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Exotic Homes Around the World





Caribbean Classic

A ST. JOHN RESIDENCE FRESHENS THE BEST OF LOCAL TRADITIONS

Architecture by Mike de Haas, AIA/Interior Design by Twila Wilson

Landscape Architecture by Wendy Jacobs Ramos, ASLA/Text by Michael Frank/Photography by Dan Forer

Calibrating a new house to an old place is one of the more interesting—and tricky—ways to challenge architects and designers alike. This is particularly true when the old place is a Caribbean island, with its aura of swash-buckling, sun-washed freedom, an anything-goes mentality that often leads to structures of dubious merit and interiors dressed up in the design equivalent of resort wear.

Fortunately for Twila Wilson, an interior designer, and Mike de Haas, an architect, both of whom are based in the Virgin Islands, their clients Katrin and Karl-Erivan Haub

had a deep connection to this part of the world. Their affection for the land they chose on St. John was such that they insisted on setting their house on a plateau below the highest point on their striking hillside parcel, which even de Haas initially thought of as the obvious site. It doubtless helped, too, that the Haubs are European and that for much of the year they live in a medieval clock tower in Cologne, which over the years they have lovingly restored. “When we finally decided to build a house on the island,” says Katrin Haub, “it had to be timeless, classic and as sensitive to the remarkable setting as possible.”

The Haubs sought to build a house that would be rooted in the local architectural vocabulary without becoming a swollen pleasure palace. They wanted it to be able to withstand battering hurricanes while remaining as open as possible to the light, air and water views. They also wanted it to have quite a bit of relaxed, easygoing chic.

Early on the Haubs invited de Haas to visit them in their

old clock tower, whose timbered ceiling was a feature Karl-Erivan Haub hoped to incorporate into the St. John house as a way of subtly linking his two separate homes and lives. In searching for an echo in St. John’s architectural legacy, de Haas first looked to the substantial precedent of a nearby sugar mill; when this struck the Haubs as too heavy, de Haas moved on to some of the region’s historic residences.

To create their house on St. John, Karl-Erivan and Katrin Haub called on architect Mike de Haas and interior designer Twila Wilson. ABOVE: The entrance court. The landscape design is by Wendy Jacobs Ramos. OPPOSITE: The gallery, which is at the heart of the floor plan. “It was always to be the main meeting space. The walls are 14 feet tall, and the windows were raised up to remain in scale,” says de Haas.



De Haas's contemporary take on indigenous customs emerges in the house's detailing.



Many of these were conceived around a low-ceilinged entrance hall that gave way to a larger common room. "It was in this rapport between the intimate and the expansive," he explains, "that I found my way into the project."

De Haas's way in, at once literal and figurative, ended up becoming a more modern take on an old local custom: He introduced the house with an interior courtyard, which in essence is the first (open) entrance hall; from here a visitor proceeds to the front door and the second (enclosed) entrance hall before heading either straight to the capacious gallery, left to the kitchen and breakfast room or right to the master bedroom wing.

"Arranging the house around

a courtyard freed us to take advantage of so many beautiful natural elements," says de Haas. "We even pulled back the guest rooms and connected them by outdoor hallways so that they would have their own views, ventilation and much more privacy than you would find in a traditionally massed house."

De Haas's contemporary riff on indigenous customs emerges in much of the house's detailing. In order to translate his client's German timbered ceiling into a more locally suitable expression, he looked at open-trussed ceilings anchored by king posts; this technique became the centerpiece of both the gallery and all the upper-floor rooms. For other ceilings he used simpler tongue-and-groove cypress,

"The cabinetry is Mike's design, and it was built on-site," Wilson says of the kitchen (above). Viking range and hood. RIGHT: In the informal dining area, she opted for black and white with accents of Caribbean color. "The openings in the room alternate between doors and windows. The doors lead to an exterior dining deck that ties into the pool deck," de Haas points out. Floor tiles, Paris Ceramics. Rocky Mountain window and door hardware throughout.



"The hallway," de Haas says, "has a barrel-vaulted ceiling that's lower than the gallery roof. This mimics the island's traditional great rooms, where the entrance ceiling was lower than the gallery." Wilson chose Bulgarian limestone tiles, from Paris Ceramics, for the colon-naded space.





ABOVE: The master bedroom's octagonal shape allows for a window or door-way in each wall and, in turn, optimal views. "We went with yellow on the walls here because it sets off the blue of the Caribbean. It makes the blue pop—not that nature needs our help!" Wilson says. **RIGHT:** The master bath. Waterworks faucets and sconces. Glass wall tiles, Walker Zanger.

a St. John favorite, though in the entrance hall he gave it a distinctive twist by shaping it into a gentle curving arch.

There were other clever gestures too. Almost every room opens onto a terrace or patio. Yet in order to make it possible to cool the gallery when, because of inclement weather, the windows and French doors remain closed, de Haas designed a shaft that brings up ventilation from the floor below (cool air floats in through grates tucked

away under window seats). All of the house's windows have functioning shutters to protect the glass during fierce storms. And the entire property has a forward-thinking relationship to water and waste: Rainwater is collected in cisterns, as is traditional in the Virgin Islands, but less usual is the way the house's sewage is filtered through constructed wetlands, a series of landscaped troughs that follow the contours of the hill; plants are nourished and





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From the pool, which features a compass rose, an infinity edge, limestone coping and a coral-stone deck, the island of Tortola can be seen. A teak-and-aluminum railing skirts the deck's edge. LEFT: De Haas situated a covered veranda right outside the gallery, extending the living space. Centered between the columns is Little Tobago island.

waste is purified at the same time, by a system that is entirely gravity-fed.

Now how does an interior designer hold her own against all this architectural vigor? If she is Twila Wilson, she makes it clear that she is not interested in another “Caribbean corny, overcooked pastel” approach. She and her clients agreed that

temporary arrangement that she found the house’s softening spirit.

As it became clear that the larger rooms in particular needed humanizing, Wilson retained the gauzy effect, using it as interior curtains in the finished gallery and bed tenting in the bedrooms. The public rooms also needed pieces that would stand up to 14-

“The clients were open to bringing the decoration up to meet the architecture.”

the interiors should reflect the muscularity of the architecture. They should also reflect the best of local tradition—hardwood furniture with bold lines and silhouettes—while at the same time reaching for a cosmopolitan air and remaining open to an infusion of color. “This had to be a house with a strong voice,” Wilson says. Interestingly, one of Wilson’s earliest effects was more like a whisper: When her clients wanted to spend a first Christmas in their still-unfinished home, Wilson ordered up miles of theatrical gauze and draped it throughout much of the house, thereby concealing construction debris. She put down sisal rugs and vivid pillows, and it was in this casual

foot ceilings—hence the large painted Brazilian cupboards, the long custom-made mahogany dining table and the antique West Indian rockers, which in this context acquire an almost sculptural dimension. Further detailed layering came from Katrin Haub, who is an avid traveler and a discerning collector.

Finally, there are the colors: lime green, raspberry, mango, bougainvillea, hibiscus pink and half a dozen different yellows, indoors and out, on cushions and upholstery, bric-a-brac and china. “The clients were open to bringing the decoration up to meet the architecture. They were willing to let their house sing,” says Wilson. “And so was I.”

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