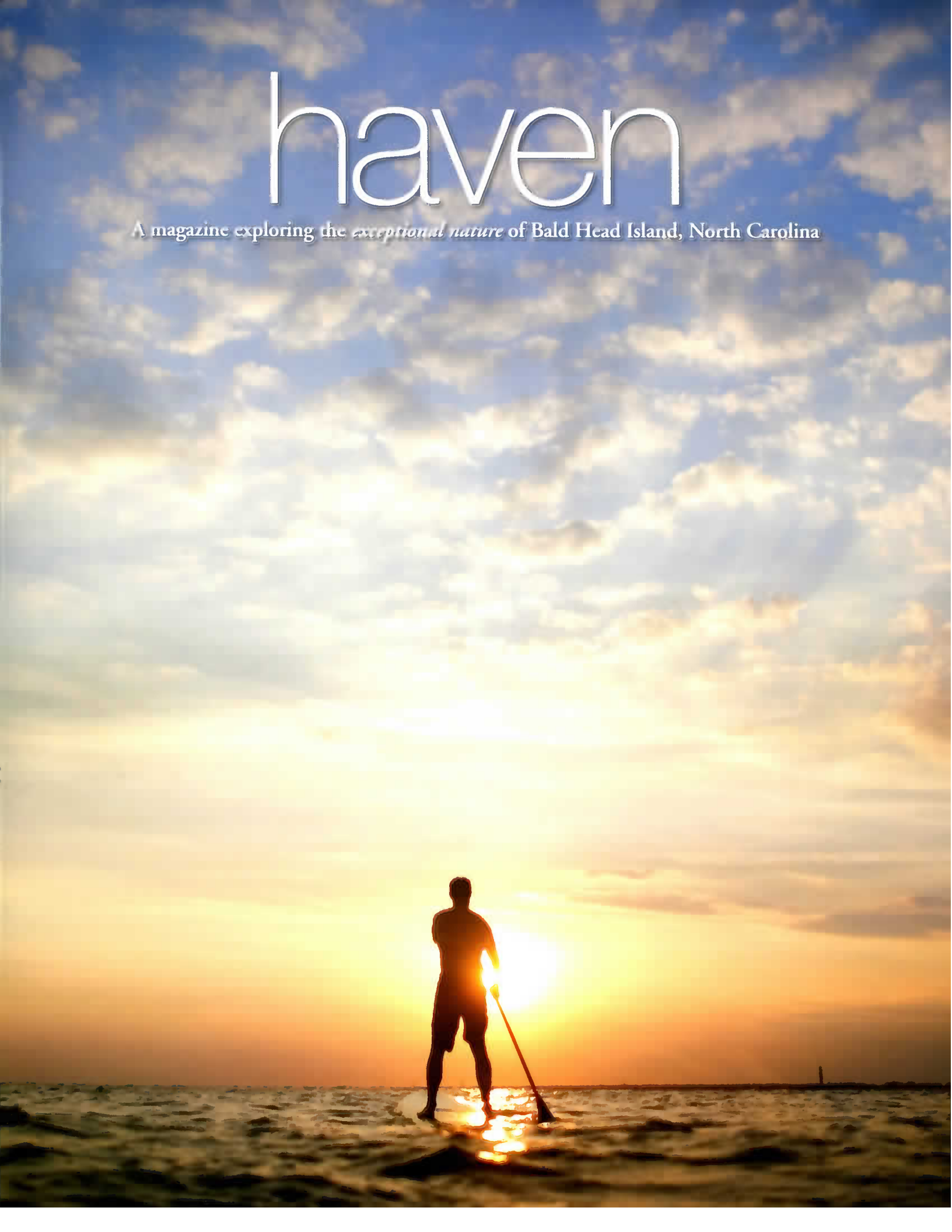
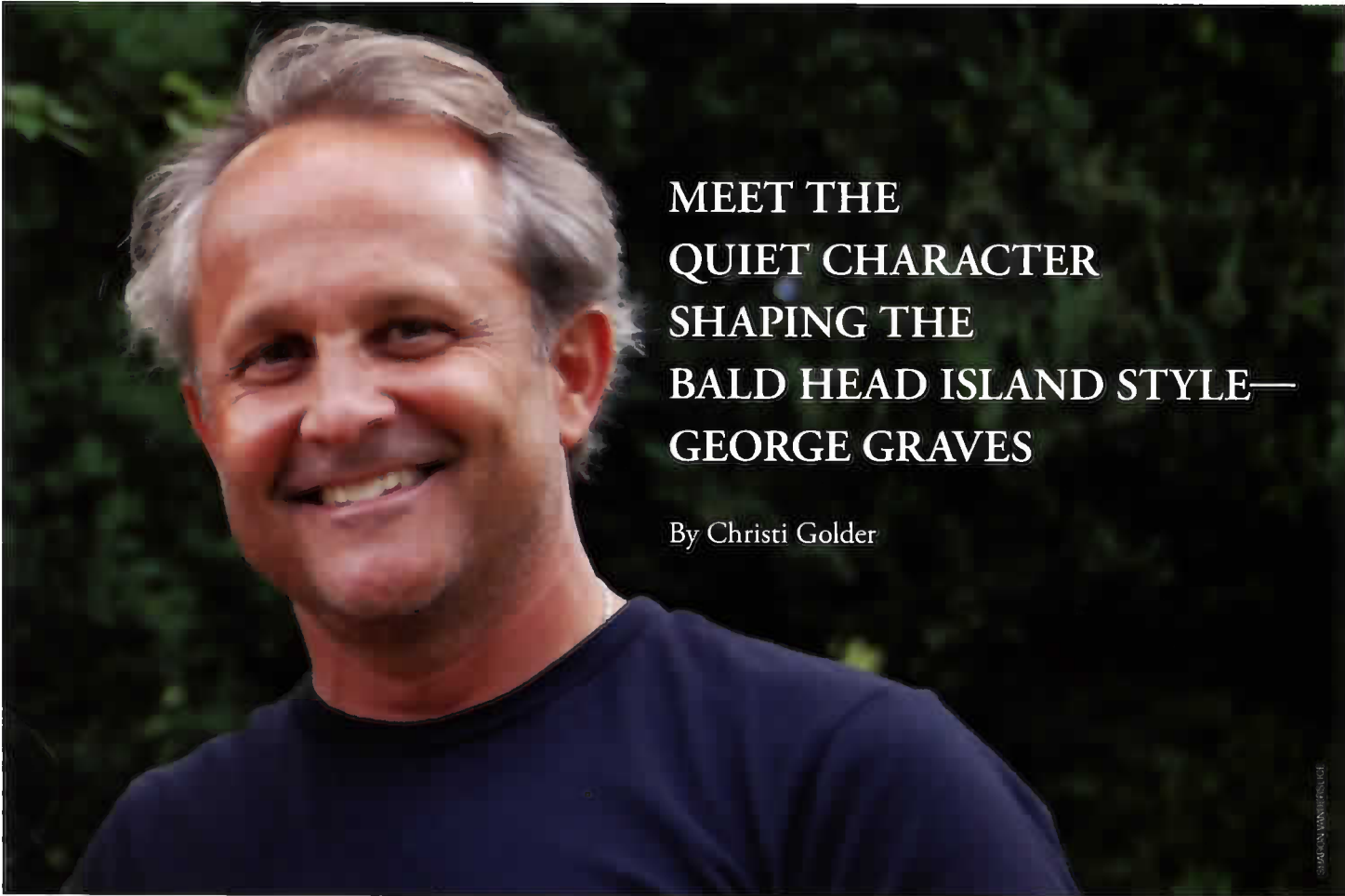


# haven

A magazine exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina





## MEET THE QUIET CHARACTER SHAPING THE BALD HEAD ISLAND STYLE— GEORGE GRAVES

By Christi Golder

Put ten architects on the Bald Head Island ferry, let them drive around in golf carts for an afternoon, then ask them to define the island's architectural style on the boat ride back. One thing's for certain—they'll still be debating long after the ferry docks on the mainland.

While the island's architectural heart is "coastal Carolina vernacular," influences as far flung as Cape Cod and the Caribbean islands can't be denied. Moreover, elements of Victorian, arts and crafts, gothic and shingle style appear throughout the island. Language maven, distinguished architect and former island planning director Chuck Dietsche once suggested that Bald Head Island and its architecture represent "an abandonment of the prosaic for the poetic." Which, although eloquent, doesn't exactly pin it down.

Ultimately, it's best to concede that the island's architectural inspiration and epoch defy categorization, and simply combine in a pleasing amalgam known as "Bald Head Island style."

Easier to identify than its wide-ranging architectural references are the select handful of architects wielding design influence on the island's homes and commercial structures. One such architect, George Graves, has quietly and carefully shaped the Bald Head Island style for nearly two decades, all the while without drawing too much atten-

tion to himself.

While studying architecture at Virginia Tech, George received practical experience at firms in Tucson, Ariz., Washington, D.C., and Alexandria, Va. In the late 1980s he moved to Wilmington, N.C., where his first contact with Bald Head came as a young architect working for Synthesis Architects. Impressed with George's work, Bald Head Island Limited developers Kent and Mark Mitchell asked him to join the company's planning department full time in 1994. After a brief break to start his own firm, George returned to Limited's planning department a few years later for good. Since then, he's continued to make his mark.

"George has been instrumental, along with Chuck Dietsche and Dan Costa, in defining and refining what 'coastal Carolina vernacular' architecture means," says Kent

Mitchell. “He’s been a catalyst to define these concepts, and then push our design to the limits of those definitions. He has been a major player in the realization of the built form on Bald Head Island.”

Jim Henry, director of planning and construction for Bald Head Island Limited, agrees. “From simple structures like the island ferry terminal and the gazebos in Harbour Village to bigger projects like Cape Fear Station and the shops along Maritime Way, George’s fingerprints are everywhere on this island.”

In Cape Fear Station, specifically, creating a sense of place was especially important to George and the team designing its Keeper’s Landing and Sumner’s Crescent neighborhoods.

“At the initial onset of Cape Fear Station’s development, we purposely built

“He’ll bend over backwards to work within the topography and save a tree.”

George has designed countless homes for sale by the developer over the years, including 16 homes in Cape Fear Station and another seven homes in Harbour Village. From spacious residences along the ocean, to sideyard homes bordering Federal Road, to compact cottages fronting the marina, all share George’s imprint in their detailing and unexpected touches. While their facades remain classic, their interior finishes can be described as clean, unconventional and, at times, surprisingly modern.

“If there is one word I would use to characterize George’s approach to architecture and planning, it would be ‘thoughtful,’” says architect Dan Costa. “Though his sensibilities have always tended more modernist than historicist, George has never tried to be

a home that they are delighted to inhabit,” says George.

Part of what makes George’s custom designs feel fresh is his out-of-the-box use of natural materials. “When someone walks into a home that George has designed, they notice the materials because of the creative way he employs them. Whether he’s using cedar boards, travertine rock tiles or exotic hardwoods, he has a good feel for the richness of materials where walls, floors and countertops are concerned. These elements often have more contrast than you might expect, which makes them all the more interesting,” says Jim.

George’s creativity has earned him the respect of his peers and a reputation as “an architect’s architect.” An example of this can be found in his single bedroom cottages known as The Elements (Water, Fire, Air

## AN ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE APPROACH IS ONE OF GEORGE’S TRADEMARKS, AND ONE OF THE REASONS HIS IDEAS ALIGN SO WELL WITH THE MITCHELLS’ DEVELOPMENT PHILOSOPHY.

homes close together to give the feeling of a burgeoning neighborhood,” says George. “We chose to build one of each house type that exists in the Cape Fear Station design guidelines to create an antecedent for home-owners that followed.”

From the standpoint of creating a pleasing streetscape and maximizing the setting, Keeper’s Landing is one of the island’s most successful neighborhoods. “George’s homes at Keeper’s Landing are smartly designed, creating a comfortable, efficient living space within a very small footprint,” says Mark Mitchell.

An environmentally sensitive approach is one of George’s trademarks, and one of the reasons his ideas align so well with the Mitchells’ development philosophy.

“No one understands and interprets the developer’s vision better than George. As an environmentalist, he brings a very thoughtful approach to design,” says Jim Henry.

flashy or trendy. He approaches each design challenge, whether an individual building or a neighborhood site plan, with a great deal of thought and care.”

One of George’s most celebrated homes combines traditional materials and modern touches to great effect. Beautiful 220 Station House Way, which overlooks East Beach, was featured as a *Coastal Living* Idea House in 2003 and won an award for “Best in American Living” from the National Association of Homebuilders.

George also has numerous custom home designs on his resume. A few of his favorite projects include the Sullivan house in Harbour Village, the Sexton/Kessler house along the creek in Cape Fear Station, and the Klett house fronting South Beach.

“The projects that have provided me the most satisfaction were working directly with property owners. There is a real sense of accomplishment to see owners move into

and Earth) and the Star & Moon, which rim the Bald Head Island Marina.

“We get a lot of great feedback about The Elements and Star & Moon,” says Jim. “People respond to the way they fit in with the harbour and their level of detailing. An out-of-town architect stayed in one and ended up photographing all of them, he was so blown away.”

Chuck Dietsche, who has partnered with George on countless island projects, also appreciates the distinctive details in a George Graves home. “George’s own work is readily recognizable, a thoughtful blend of casual elegance, perfect scale and island character. But if you look closely, you will see the unique-to-George, restrained, crisp, contemporary detailing that seems to wink at his fellow architects mired in historic accuracy,” says Chuck Dietsche.

George is as quick to shrug off compliments as he is any label as a modernist. His

## The Elements of Style

According to architect George Graves, Bald Head Island's architectural style has roots in the simple cottages built along the North Carolina coast in the early 1900s, like those once seen at Nags Head and Wrightsville Beach.

Back then, local builders and architects designed durable and common sense dwellings that provided protection from the elements while maximizing outdoor living areas. Typically, first floor living spaces flowed easily onto wide, gracious porches with broad overhangs for summer shading, while bedrooms were tucked under steep-roofed spaces and dormers. Storage buildings stood on the windward side to provide a sheltering effect from storms. "Bald Head Island incorporates many of these early building principles into its design guidelines," says George.

One of the architectural guidelines that George credits with the most influence on the signature Bald Head Island style is the story-and-a-half design. On primarily oceanfront and dune ridge properties, where homes are usually built five feet above grade, the second story must be no more than half of the square footage of the first. The height restrictions of 35 feet and required steep roof pitches are also instrumental in maintaining island architecture of fine proportion and scale, says George. "Beach communities that have not incorporated these native coastal guidelines have suffered from 'zoning design,' which has resulted in overbearing homes that maximize height and area. This has unfortunately been the case for Wrightsville Beach, where many of the original cottages have been replaced with oversized homes," says George.

By respecting past principles of design, Bald Head's planners remain forward-thinking in their approach, ensuring a human architectural scale that makes the island's streetscapes so pleasing to the eye.

approach is, by nature, broad, with every possible design tool intentionally left at his disposal. "A lot of dogma and theory must be cast aside for a more realistic and pluralistic approach to problem solving," George explains. "That said, the classic design principles are always in fashion whether the work is labeled modern or traditional. Functional design that delights the senses with beautiful proportion and scale are my guiding allies in the quest to please the architecture gods."

Not limited to residential architecture, George has had a hand in the design of nearly every commercial building built on the island in the last decade. The redesign of Eb & Flo's Steambar, with its whimsical touches and "upscale dive" atmosphere, represents George at his best—creatively making the most of unconventional interior materials like galvanized aluminum and exposed duct work.

"George's recent redesign of Eb & Flo's is very successful, and includes so many clever elements," says Mark. "He really has a talent for interiors, and has had tremendous influence over our commercial property interiors over the years. Another good example of this is at the Shoals Club."

In the case of the Shoals Club, designed by architect Cothran Harris, George collaborated extensively on the interior fixtures and finishes. Along with numerous other features, the lighting design, wall and ceiling paneling details, and bar design were carried out by George—subtle touches that help lend the building its personality.

"As Bald Head Island Limited's senior architect, George's signature is on everything," says Jim. "Even when we work with outside architects on a project, it always filters back through George."

Collaborating with another designer can be a tricky proposition. But Jim says George handles the dynamic gracefully, describing him as "genteel and considerate" when working with other architects.

George's longtime colleague and collaborator Cothran Harris concurs. "While George is best known for his architectural

contributions, his friends appreciate his good nature. George's ability to get along with people is just as important for Bald Head Island as his technical skills," says Cothran. Self-deprecating almost to a fault, George frequently credits his colleagues for inspiring his best work.

"Much of my Bald Head Island work has been in collaboration with other architects and designers. A good idea is a valued asset and where it originated is of much less importance," says George. "To work in a creative and nurturing atmosphere has been instrumental in the quality and consistency of our work."

George's fellow architects are quick to point out that his thoughtful comments and guiding presence on the island's architectural review board have elevated their own work.

"The thing about George is that he is not only a great designer, he has the rare capacity to make all the other designers around him better," says Chuck. "His effect on the quality of architecture on the island is not limited to just his designs, it is present in everything built here over the last 15 years."

Time and again, other architects mention George's self-effacing personality. "George has always been a wonderful and generous collaborator, one who doesn't let his own ego get in the way," says Dan. "He always has a kind word, even if he disagrees with an approach or outcome. His critical eye sees beyond his own personal approach. We all look forward to many more years of working with him. Bald Head Island will be a better place for it."

While George deeply appreciates the recognition from his colleagues, he remains visibly uneasy about any attention, always redirecting praise back to his peers or to the Mitchell family for their vision and support. This architect's architect, it seems, is most comfortable simply letting the work speak for itself. 🌸

*When not writing or editing all things Bald Head Island, Christi Golder can be found on the water with her husband Walker and son Will.*