



By FELICIA LOWENSTEIN NIVEN  
Photography by JOHN DIMAIO

THE BEST KIND OF LEARNING, THE KIND THAT REALLY STICKS WITH YOU, COMES WHEN YOU'RE DOING IT ON YOUR OWN. WHEN YOU'RE READY. AND MAYBE WHEN YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW YOU'RE DOING IT.

So explains architect Mark Asher of his passion for coastal homes, those classic structures that have framed the scenery ever since the first travelers journeyed to the Atlantic. For as much as Cape May has its signature Victorian homes, coastal towns up and down the Atlantic have theirs. Asher has been working to recreate that original elegance long before he ever knew that would be his mission.

"I was a Jersey shore kid. My family has always summered in Ocean City. As I got older, I traveled up and down the coast. I knew Cape May, Avalon, Stone Harbor and Longport. And at a pretty young age, I started to draw, really just as a hobby. I started to sketch old houses. I would go out on my bike after dinner and sit and look at old homes that I liked. I've always found it fascinating that I did it at all. Nobody told me to do it. Nobody else in my family drew. But I certainly learned from these coastal homes and I carry their images with me 35 years later."

Asher went on to study architecture formally at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. He then followed the classic pattern—working for different firms in the Philadelphia area, paying his dues. Then came the defining moment—the moment when he went out on his own.

"It was 16 years ago," recalled Asher. "The Ocean City Yacht Club hired me to renovate their building. It was an old building, a building I knew from my childhood, and the members all knew me. But they took a risk on a young guy. I went back and started drawing on those influences of the past, of that coastal vernacular that I knew and loved as a kid. And it turned out to be a great success.

"From there, the Avalon Yacht Club called because they needed a new building. The timing was incredible, right before the big real estate boom. I didn't set out to be a coastal architect but all of a sudden I had these projects under my belt and I was there."

# Classics BY THE SEA



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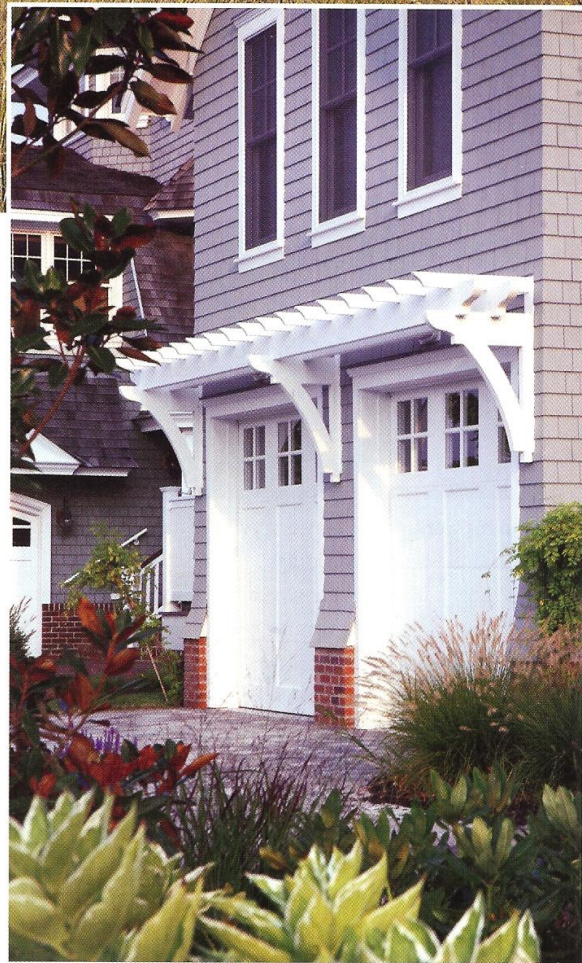
Today, Asher Architects builds homes and additions up and down the coast, from Cape May to Long Beach Island, N.J. But they've also traveled a bit further, as a request of clients who initially discovered them at the shore. You'll find Asher-designed homes in Maine, Virginia and Maryland.

Mark worked for a number of years on his own, but today, he has a staff of 8, five of whom are architects. Wife, Susan, serves as business manager. Rebecca Lauer is another lead architect.

"Everyone here has been here for awhile," Asher acknowledged, "so much so that we're all drawing and working in sync. We really breathe in and out together."

The distinctive style of Asher Architects has been described as New Urbanism. It's a departure from the enormous Tuscan manor house at the beach and a move toward more honest coastal buildings.

"Something happened in residential construction where people started to confuse their house with a Disneyland ride," Asher half-joked. "We build pretty good-sized homes, and smaller ones, too, but they seem to be a little quieter in their presentation to the street. They're happy to be background buildings as part of the fabric of the town rather than a screaming, 'hey look at me.'"





## CLASSICS BY THE SEA

That, too, is part of the New Urbanism, which refers not to the inner city but to the densely-packed East Coast towns in which Asher often works. They feature small gardens, courtyards, front porches, smaller streets, walk-a-bility and an old town 'feel.' It's much better suited to classic homes than big modern condominium complexes.

"This is not nostalgia," he explained. "but the idea that the house has some historical roots and a responsibility to the community as a whole. It's the idea that the community is larger than the house. As the homes start to fill in and you have two, three to a block, you get a more traditional pattern."

Asher is well versed in the history of the area and brings

words, homes shouldn't go out of style over the years.

"We want them to age well," he said, "and build some kind of memory of their own. Some of these homes are custom homes for a family. And the family will very often recognize that it's not just for them but for their kids and grandkids. That influences how you build. You're building for a longer haul and you know they're not going to tear it down in 15 years. It's a legacy."

It's an approach that has worked well for Asher Architects. Even in these tough economic times, the firm remains busy.

"It's been a success story if I might say it myself," he confessed. "Often the skill set it takes to get the job is different than the skills needed to do the job. We're successful in marrying the



much of it to his work. "Cape May is very well known for its architecture and its Victorian buildings," he said. "But the other towns had a really interesting coastal vernacular too. Their homes were up in the air to catch the summer breezes, with big wrap-around porches. They were shingle-style Victorian cottages with a lovely, simple aesthetic to them. So the inspiration is there."

Just because the homes aren't presented as mansions doesn't mean that Asher's homes aren't substantial. "A lot of these homes are big houses," he explained. "These are not a little sea shanty. The original homes in this area, too, were for an affluent population. These were the people from Philadelphia who could afford to get on a train and come here for the summer."

Asher aims for what he terms "stylistic neutrality." In other

two. The construction, the business, the design—we wear a lot of hats. But you have to accept that as the joy of the process. You have to enjoy the ride, and we do.

"We recognize it's a very personal thing we're doing," he continued. "We're involved in these clients' lives in a very intimate way and we take that responsibility very seriously. But you care about what you're doing and I think that translates. It's very hands-on, very passionate."

"I recognize the uniqueness of what we do and the great opportunity we have, where so many of these clients spin out into other clients, friends of friends and family. That is an incredible gift. It's hard and sometimes a high wire act but at the end of the day, I'm in the lives of fantastic people." ■