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# CAPE COD HOME

MARTHA'S VINEYARD & NANTUCKET

## *Waterfront Living*



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# THE BEAUTY



By Allyson Plessner  
Photography by Dan Cutrona

# OF BALANCE

THIS INNOVATIVE HOME IN WEST DENNIS IS ALL ABOUT FINDING THE BALANCE BETWEEN SUSTAINABILITY AND THOUGHTFUL DESIGN. A3 ARCHITECTS AND MCPHEE ASSOCIATES COLLABORATE TO CREATE A HOME THAT WILL LAST THROUGH GENERATIONS OF FAMILY ADVENTURES ON CAPE COD.



**ON CAPE COD**, building homes to last a lifetime—through generations of sandy feet running excitedly from room to room and innumerable summer cookouts with neighbors and friends—is a purpose of the highest order. For a young family of five in West Dennis, imbuing their colorful spirit into a home that will yield lifelong summer memories was exactly the goal when they finally found the perfect spot to build a family vacation home.

“Once I found the property, I walked past a nearby beachfront project that McPhee was building,” the homeowner explains. “I asked if I could see the inside, and they were great about letting me check it out. I could not believe the quality of their work, particularly the finish; it was perfect. So when I started to work with A3 Architects I specifically asked to have McPhee included in the consideration of builders.”

As a second-generation building and design firm, Dennis-based McPhee Associates of Cape Cod has their finger on the pulse of Cape Cod, crafting custom homes to last a lifetime...or several. They have built lasting relationships with local architects to create buildings that are thoughtful representations of a homeowner’s desires and lifestyle.

From beginning to end, the team at McPhee uses their vast expertise to bring to reality the goals of a homeowner, and with this project, the desire was to create a sustainable and modern space for lifelong memories and colorful adventures.

“It was a very exciting project and a bit of a departure from the traditional Cape style homes we see so often,” says Rob McPhee, president of McPhee Associates. For a company with almost 50 years of experience, that’s saying something. The home itself is a spectacular example of collaboration between builder, architect, and homeowner. “It was really rewarding for us to work with the owner and architect to bring their visions to reality with clean finishes and style,” says Sue Contonio, vice president at McPhee and project coordinator. “Seeing the unique spaces, such as the children’s nook under the stairs, come to life, is personally one of my favorite parts of this project.”

McPhee’s commitment to quality and the overall success of the project resonated with the homeowner as well. “McPhee’s quality is indisputable, but another important element is how well they communicate. I knew I couldn’t be on the Cape for meetings on a frequent and regular basis, so I needed someone who could really support





me through the whole process and McPhee was absolutely fantastic about that. They communicated and consulted on every detail.”

With views of Nantucket Sound from the front of the house, and a charming pond to the back, Alison Alessi, of A3 Architects, was particularly focused on working with the client to design a seamless transition between indoor and outdoor spaces, capturing the effervescent scenery that is so intrinsic to Cape Cod. A variety of covered porches and roof decks facing a multitude of directions makes for a variety of incredible spaces to enjoy classic Cape Cod views, rain or shine. Structurally, the collection of decks create a home that is beautifully intricate—and statuesque. Due to the home’s location in a flood zone, the structure is organized vertically and sits some six feet above grade.

“This home was definitely a challenge, but an exciting one,” notes Alessi. “The site, which is somewhat limited at around 11,500 square feet, required conservation and zoning approval while also needing to be built above the flood plain. All of these sometimes competing requirements are design opportunities.” For example, having to build vertically gave the A3 team the opportunity to emphasize one of the most essential aspects of such a towering home: the stairwell.

“The stair is a light modern open rise stair, and the stair tower itself bumps out from the main massing of the house itself,” describes Alessi. “The stair tower has lots of oversized windows bringing light into the home and providing a variety of interesting views that frame the beach beyond.” The vertical orientation was important to achieving these desirable views, which only get better the farther up you ascend the two-and-a-half stories, and on a bright summer day, the home is flooded with light. At dusk, elegant recessed lighting illuminates the stairs and reflects off of the modern stainless











steel cable railing. “The floating stair finished with custom railing details immediately communicates the clean, contemporary aesthetic,” says Contonio. “The homeowner really wanted a modern clean style that emphasizes the views and location.”

“The home is unique in the sense that it’s not what you would expect on the Cape...but it’s still at the beach,” adds McPhee. “We have collaborated with A3 in the past, and this project really stands out. Lines of communication were open, problem solving was more about opportunity identification and the creative spirit was evident in everyone’s approach.”

One of the most standout aspects of this home is that it is 100% net zero, meaning that it’s designed to produce as much energy as it uses. “There is a +/- 8640 kWh photovoltaic system on the roof by E2 Solar. It’s hard to see but it’s there!” enthuses Alessi. “We also designed the whole house with electric systems since the PV panels produce electricity.” For 20 years Alessi has focused her architectural expertise toward designing environmentally responsible homes, collaborating with clients on conceptualizing projects that are not only sleek and beautiful, but sustainable as well. Her designs are both insightful and responsible, so that families building lives and homes on Cape Cod can look forward to a lasting and vibrant future. For these West Dennis homeowners, Alessi’s eye for design and passion for sustainability made A3 the perfect pairing to McPhee.

“The mechanicals are all electric,” continues Alessi about the home, “and with enhanced insulation strategies and triple glazed windows we are able to reduce the mechanical loads enough so that the solar produces all that is needed.” The benefits of net zero design are clear. A 2019 report found that buildings and construction are responsible for just under 40% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Architects have a profound responsibility—and as Alessi likes to view it, opportunity—to work toward a greener future. Sustainable

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design comes in many forms, and even among net zero homes there are various ways to achieve the same end goal, but the expertise of a team like A3 is important for creating a home that is both durable and creative, as well as lasting and personable. And for a vivacious family of five, durability is key.

The homeowner explains how and why A3 was her architect of choice. “I knew that I wanted a modern home and I found A3 from searching for projects on the Cape. When I got in touch with Alison, I started to learn about net zero homes and it was clear, they were the right choice for what I was looking for: a modern aesthetic and sustainability.”

“Building a net zero home for us is about balance,” explains Alessi. “Balancing the energy used, of course, but also balancing the space. On the Cape you have these incredible opportunities to connect a home to the outdoors, but it’s important to also create spaces that are cozy and inviting even when it’s cold and rainy.” The homeowners, too, have a unique appreciation for balance, and worked well with Alessi and McPhee to create spaces that found the elusive line between sophistication and playfulness. “We loved their aesthetic and the blend of modern materials they chose,” says Alessi about working with the homeowners. “For example, more traditional wood accents and lap siding were mixed with more modern fiber cement panels to create a unique exterior.”

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Detailed accents like large doors and windows to capture dynamic, expansive views of sparkling Nantucket Sound; exterior folding doors; and wide plank flooring make the space feel thoughtful and complete. Colorful furnishings and elements—like the teal front door leading into the mudroom with deep navy geometric tiles—bring a spirited energy that complements the modern aesthetic. Under the stairs on the first floor is a unique play area. “Kids only!” laughs Alessi. The home is all at once contemporary yet retro (with accents of hot pink and detailed wallpapers); sleek yet bubbly (think contemporary chandeliers next to an electric blue couch); and structural yet seamless. It oozes personality, encouraging experiences and adventures to come, and above all, finds an almost intangible balance.

“My favorite part about our house is the way Alison has framed every view through every window, like an artist,” the homeowner states. Each window acts like a picture frame. She took the time to consider every opportunity in the design to be able to fully appreciate the views.”

“We wanted to make sure that the home was resilient and would last for many generations,” says Alessi. Especially with a vulnerable location along the beach and in a flood zone, finding that space between durability and creativity, inviting interiors and relaxing exteriors, and contemporary and coastal aesthetics was essential. It’s an undertaking that McPhee and A3 handled with an easy commitment to collaboration and teamwork. “I’m proud of my whole team,” says McPhee. “It’s not that they were stepping out of their comfort zone. Instead, it is like they had an opportunity to push the envelope to try something completely different and that was an invigorating experience for everyone.”

*Allyson Plessner is a frequent contributor to Cape Cod Life Publications*

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