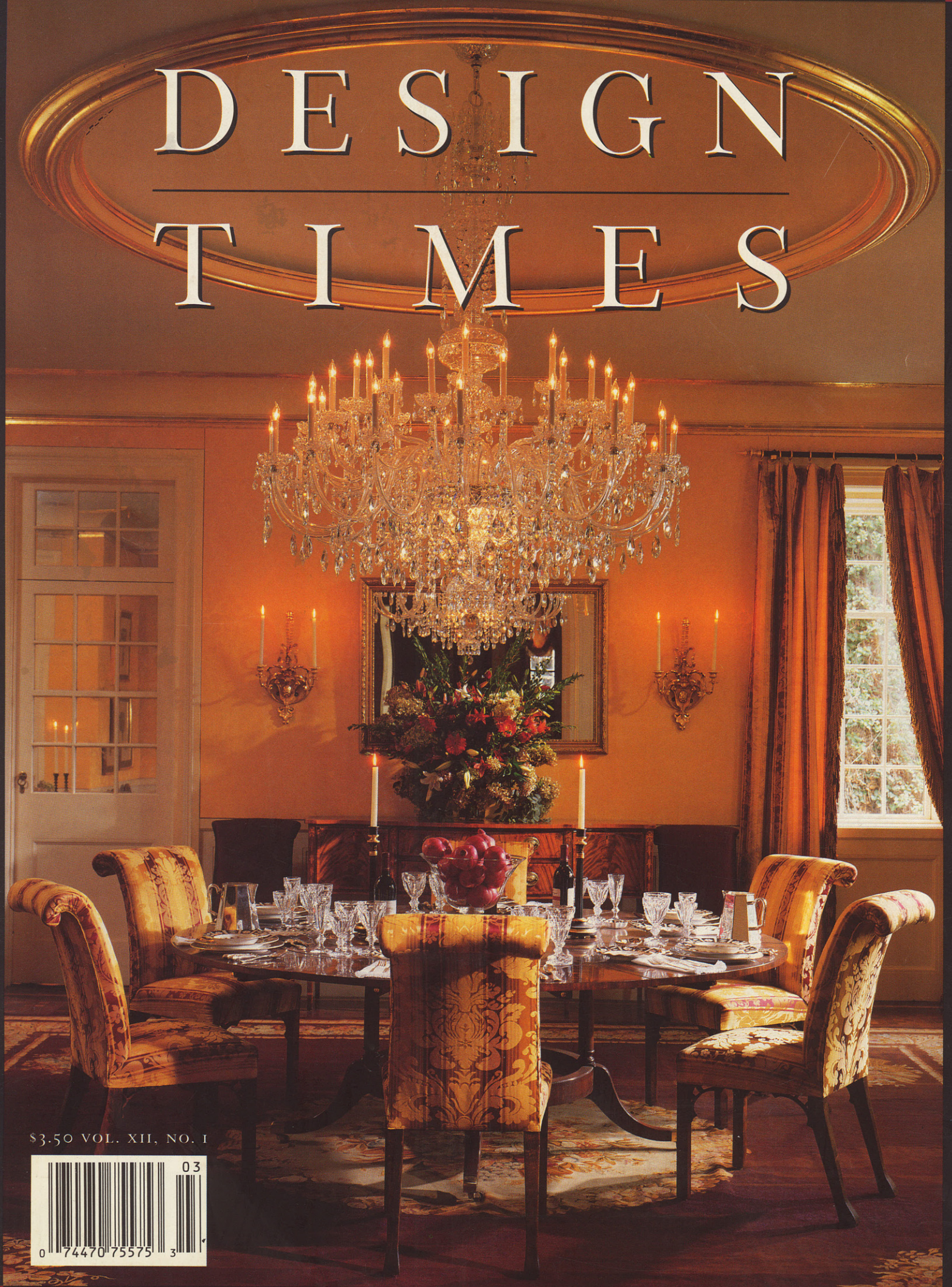


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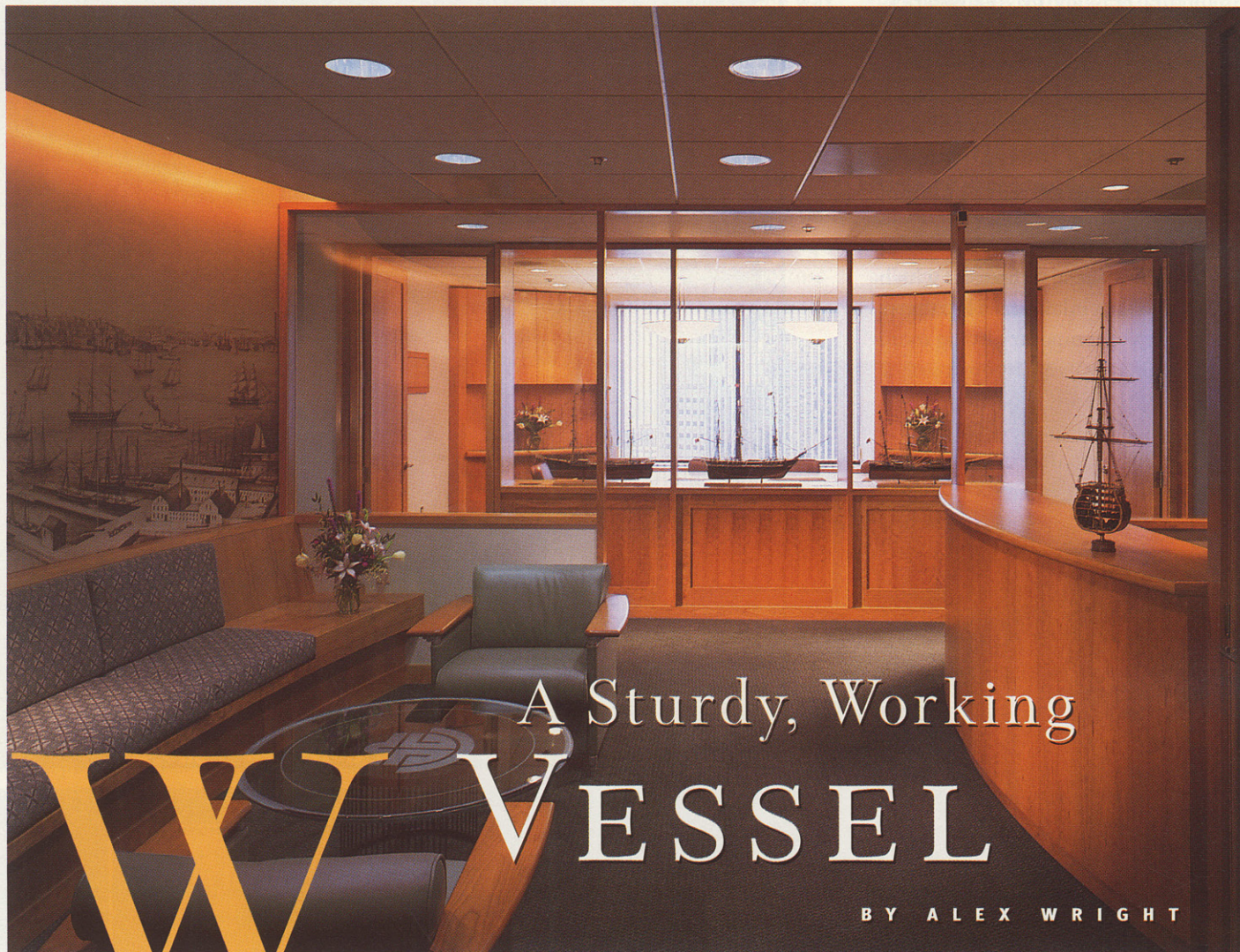


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A Sturdy, Working
VESSEL

BY ALEX WRIGHT

WHEN ARCHITECT BOB ADAMS FIRST MET BILL RICE, HE heard the alarm bells that signal “activist client.” Activist clients, he knew, could sink a project—or be the source of its success. Rice had hired Cambridge-based Tsoi/Kobus & Associates to design his company’s new offices at One Post Office Square. “Bill Rice had a very clear idea of what he wanted,” Adams recalls. “I walked into that office and Bill told me that as far as the decision-making process went, I’m it.” ¶ Rice, founder

and president of Anchor Capital Advisors, has all the markings of a classic Type A personality. A former soldier in the Vietnam-era army, veteran of the financial services industry since the age of 15, and founder of his own successful investment firm, Rice prides himself on his ability to take control of any situation.

His 12-year-old investment company handles group pensions, endowments, and other long-term vehicles for institutional investors like churches and labor unions—the kind of clients who want to build enduring, reliable relationships with their portfolio managers. Rice wanted his

office to send subtle reassurances that Anchor Capital was here to stay. “We wanted to project ourselves as being an established, successful company,” says Rice. “But at the same time, we wanted to avoid making any in-your-face kind of statements.”

An accomplished yachtsman and nautical enthusiast, Rice had recently become enamored of finely detailed model sailing ships. Three of these exquisite pieces, replicas of the Princeton *Neufchatel*, the H.M.S. *Victory*, and the U.S.S. *Constitution*, are perched on a sill across from the entrance area of Anchor Capital. Rice

wanted to make these prized collectibles a starting point for exploring a broader maritime theme.

The marine motif not only meshes with Rice’s personal interests and his company’s nautical moniker, but it also makes a suggestive link to Boston’s sea-faring past and to attendant associations with old Brahmin prosperity. The theme works well with the company’s particular line of business; the compact, functional design emphasizes economical virtues as well. The qualities of sturdiness, security, and careful use of resources make a nice physical metaphor for a company hoping to provide a safe vessel in stormy financial seas.

The shipboard sensibility comes across in a series of subtle gestures. For instance, Adams varied the lighting throughout

A mural depicting 19th-century Boston Harbor welcomes visitors to the reception area.

the interior to suggest a kind of “below decks” atmosphere. “I wanted to strike a balance by having subdued light in the hallways—almost ‘mood lighting’ but not quite—and bright lights in the work spaces. We tried to use down lighting wherever possible.”

Adams also worked the nautical theme into the furnishings themselves. For example, the Meridian file cabinets were recessed into the corridor walls to create a batten-down-the-hatches sense of efficiency. “On the conference tables,” he says, “we used planked tops just like those on a ship, and we had them rolled in such a way as to suggest a nautical curve.”

The custom-built cherry and maple tables boast another quirky maritime feature. Embedded in each corner of the table are glass prisms, each slightly larger than a fist. These curious objects are exact replicas of the prisms that old ships used to install in the ship’s body to diffract sunlight into the lower decks. “I had come across references to the prisms while I was reading up on the British Royal Navy,” Rice recalls. “When I found out that I could order reproductions of these from the Meridian Maritime Museum in Connecticut, I knew I wanted to work them into the design somehow. The table idea seemed like a natural fit, so I suggested it. Bob loved it and made the necessary arrangements.”

Rice has since discovered that prisms have added more than just decorative whimsy.

“These things are the greatest little conversation starters you can imagine,” he says. “I don’t know how many times I’ve used these to break the ice with a new potential client.” In fact, so many of Rice’s clients have become enamored of the prisms that Anchor Capital has instituted a new policy of giving away custom-engraved prisms to clients when they reach their 10-year anniversary with the firm.

The conference room also features two custom wall units, made by Maine cabinetmaker Bruce Swift of Woodworking in Booth Bay. One, a serving station, features a Carnelian granite counter with plenty of storage space above and below. Its sister unit, occu-



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pying the opposite corner, houses electronic conferencing equipment.

Swift also created the exquisite custom cabinet installation in Rice's own office. Fashioned from cherry with maple inlays, the unit is sleek, versatile, and functional. With its multiple pigeonholes and ample storage space, this piece is closely attuned to its owner's habits. "The way I work," says Rice, "I'm inevitably trying to manage a great number of projects simultaneously. This unit accommodates my style of work extremely well."

The most striking thing about Rice's office, however, is the remarkable window view of the ocean which perfectly complements the interior. The window strikes a neat balance with the wall mural adorning the main reception area. The 1848 print by Boston artist Edward Whitfield depicts the view of Boston Harbor from East Boston. Adams found the work through a connection at the Boston Athenaeum, then convinced the private library to loan it out for photo-reproduction. "I knew I wanted to do a mural," says Adams, "something that really captured your attention when you first walked in. But since this is a growing company—likely to move on again in the future—I didn't want to invest in an expensive permanent installation."

The lounge area, with its promenade of deep money-green carpet and rich cherry walls, also features a long wooden bench and Metropolitan chairs surrounding a custom glass table featuring the company's "anchor" logo.

While Rice is the first to admit that the office bears the strong imprint of

Reproduction ships' prisms adorn a custom plank-top conference table.

his own tastes, he also instructed Adams to take his employees' concerns into careful account. Adams held individual consultations with each staff member—a rare luxury, even with a small company project—trying to identify particular needs and tastes in crafting highly individualized offices. Tsoi/Kobus then created a different configuration in each office, using the same basic menu of furnishings and custom cabinetry.

Working with a smaller company gave Adams the leeway to make recommendations and get them approved quickly—the kind of tight-ship efficiency that often seems impossible with larger projects. And rather than being a hindrance, Rice's take-charge attitude ultimately proved a boon. "This one was a real pleasure to work on," Adams says. "Bill was very well prepared, and he wasn't afraid to sit down and look at plans. As a result, we were able to draw up a comprehensive plan, critique it, and finalize it within two weeks. The whole project took less than nine weeks from start to finish."

That efficiency shows in the finished design, which manages a perfect balance between style and economy. "After all," Adams observes, employing an appropriate metaphor, "there's always the danger of going overboard." ♦

ALEX WRIGHT has written for numerous publications, including *Harvard Magazine*, *Yankee Magazine*, and *Utne Reader*. He is a contributing editor at *Design Times*.