shark-tooth crown. A hat for a roof, or a roof for a hat. One drapes the sunset over its shoulders. . . . Another wears a sea-salt coat, filigreed with pearl and catfish whiskers. . . .



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Ridge Rider's living room features a rustic fireplace and a painting (*Vessels #7*) by Provincetown artist Paul Resika.

Soon the dance floor has become thunder.  
Oh, what revelry. What a display. Even the  
sun has lent itself as an earring, tucked into  
the tender lobe of a harborside window.

Nethercott's poems, like the homes featured in the book, reflect the traditions of the sea, retranslating them through details of the homes as well as the lives of people. Her poem about living on a kettle pond celebrates geological creations and appreciates the conversation these designs have with the past: "Forgive / the walls their conversations, designed // like we are designed—with the urge / to tell & retell what came before." The prose poem that opens the chapter "On a Salt Pond" pays homage to the siren and her seductive song: "her story became a fever, contagious, eager to be told & told again. too big to fit in her throat, she draped her tale over the house like a shroud." In her poem for homes "On a Bluff," Nethercott reminds us that our homes reflect us: "Inhabit a space and it becomes a mirror; festooned with vines / of your hair, your pulse erupting from the opening and closing // of cabinets, light passing among rooms like your breath."

But as the 376 pages of this book reveal, homes do not simply reflect those who inhabit them and transform them through daily living. They reflect the traditions from which their forms have sprung, the creative and innovative minds that plan, shape, and play with those forms, as well as the hands and minds of all who put wood to lathe, sand to fire, weathervane figures to copper, paint to walls and canvases, and, in the beginning, designs to paper.

This book exposes and celebrates the layers of creation that go into the inspired building of beautiful homes, as stunning as their settings, built by expert hands to delight and inspire. Perhaps Nethercott's "Epilogue" best brings

this sense of beauty and mystery to light in her naming of houses:

- name this house Almost Chaos
- name this house Lore
- name this house Port & Starboard
- name this house Blue Heron Rising over the Waxing Gibbous Moon
- name this house Shape Shifter
- name this house Runaway
- name this house Boiling Out From the Body, Eruption
- name this house Ripened Plum
- name this house East, West, North, South
- name this house Spark Swallow, Lantern Throat, Glowworm
- name this house Ours
- name this house Storyteller
- name this house Have You Walked in the Belly of a Whale
- name this house Have You Slept in a Room Built of Light
- name this house Have You Found What You Were Looking For
- name this house I Remember
- name this house Wheat Grasses Kneeling in the Golden Field
- name this house Yes
- name this house Question
- name this house Companion, Cradling Us Beside the Waves of the Endless Sea



*LAUREL KORNHISER is a freelance writer who has admired the architecture of Polhemus Savery DaSilva since she first encountered it when an editor of Cape Cod Home. She is a professor of English at Quincy College and, after four decades on the Cape, recently moved just over the bridge to Plymouth.*



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