

Gunnar Peterson: A Committed, Contrarian Modern Architect

by Deborah Griffin Scanlon

With information gathered from Falmouth Enterprise files and conversations with Gunnar Peterson's son Joel.

Architect and Falmouth native E. Gunnar Peterson may be best known as the developer of the Nautilus Motor Inn and Dome Restaurant, as it was his association with Buckminster Fuller that brought the geodesic dome landmark to Woods Hole. But Mr. Peterson, one of the first modern architects on Cape Cod, left his own architectural mark on homes, public buildings, and businesses in Falmouth and Woods Hole and on Martha's Vineyard.

He designed buildings for the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and the center of Falmouth, as well as houses along Oyster Pond Road and Elm Road. He designed a chapel, a yacht club, a school, and a police station and created the entire Bywater Court neighborhood of modern houses off Surf Drive.

His modern designs of concrete-block, flat-roofed buildings were not always well received in Falmouth. The *Falmouth Enterprise* reported that “a prankster” propped an old gasoline pump on the lawn in front of his new homes on Bywater Court, “by way of comment on the architectural style.”

It did not deter Mr. Peterson; in fact, it seemed to inspire his rebellious spirit. “He embraced it,” his son Joel Peterson said. “He was a contrarian.”

Independent and determined, Gunnar Peterson was once described by *Holiday*, an American travel magazine, as an “evangelist for contemporary architecture.”

He wrote in an *Enterprise* article that “properly handled, the modern home will be as indigenous to the soil and as appropriate to time and place as were the original Cape Cod homes in their time.”

Ernest Gunnar Peterson was the son of Ernest and Augusta Peterson, who came to this country from Sweden in the early 1890s. They lived in Brockton, where Ernest worked in a shoe factory. Gunnar and his brother, Carl, were born in Brockton but moved to Falmouth in 1905 when their father, suffering ill health as a result of working in the factory, took a job as caretaker for the Nathaniel H. Emmons estate. Ernest Peterson lived to be 73 and credited his renewed health to coming to Falmouth to work outdoors.

Gunnar Peterson spent his childhood in one of Falmouth's oldest homes, the farmhouse on Elm Road that may have belonged to Moses Hatch. (The Petersons sold it in 1955 to John

T. Hough, editor of the *Falmouth Enterprise*, and his wife, Mary). Later he built a modern house overlooking the centuries-old farmhouse.

He graduated from Lawrence High School and went to Tufts University before transferring to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

After his graduation from MIT in 1929, he worked for Harold Kellogg, a Boston architect. When the Boston firm's bid for Falmouth's new Village Grammar School was selected in 1931, the *Enterprise* reported the story, referring in the lead paragraph to "Gunnar Peterson, Falmouth boy associated with Mr. Kellogg."

As an associate architect at the Kellogg firm, Mr. Peterson designed the new school, (now part of the Mullen-Hall School). Joel Peterson remembers seeing his father's name on a commemorative plaque on the wall near Principal Margaret Mullen's office. "If I ever got called to Miss Mullen's office, I had to walk by that!"

He explained that his father's few years at the Kellogg architecture firm were similar to an apprenticeship and the only time he worked for anyone. "He was eager to be on his own."



The police station, Town Hall and library with the Village School in the background and the A & P on Main Street in the foreground. Photo courtesy Falmouth Police Department.

By 1935 Gunnar Peterson was working for himself and living in Falmouth, where he met Ruth Kramer, who had come from Duxbury to teach at Lawrence High School. They were married in 1939.

In 1935 his plans for the new Falmouth Police station were accepted. Built on Shiverick's Pond with access from Main Street (this was pre-Katharine Lee Bates Road), the fireproof building with brick facing was on a concrete slab and made of steel joists. Considered a modern adaptation of Georgian-style architecture, it served as police headquarters until the late 1960s. Like some of his other early projects – the Village School and the Parke Memorial

Chapel at Oak Grove Cemetery on Jones Road, completed in 1935 – it was in a fairly traditional style. Featured in the building was a mural by Fritz Fuglister, an artist who later became a WHOI scientist, funded by the Works Progress Administration during the Depression years.

But the modern movement in architecture was clearly on Gunnar Peterson's mind: three years later, in 1938, he wrote an article for the *Enterprise*, "'Modern Style' Will Become Native To Cape Cod." First, he clarified modern and modernistic: "The term modern applies to contemporary architecture done in a manner independent of traditional forms." Modernistic," he said, "implies something faddy and transitory without any lasting merit."

In this article, he addresses modern architecture's "suitability to Cape Cod," noting that "those against the appearance of this new style of building on the Cape" base their opinions on "an outworn romantic idea of what the Cape used to be."

He continued:

"It is safe to assume that only 10 percent of the homes on Cape Cod are in the style commonly known as Cape Cod type. ... this style only had significance when it was conceived, and incidentally the colonial house met the needs of its builder, admirably. Then it was real - today it is stage dressing, sham, imitation not creation.



The home on Oyster Pond Road built by Gunnar Peterson for his family, as it is today.

Photo by Deborah Griffin Scanlon.

The principal advantage of the modern house lies in the complete freedom, which the designer has, to develop an efficient plan.... Its large windows make it possible to gain a roomier, and more expansive effect, and to literally bring the garden into the house. In the winter when the sun rides low in the sky - the sun is permitted to reach way into the room; in summer - the sun being high it offers no obstacles to getting shade. The benefits to be derived from the health standpoint cannot fail to be apparent."

He ended his article with, "The modern home offers the home builder unlimited opportunities for providing the family of today with the best and more reasonable form of shelter, unhampered by artificiality."

Gunnar Peterson's next projects were two traditional homes in Mill Park, which he developed off Mill Road facing Siders Pond. One was for

his family; the other for George Bywater Cluett 2nd, heir to a shirt manufacturing company.

A year later, in 1941, he was working with Mr. Cluett again, this time to build Bywater Court on land that Mr. Cluett had bought from Garrett Schenck, founder of Great Northern Paper Company. Mr. Cluett had insisted on traditional houses on the Mill Road property, but this time he allowed Mr. Peterson to design modern houses for the development on 13 acres. "Cottages, on slabs - very modern," said Joel Peterson. Some of those houses remain, although many have been torn down and replaced with much larger, taller houses.

That same year, Gunnar Peterson built a house for his family on a high point of land off Oyster Pond Road, across from Trunk River. The land, once the Linden estate, abutted the Fenno estate that is now part of the WHOI Quissett campus.



Bywater Court, circa 1960. Surf Drive is in the lower right.

Photo courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.



The Lawrence-Lynch Company building on Gifford Street.

Photo by Deborah Griffin Scanlon.

He later added three more houses to the development that he called Bellevue. The Peterson house was “very modern and had great views,” according to Joel Peterson, who grew up in it. The house, which was featured in the *House & Garden* October 1944 issue, still stands.

Described in detail in a contemporary article in the *Enterprise*, the Oyster Pond Road house “will embody the latest facilities for comfortable living. The conveniences will fit into Mr. Peterson’s conception of what modern living should be. If they don’t, the reason will be E. Gunnar Peterson, for he is designing the house from the floor to the two-car garage to the top of the flat roof. Every nook and corner will be of his design.”

The “abundance of windows” is one of the unusual features of the modern house. The floor construction is fireproof. “A slab of concrete on

a concrete joist will be covered with linoleum, carpeting or tile, according to the room. A feature, unique in American homes, will be the heating system, called radiant heating...” Other features included built-in bookcases and buffet, a fireplace wall sheathed with African walnut plywood that is also fireproof, and “between the hall and the study ... something exceptional in doors - a collapsible, accordion door covered in leather.”

While these houses attracted press coverage and found some acceptance, the modern style was still not well received for town buildings. In February 1946, responding to a town meeting vote in favor of traditional colonial and Cape Cod style, Mr. Peterson told the *Enterprise*, “Falmouth has had a tradition of tolerance for more than 200 years. I wish I could see some of that tolerance infused into today’s attitude toward architecture of the town.”

“I wouldn’t presume to tell Harvey Martin how to sell hardware...or Sam Smith how to run a clothing store, or Dr. Wiswall how to treat his patients,” he said, referring to well-known Falmouth merchants and a physician. “They’re all specialists in their own line. But everyone in this town presumes to give his opinion on architecture, which is my specialty.



The Dome.

Courtesy Joel Peterson.

“In stressing contemporary building design I am urging what I sincerely believe in, a type of building that is fundamentally honest, making the best of all its possibilities, built for utility as well as appearance. I’m betting on today, not on what has been, on the future and not on the past.”

This particular dispute might have been about the New England Telephone & Telegraph Company’s telephone exchange building at the corner of Main and Gifford streets. Mr. Peterson was given the contract in 1947 but it was not built until 1955.

Modern architecture was apparently not a problem for Frederick V. Lawrence, whose family for many years had operated the contracting business on Gifford Street Extension. In 1947,

his new plant headquarters, designed by Mr. Peterson, opened. It was “ultra modern,” according to the *Enterprise*, and built of cement and cinder blocks. The plant, now the Lawrence-Lynch Company, also featured radiant heat.

Gunnar Peterson then designed the Tides Motel and Falmouth Yacht Club, both at the mouth of Falmouth Harbor, as well as commercial buildings along Falmouth’s Main Street. These included Fay’s, on the corner of Main Street and Lantern Lane; the N.E. Tsiknas block, across from the Falmouth Public Library, and Issokson’s, further down Main Street.

In 1951, the US Navy hired Mr. Peterson to design WHOI’s Laboratory for Oceanography on Water Street, which was later named after his good friend Edward H. Smith, the institution’s



PROGRESS AT THE DOME—Architect and hotel man E. Gunnar Peterson photographed this week with the geodesic dome as background as he watched workmen erecting his Nautilus Motor Inn.

Nautilus Inn And Its Dome Room Are Family Venture For Petersons

From the *Falmouth Enterprise*, March 12, 1954.

director for six years. The *Enterprise* noted at the time that “Officials stress one point of some importance to Woods Hole residents, the new building will be designed to conform from an architectural point of view to the present colonial Oceanographic building.”

About that time, Gunnar Peterson began to create the development between Elm and Woods Hole Roads known as Katy Hatch. His father, Ernest, already owned some lots on the hill above Elm Road and the rest of the land was for sale. Gunnar bought it and put in roads leading from

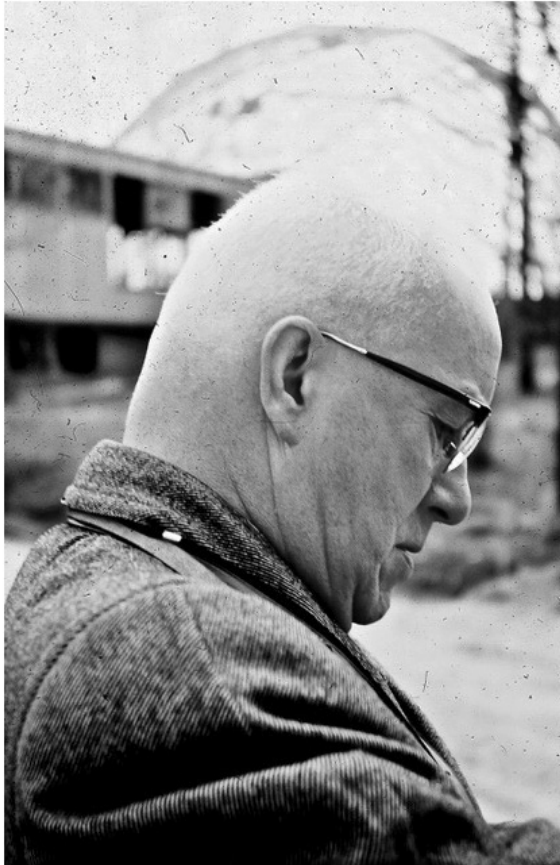
Woods Hole Road. But about that same time, he was starting his biggest project, the Nautilus Motor Inn and Dome restaurant, so he sold the land for Katy Hatch to builder William Mullen.

In 1952 Gunnar Peterson bought the Robert Chambers house and property, formerly part of the Joseph Story Fay estate in Woods Hole with views of Little Harbor and Vineyard Sound. He considered it the ideal spot for a motel. His plans included moving his office there as well as his home. The Chambers’ house was left intact and sold to his friend Edward Smith.

The Nautilus Motor Inn was just 12 rooms when the family moved into it in 1954. They lived in two rooms. Multiple chunks were added to the building, which ended up with 54 rooms. Ruth Peterson managed the motel, and Joel and his younger brother, Carl, helped.

Mr. Peterson chose to build a dome to house the restaurant accompanying the motor inn. At a Woods Hole Historical Museum Conversation in 1979, he explained: “When anybody builds a motor inn or motel, usually they’ll have some kind of scene... a lot of ship models and this and that... At the time, I felt that I wanted something unique that would stand out and intrigue people, would excite them, make them ask questions about it.”

He connected with Buckminster Fuller through MIT colleagues. He said he chose him “because the basis of his thinking is, how do we do more with less? How do we do more with less effort, work, less material, which hopefully might be reflected in less cost?” And, he added, “the



Buckminster Fuller. Photo taken by Joel Peterson when he was 12 in 1953 using a 35mm camera that Mr. Fuller gave him. Joel wrote, "Note 2 domes."

philosophy of the whole thing...it would open so many doors and it would prove to be such a socially beneficial undertaking."

Mr. Fuller and his wife lived with the Petersons in their house overlooking Oyster Pond Road during the summer of 1953 as the Dome was being built.

MIT architectural students, who lived in a small domed tent on the site, built the Dome using pieces that had been cut in MIT's carpenter shop. The sections fit together so they could be assembled and bolted on location. "The Dome was built like a puzzle," remembers Joel Peterson. "When the last piece was put on top they hired



Gunnar, Ruth and Joel Peterson, Fort Myers, 1991.

Courtesy Joel Peterson.

a helicopter to do it – not necessary but it was dramatic.”

In his *Museum Conversation*, Gunnar Peterson said, “As far as I was concerned, I think one of the most interesting, if not the most interesting part of my whole life was to have been a part of that.”

The first summer that the Dome was open was dramatic: Hurricane Carol came through in August 1954. The Mylar that covered the Dome was strong, according to Joel Peterson, who remembers as a kid jumping up and down on it, but branches pierced it during the hurricane. Following the storm the Mylar was replaced with a new product, Fiberglass. The pink and green Fiberglass eliminated glare and reduced the temperature. The Mylar had made the interior “like a greenhouse ... hot as heck in there,” said the younger Mr. Peterson. He added, “The

dome is a dynamic building – it moves – that was Bucky Fuller’s thing. No columns, no posts. You just don’t want it to leak, so it was sealed with flexible sealant.”

Gunnar Peterson died in 1992 at the age of 89.

Robert Mohr, Visiting Lecturer at MIT’s School of Architecture and Design and architect at Open Studio in Rhode Island, described his architectural style: “Peterson was a modernist. Within the discipline of architecture, the word ‘Modern’ refers partly to an aesthetic, but most accurately to a time period when architects were interested in simple functional designs that in many ways shunned ‘ornament’.”

Joel said he thinks his father “would be amused today that his architecture, which was not popular when he designed it, has to be protected at all costs because it is historical.”



Photo by Deborah Griffin Scanlon.

Joel Peterson (on left) and Arne Grepstad have been friends for nearly 50 years. During Joel Peterson's winter months off from the Dome and Nautilus, he was a substitute teacher at Lawrence High School. One day, filling in for Helen Pierce, a longtime English teacher, he called up a student who was "giving him the business." That's how he met the young Mr. Grepstad, an American Field Service student from Norway, staying for the 1970-71 school year with the Dr. Harry Bowen family. Mr. Peterson became Mr. Grepstad's friend and mentor. "Joel told me to come to him if I needed anything during my stay and he would help me," said Mr. Grepstad. "I ended up spending lots of time at the Petersons' home. We even went to a Celtics-Knicks game at the old Garden." At his mentor's urging, Mr. Grepstad attended the Cornell Hotel School, Mr. Peterson's alma mater. During the summers of his college years, he worked at the Dome and Nautilus with Mr. Peterson, who said, "That's where I got my gray hair!" Mr. Grepstad graduated in 1977 and came to work for his mentor and friend year round: summers as maître d' at the Dome and front desk clerk at the Nautilus, and winters doing maintenance on the property. The two worked together at the Dome until 2002, when it was sold. Arne continued at the Nautilus until 2009.

About the Author

Deborah Griffin Scanlon served on the *Spritsail* Editorial Board before becoming executive director of the Woods Hole Historical Collection and Museum.