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Changing Tides

Polhemus Savery DaSilva
transform their award-winning,
iconic project “Riptide” for a new
chapter with new homeowners.

Story by Chris White
Photography by Brian Vanden Brink



For most of Chatham’s history, rip currents have meant striped bass. A plethora of stripers. However, in the 1970’s, stocks of this vaunted gamefish plummeted, which led to size limitations and regulations that conservationists and fishermen hoped would restore the species’ numbers. To many anglers, especially younger ones, the striper was verging on mythical status, an amazing creature that could no longer be found, like a dragon or a griffin. However, the conservation measures actually worked. Over the next twenty years, the striper population grew, and the rips off Chatham’s coast once again teem with schoolies and lunkers feasting upon squid rushing through the currents and chop. In a time when much news of the environment has been grim, the restoration of the striper, and the revitalization of Chatham’s rips, have been bright spots. Each year, the islands and shoals move a little, the sands shift, and the channels reassert themselves in new configurations, but the rips reemerge, and the stripers flock to them in June and July in an incredible example of rebirth.

Riptide, an iconic home on Shore Road, shares more in common than just its name with the story of the local fish and the rips. It, too, has long been a fixture of Chatham’s landscape; a 2021 BRICC Award Winner, this iconic home, like Chatham’s currents, has undergone a number of significant shifts. Since its original construction, various owners have completed three major renovations; the most recent is the most magnificent and vibrant yet. The integrated architecture and construction firm of Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders (PSD) are responsible for the two most recent reconsiderations of Riptide. Both times the thoughtful professionals took care to preserve the home’s historic appearance while updating its features in ways that have allowed its owners to optimize their own life in the home’s location upon Chatham Harbor.

Aaron Polhemus, owner and CEO of PSD, says, “This is an interesting house in that it was initially constructed in the first decade of the 20th century; it started as a rustic bungalow style house.” In the 1930’s, in keeping with some ideas arising from the “myth” of an “Old Cape Cod,” the then owners converted the bungalow—with its wide overhanging roofs and craftsman styling—to a “substantial Colonial Revival house,” according to PSD. “They even used fireplace surrounds and paneling from another colonial era house.” It was during this rebuild that the home took on the name Riptide, and for the next eighty years or so, it remained largely unchanged. Polhemus Savery DaSilva won a BRICC award in 2016 for their initial renovation of Riptide, but that renovation involved very few changes to the exterior. They created a new arbor and updated the widow’s walk, but the bulk of the renovation focused on revamping the interior to fit the needs of its new family. Several years later, PSD would return, this time in collaboration with Riptide’s newest owners. Although PSD had made major progress for the 2016 award-winner, the plan was to take things to another level, to reach for higher heights and truly open up the home to its potential. In order to make this a reality, however, the firm would need to make a few key changes to the home’s exterior, as well.



Riptide takes full advantage of the views of Chatham Harbor.



PSD created a new front entrance, which was central to the new owners' vision, along with a clear view right out to the water when walking in the front door. Previously, there were two side entrances to the home, but no front entry.

Central to the new owners' vision for Riptide was change to the roadside entryway, which had always been tucked around the side. In fact, there were two side entrances: a door leading into the mudroom on the north side of the house and the main entry on the south side. Neither did the iconic home any justice. The owners wanted "to be able to walk in the front door and have a clear view right out to the water." To fulfill this request, PSD would need to create both an entrance and a hallway that opens from the west and faces east. Design Principal John DaSilva explains, "The new entrance solved a design problem. Because there was no front entrance, Riptide didn't address the street or welcome people." PSD designed a porch with four columns and a fanlight that DaSilva describes as "abstracted and overscaled" in order to create emphasis and warmth. "At night, this becomes a lantern," he says, "providing the welcome that the previous house lacked." Reconfiguring Riptide's front door to open directly to the sea was a task more complex than simply adding a "signboard" of a porch, however. The interior would also need to change, and to maximize light, further exterior adjustments were in order. Just above the old entrance, on the home's south face, are the home's archetypal repeating dormers. "These are an iconic feature of the house," notes DaSilva, "very visible from the road." It was important to preserve this design element, but PSD actually took the existing dormers down, then rebuilt them in a way that better fits with the new entrance, while providing more light and headroom to the interior.

While the entryway invites the outside world to Riptide, a radical reinvention of the interior expands the entire home's living experience in relation to the sea. Rather than walk in from the side, into a short hallway facing a straight staircase, residents and visitors now step through the porch and open the front door of the home to a



A welcoming front porch glows like a lantern at night and a fan light shaped screen wall gives the entry the scale necessary to have impact across the large front yard.

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grand foyer in which an elegant, curved staircase with substantial banisters rises up into the light created by the changes to the aforementioned dormers. The stair's blue carpet with a pattern of large white stars, evokes a sense of ascension to the heavens. To fulfill the owners' desire for an unobscured view from doorway to sea, PSD crafted a circulation space that passes through a columned arcade before continuing in spirit through a four-paned window, across the sloping lawn to Chatham Harbor and beyond to North Beach Island and the Atlantic. It's as though the doorway opens like C.S. Lewis' mythical wardrobe into an entirely new world. The expansiveness of PSD's new renovation of Riptide is far from merely metaphorical, however. The visual path to the ocean now bisects the kitchen and a new family room, the latter of which occupies an entirely new addition to the home. This new addition exclusively houses the family

room; because there's no bedroom directly above, PSD created lofty ceilings that open the space upwards in this southeastern corner of the home. Polhemus says, "We were able to add this two-story space—the house before was limited in its ceiling height—so having such a comfortable room with a high ceiling and the detailing, it just really changed the whole dynamic." The team also opened up the whole of Riptide's sea-facing side by creating three new gables, the first of which rises from the family room. The gables step back from the water as one moves from south to north, thereby breaking up what could have been a rather boring, straight wall as well as creating room for side windows at the northern corners of the family room, kitchen, and dining room. "Even a small window brings in more light," says DaSilva, "And the diagonal views are just as interesting, if not more, as the straight out views—this allows more parts of the house to participate in light and view."



An entirely new two-story family room maximizes the views and light, as well as accommodates the client's large family.



Above: An elegant new curved staircase with substantial banisters rises up in the new grand foyer. Below: The homeowners wanted a sensibility that they described as ‘part Beacon Hill, part Cape Cod beach house.’ Interior designer, SLC Interiors worked to achieve this with the décor.



In many contemporary homes, openness and light are essential to the living experience, but so, too, is a free-flowing connection between the kitchen and family space. Modern kitchens are often the focal points of a downstairs interior. They tend to produce social gravity, and as such, they impart an emotional warmth to abutting family rooms. The philosophical changes around kitchens are profound, and some of the most obvious in the evolution of home design. As was the case in many colonial revival houses, Riptide’s original kitchen was something of a closet, walled off and out of sight, its view obscured by the physical barrier of a pantry.

In PSD’s first remodel, the firm had opened it up to a modest family room with a view, but its location had not moved from the rear portion of the home. For the current configuration, they scrapped the original plan; a guest bedroom now inhabits that space, while the new kitchen occupies a seat of honor between the dining and the family room addition. The effect of the shift is that the kitchen and family room now form a partnership, a kind of “living wing” of the home with direct access to its stunning views. On the north side of the home, PSD worked similar magic. The team reconfigured the old family room into a screened porch on the ground floor, leaving the shape of the existing bay window. This shape rises up into the primary bedroom on the second story, where they employed another key move to maximize light. “We took out the ceiling,” says DaSilva, “extended the room up into what had been the attic and added a dormer. In the sitting room of the primary suite, situated behind the wall where the bed sits, we also opened the ceiling, inserted a dormer, and created a light cove and a window seat.”

Another goal of the Riptide renovation was to build, Polhemus recalls, “on the concept of Beacon Hill meets Cape Cod. There’s consistency throughout the house



The kitchen was moved to a more central location and is partly screened by a colonnade. Classic Kitchens & Interiors served as the kitchen designer for the project.

with the color palette, much of the furniture is antique or antique-looking, and spaces such as the dining room are more formal.” In keeping with this theme of formality, but somewhat ironically in terms of the more visible changes, Polhemus says that some of the most satisfying elements of the renovation took place out of sight. “We were able to upgrade the performance of the home,” he explains, “by modernizing systems, insulation, and the envelope. This is important because older homes have character, and are beloved, but they’re often inefficient. The air quality and climate control—we wanted to elevate them to current standards. We also added LED lighting and dramatically improved Riptide from an efficiency perspective.”

While the physical transformation of Riptide is stunning, extensive, and makes practical sense for the new owners, the renovation

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Above: In the primary bedroom, the flat ceiling was replaced by a soaring cathedral ceiling.
Below: The character of the back of the house is more dynamic now. A custom designed eagle weathervane is crafted of gold leafed copper.



process and the relationship that the PSD team has developed with its clients has been perhaps equally rewarding. PSD offers something of an “all-inclusive” experience, as they design, build, and even take care of the landscape architecture and ongoing maintenance. Of PSD’s collaboration with Riptide’s owners, Polhemus says, “It’s been really enjoyable. As much as we turn over a project, it’s not like we’re done. We deliver, but we’re still taking care of it going forward.” John DaSilva shares a similar sentiment, recalling, “It’s been wonderful. When the family saw their new home for the first time, finished, they were so excited; it was one of the highlights of my career. Three generations of family members came that day, and one of the adult children had made Riptide t-shirts. The little kids were climbing on the window seats—it really made my day, made my year, to see them so excited.” In fact, the family had had its eye on Riptide for some time and seized the opportunity when the previous owners decided to sell it. “They had fallen in love with the Cape about fifteen years ago,” recalls Polhemus, “and had bought a different house nearby. They’ve kept the original house, too, for their extended family and guests to use.”

The owners have described their working relationship with PSD as “collaborative, with constant open transparent communication. PSD will take you from dream and ideation to high quality attention-to-detail finished product.” The owners are also delighted by the way PSD could maintain the historic qualities of Riptide, they say, “but then modify and reconfigure it in ways that would be unique to us.” The summer of 2022 will be the family’s third in Riptide, and the family remains happy in their home. “We love Chatham,” proclaim the owners. “We love the Cape, and Riptide is just a jewel.” 🏠

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