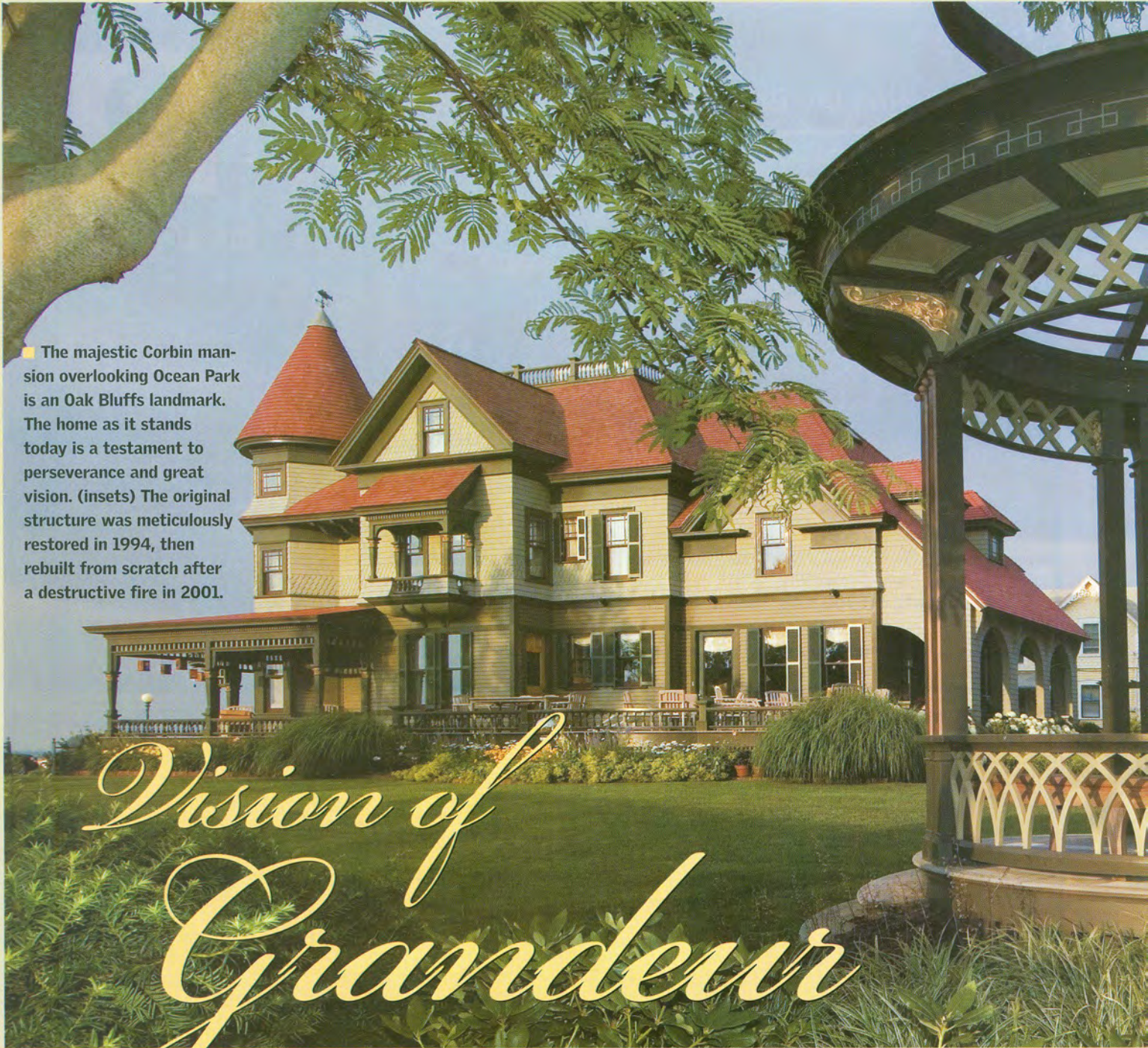




■ The majestic Corbin mansion overlooking Ocean Park is an Oak Bluffs landmark. The home as it stands today is a testament to perseverance and great vision. (insets) The original structure was meticulously restored in 1994, then rebuilt from scratch after a destructive fire in 2001.

Vision of Grandeur

GREAT MINDS AND A DRIVING SPIRIT

RESURRECT A HISTORIC VINEYARD MANSION—TWICE.

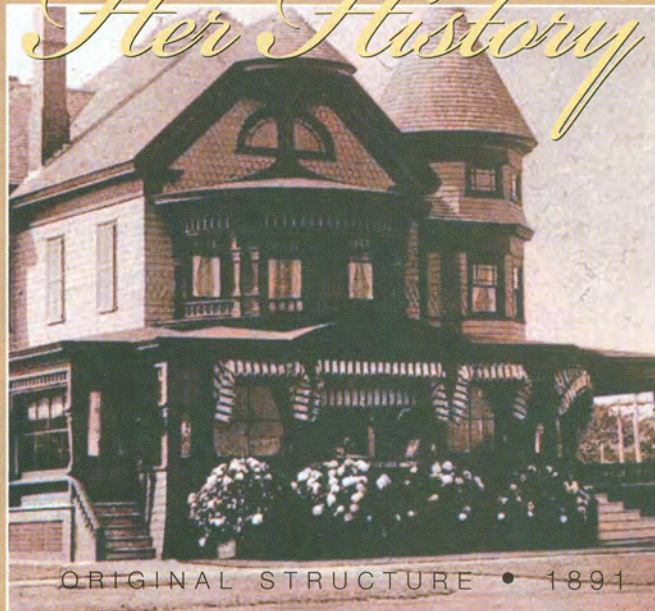
BY GREG O'BRIEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER VANDERWARKER



It is eight o'clock in the morning on a hazy July day, and the locals and summer visitors are queued up at Mocha Mott's in Oak Bluffs on the Vineyard for a splash of caffeine. On Circuit Avenue, early risers peer into the windows of the diverse shops that line the street. Around the corner at Ocean Park, overlooking the ferry dock and Nantucket Sound, the dew on the ground is still wet enough to dampen a pair of boat shoes. The park is lined with a row of tidy, whimsical gingerbread cottages in fanciful colors—remnants from the late-1800 Methodist revival meetings held in the Campground, a nearby oak grove. It was as if Oak Bluffs was ordained to be precise and orderly.

Her History



ORIGINAL STRUCTURE • 1891



RESTORED • 1994



DESTROYED BY FIRE • 2001



■ The kitchen and dining area have a fresh, contemporary feel. Summery colors and a relaxed setting evoke the island surroundings and a vacation spirit. (opposite insets) The aftermath of the 2001 fire left no choice but to rebuild.

Philip Corbin, a Connecticut industrialist, never got the memo. A co-founder of Corbin Locks, which fashioned ornate hardware and horn knobs, Corbin built his 5,071-square-foot Queen Anne-style mansion on Ocean Avenue in 1891, a massive, majestic three-story structure with towers and turrets, porches and balconies. You can't miss it from even a mile out to sea: it boasts a red-hipped and gabled roof topping off earth-colored trim, window frames the size of a boat hull, and a front entrance as large as a hotel. It consumes the tight, low landscape of the park—and yet it is a perfect fit.

A perfect fit that has had its share of alterations. The house was built from scratch in just six months, then restored in the 1990s over

three and a half years. It burned to the ground seven years later during an electrical fire, and it took five years to rebuild the home to its former elegance. It wasn't all bliss, insists the home's savior and owner, computer sage Peter Norton, whose Norton Utilities—an operating software that restores files and protects hardware—turned the computer industry on its hard drive in the 1980s.

Norton visited Oak Bluffs for the first time in 1990, the same year he sold his company for a reported \$70 million to Symantec, which kept the Norton name and rendered the Santa Monica transplant a wealthy philanthropist and arts patron. A portion of the bounty has been bestowed on Ocean Avenue. "West Coast people



Vision of Grandeur

don't summer," says Norton, sitting on the airy front porch overlooking the park's archetypal bandstand gazebo, the wide swath of the sound and the Cape in the distance. "We thought we'd come here, laugh up our sleeves, and go home. We didn't count on how seductive the Vineyard is." So enticing, in fact, the Nortons returned the following summer and purchased two summer homes in Oak Bluffs. One was a Cinderella cottage, "a wedding cake of a house" as Norton calls it, about two blocks from Ocean Park. The other was the Corbin mansion.

"It was an absolute eyesore. Rundown, highly abused," says Norton, "but still a grand old home." The Nortons restored the



FIRE DAMAGE • 2001



CONSTRUCTION PROGRESS • 2002



TODAY • 2006

ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY DESIGN ASSOCIATES

Vision of Grandeur

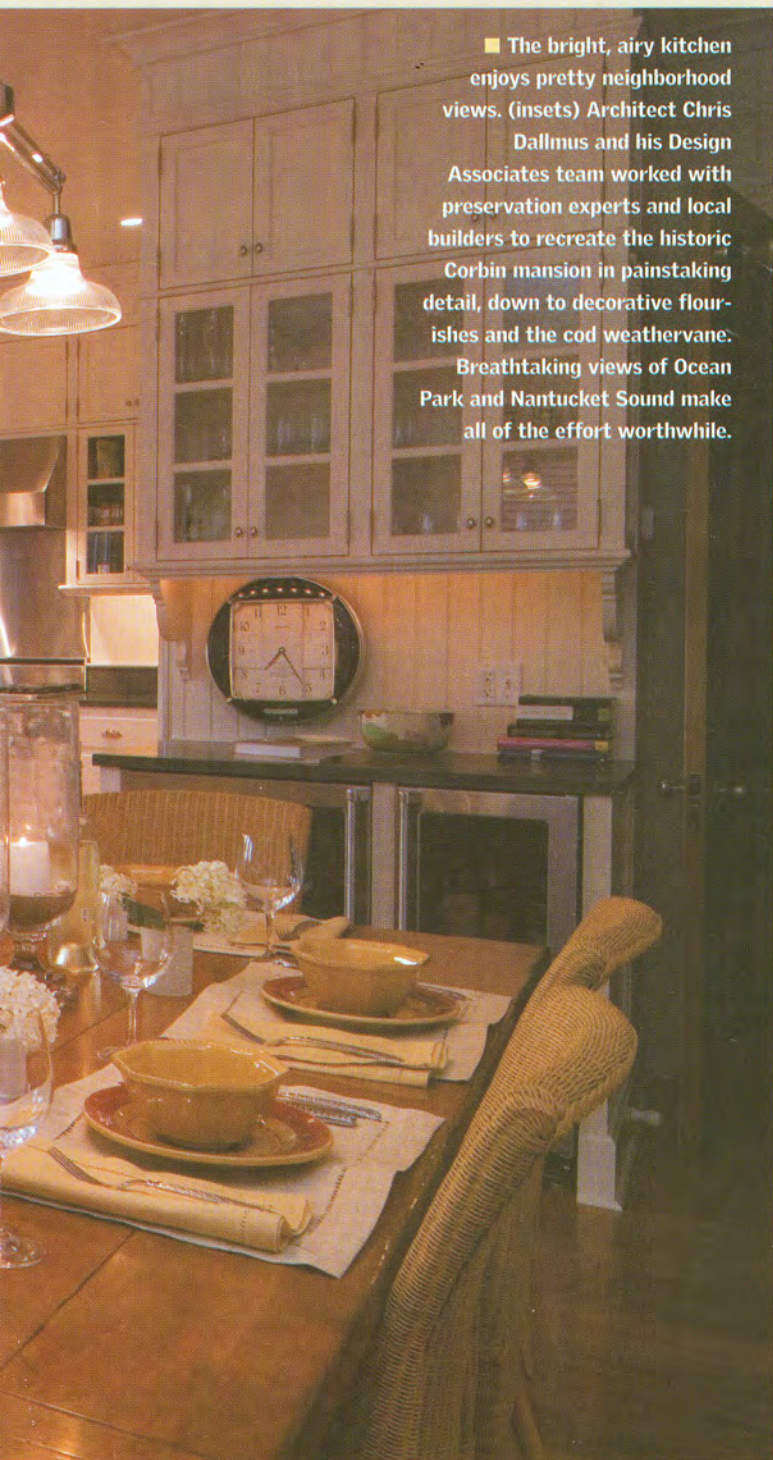


Corbin house while living in the nearby cottage. From the start, Norton had his work cut out for him. The mansion was in disrepair and a dreadful cocoa brown, with a high fence that made it look like something Herman Munster might acquire. The ornate hardware had been stripped and sold off, and the shingles replaced with redwood boards painted a ghastly shade of dark red. To add to its troubles, parts of the house were structurally unsafe.

"This was not my style," Norton admits. "Completely out of character for me. The house was crying out for a careful restoration. It needed someone with more money than sense. So I volunteered." He

bought the home from the Resolution Trust Corporation at the fire sale price of \$350,000. Norton thought it a fair price, not having assessed the full cost of restoration—or imagined the cost of rebuilding again after the devastating 2001 fire. "It was a wreck," Norton recalls of the newly purchased home. To mollify his new neighbors and take the edge off the exterior's frightful color, Norton threw a coat of inexpensive white on the house before starting restoration work.

Expunging years of abuse was a challenge even for a man who made millions on maverick software with the power to magically resurrect erased computer files. So to restore this old house, Norton



■ The bright, airy kitchen enjoys pretty neighborhood views. (insets) Architect Chris Dallmus and his Design Associates team worked with preservation experts and local builders to recreate the historic Corbin mansion in painstaking detail, down to decorative flourishes and the cod weathervane. Breathtaking views of Ocean Park and Nantucket Sound make all of the effort worthwhile.



DETAIL • 2006



WEATHERVANE • 2006



OCEAN PARK • 2006

tapped principal architect Christopher Dallmus of Design Associates, an award-winning Cambridge architectural firm that has provided architectural and consulting services for 12 restoration-quality renovation projects to the august PBS show, *This Old House*. Dallmus's mission was to restore the home to its former glory, a task akin to creating the Garden of Eden from a swamp. However, Dallmus and his team were up to the task. "The job offered great opportunity and creative reward," he says. They called in Adams and Roy, a "preservation contractor" from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which spent 10 days in Oak Bluffs



Vision of Grandeur



■ Casual fabrics and colors balance the richness of the living room's oak paneling to create a warm, intimate space for evening and a bright, playful daytime setting.

divining clues as to the look of the original structure. The team lifted up the skirt of the old house, examining the structure “stick by stick” and scouring the property for evidence. They found hidden in a bush examples of three different shingle patterns from the original house, along with one last baluster from the previously removed porch railing.

Doyle Construction of Martha's Vineyard, under the leadership of Neal Galligan, master-built both the initial restoration, completed in 1994, and post-fire reconstruction work, completed in 2004. Among the modern touches added to the project: an expanded and updated kitchen; a finished third floor with additional bedrooms for children, friends, and family guests; a back deck off the kitchen that serves as an open-air breakfast room; central air conditioning; and benches around the roof walk, an observation deck at the crest of the roof that offers a mountaintop view of the Vineyard.

All in place, you would have thought the carefully restored Corbin-Norton House, the centerpiece of Ocean Park, would stand for another century—but fire has a way of leveling the best of visions. A freak conflagration completely destroyed the home in 2001. “I had clear options,” recalls Norton. “I could never return to the island, I could come back here for a tar and feathering, or I could rebuild it.” Out of characteristic perseverance and a commitment to Oak Bluffs, he chose to rebuild. “One small footnote,” adds the good-natured Norton. “The house was self-insured.” Or in other words, not at all.

With blueprints in hand and the trajectory of a phoenix, Norton and Dallmus revived the vision from the ashes, an exact replica of what once had been. Without the 21st-century conveniences, Philip Corbin himself couldn't have told the difference—from shingles to turrets, they recreated his masterpiece, again.

“The house today and in its original condition is really an essay in Victorian sociology,” says Norton. “There are four levels of hardware and four levels of wood that create a hierarchy. The best wood and hardware are reserved for the public rooms rather than the private bedrooms.”

Inside the front door is a small sitting room, paneled from the floor to the ceiling with the finest oak. The vestibule leads to an open parlor and formal dining area, paneled with hand-picked premium oak. The parlor, endowed with a seamless blend of Victorian and camp-style furnishings, opens up through wide double doors to the front sitting porch. An expanded kitchen in the rear of the house offers every convenience and a large walk-out porch, decked with tropical Ipe wood—tough enough, Norton notes, to withstand an apocalypse.



A switchback oak staircase leads from the entryway to the second-floor master suite, modest by today's standards but with a Victorian elegance. In the original home, the graceful oak paneling framing the stairwell ran 18 feet, seamlessly, from floor to ceiling, but such lengths of unbroken oak are not available today. The master bedroom suite, which opens onto a crescent-shaped sitting porch, is paneled in cypress, a lesser grade of wood in keeping with the Victorian social order of the day. The stately master bath, tucked off the bedroom, has all the accoutrements of a trophy home.

A hallway off the master suite leads to three smaller, impeccably furnished bedrooms, paneled with floor-to-ceiling wood that steps down to painted pine. The third floor, once an open attic, has been remodeled to provide three more snug bedrooms, a playroom, and a small guest kitchen. The ceilings, following the curves and peaks of the roofline, add great character to the space.

Of all the spaces in the house, perhaps the "unfinished" fourth floor is the most impressive—an observation deck framed with benches and a sweeping view of Oak Bluffs, all the way to Edgartown

and Chappaquiddick in the distance.

If Norton had to do it all again, is there anything he would change? The part-time Manhattanite considers before replying, "Excuse me, I did!" Upon further pondering, he adds, "And I *didn't* change a thing."

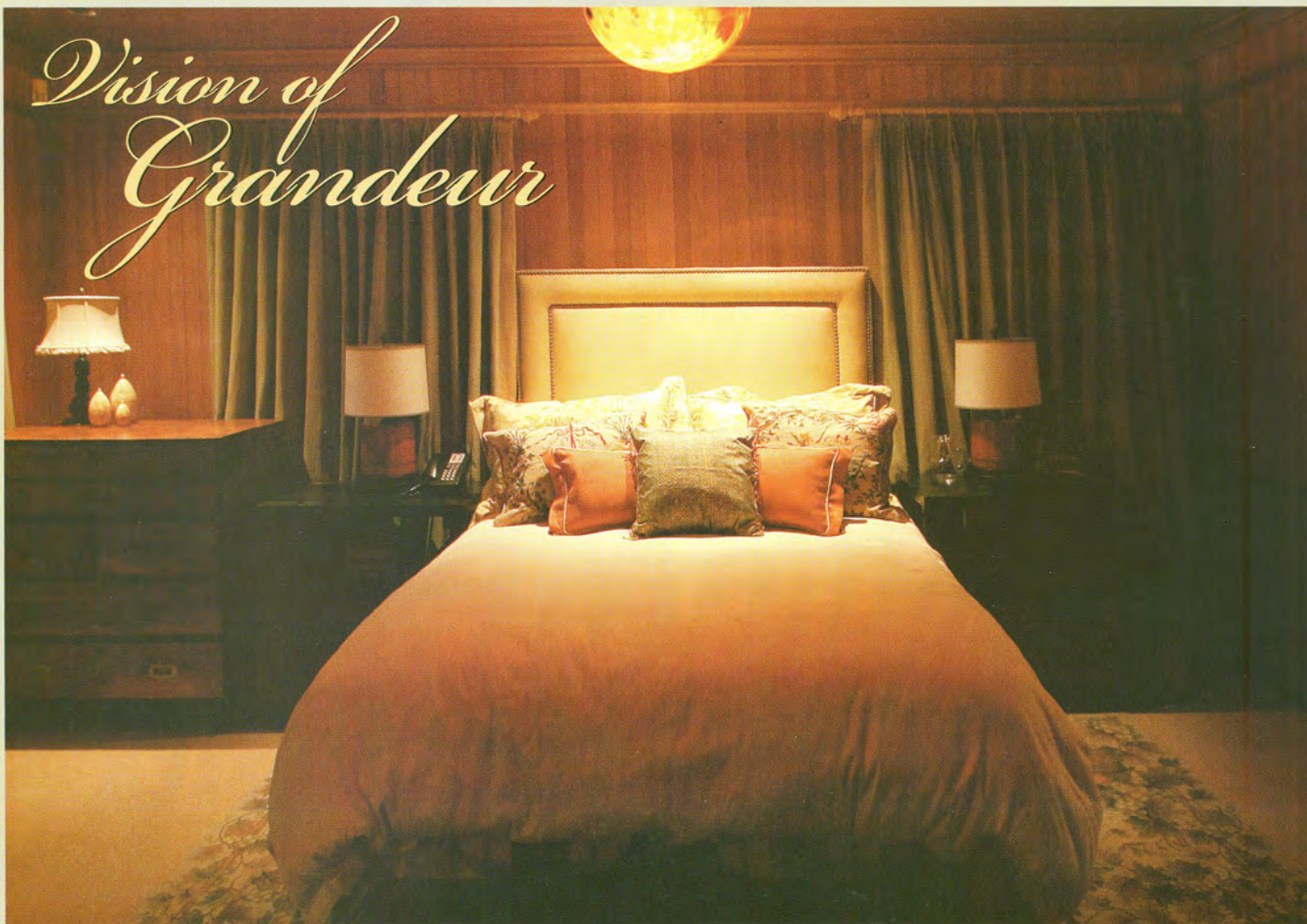
For this majestic home that has seen its share of devastation and salvation, one hopes that lightning won't strike twice. "I think next time," Norton concludes, "I'll take the tarring and feathering."

**FOR MORE INFORMATION,
SEE MARKETPLACE ON PAGE 135.**

Greg O'Brien, president of Stony Brook Group, a publishing and strategy company based in Brewster, regularly contributes to Cape Cod Life Publications. The author-editor of several books about the Cape and Islands, he contributes to various regional and national publications, is a television scriptwriter, a political columnist for Boston Metro, and a regular contributor to Boston Irish Reporter.



■ The use of high-quality oak in the living and dining areas reflects the Victorian hierarchy of woods, in which the finest pieces were reserved for the most formal rooms. (opposite) A custom-made elk table in the comfortable dining room combines with wrapped rattan chairs and a shell-encrusted chandelier for an eclectic mix of color and texture. (below) The master bedroom suite features cypress panels.



Vision of Grandeur

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