



# Tropically Integrated

SPINNING THE BAHAMIAN COLONIAL COTTAGE OF OLD INTO A DESIGN OF ITS OWN PLACE AND TIME



Architecture by Lubrano Ciavarra Design  
Interior Design by Port of Call  
Text by Gerald Clarke/Photography by Steven Brooke



For a client's house on Harbour Island in the Bahamas, Lubrano Ciavarra Design utilized Bahamian colonial-era forms and natural materials to conceive a house that reflects the island's sense of place. Among the innovations of the design is the *ipe*-wood shutter system, which wraps around each of the three small, function-specific wings (sleeping, living, kitchen). OPPOSITE TOP: The property's beachfront side. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: The guest-wing entrance.



The indoor-outdoor living room. The white stucco walls of the building's concrete-block core are surrounded by living-space-extending porches. With its beams, rafters and window elements exposed, the space has a decidedly architectural aesthetic. Interior designer Mimmi O'Connell's selection of furnishings includes Indian sofas and tables, Kravet sofa fabric,



OPPOSITE: The double-height library has built-in bookshelves constructed of *ipe*, which is termite-resistant. Its stair- and catwalk-balustrade design was inspired by that of the area's old colonial cottages. Where the shelves meet the pickled-cypress ceiling, the architects concealed an air-conditioning system and uplighting.

The village is situated on the west side of that little patch of the Bahamas called Harbour Island, and natives say you would have to be crazy to build a house on the island's other side. That's where hurricanes strike. But that's also where there are long stretches of pink sand and dazzling views to the farthest horizon. And that, of course, is where a French-born New Yorker decided to plant her tropical retreat. If she could not stop the hurricanes, she could build a house that would stand up to them as much as possible.

To design that house, in 1999, she hired two young Manhattan architects who had just launched their own firm, Lubrano Ciavarra Design. "She was our first official client," says Lea Ciavarra. "She was our Medici," adds Anne Marie Lubrano. "She allowed us to explore."

Exploration meant research in books and magazines, as well as trips to Harbour Island itself, which is only a short ride in a water taxi from an airport on Eleuthera. It also meant a visit to a balmy enclave closer to home—the tropical house at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. "We went there more for inspiration than specifics," says Ciavarra. "But we were inspired by the palm trees." While they



ABOVE: On the side that faces the ocean, an *ipe* deck reaches from the edge of the house to the swimming pool. LEFT: The master bedroom. "The idea of this room," Anne Marie Lubrano points out, "was to sleep under the grand canopy of the peaked roof, lulled to sleep by island cross breezes from the bay and ocean beyond." A wood wall separates the bedroom from the bath.

were still at the drawing board, Hurricane Floyd struck the island, blowing away a dune on their client's property and persuading them to relocate her house 25 feet farther back from the high-tide line. When the islanders warned against hurricanes, they were not joking.

The owner wanted a house big enough for her family and friends: five bedrooms and a small stand-alone cottage. Out of respect for the island's friendly and understated traditions—"There's no sense of us and them on Harbour Is-

land,” says Lubrano—she also wanted it to inconspicuously blend in with the landscape. How do you make less out of more? The architects’ solution was to nestle the house into the dunes in such a way that it tricks the eye. Viewed from the beach, it looks not like one house but like a group of small cottages. Only from the road side does it rise to its two full stories.

To make the structure look less imposing and to more effectively integrate it with the site, the architects also divided the house into three sections, with a wing each for sleeping, living and the kitchen and other service functions. The centerpiece of this island refuge, a place where everybody meets, is the soaring two-story library, which, at the client’s request, was made into a cubelike space, 24 feet high and 24 feet on each side. Lubrano likens it to a Rubik’s Cube without the puzzle. As in most other portions of the house, that cavernous cube is lined with a very dense South American wood called *ipe*. “We picked it because it resists termites, which are an issue on the island,” says Lubrano.

Like the rest of the house, the exterior walls of the library are encased in a finely crafted system of louvers, designed to allow easy entry to cooling breezes from the water while screening and softening the intense rays of the Bahamian sun. At night the louvers do the reverse, filtering light from the inside so that, to someone standing on the beach, the house gives off the enchanting glow of a Chinese lantern.

The result of so much thought and effort is what Mimmi O’Connell, an interior designer for the London firm Port of Call, calls a house of discipline and simplicity. Though she bought “some wonderful Oriental pieces,” O’Connell says she kept the interior very simple. “You don’t need much furniture when you’ve got good views and that wonderful space,” she says.

Out of respect for the islanders, the owner insisted on using only local craftspeople to construct the house. She even went so far as to buy them power tools when she discovered they had none. Lubrano and Ciavarra soon learned island ways. One day the contractor called to say he needed nails. What kind of nails? they asked. “As long as my finger,” he replied. However simple their methods, the island craftspeople amazed Lubrano and Ciavarra with their abilities. “Some projects can be difficult, but this was a happy one,” says O’Connell. “It was happy from the beginning to the end.” □

At the oceanfront elevation, the projecting wings of the kitchen, right, and master bedroom, left, establish a patio space with a trellis. As the architects intended, the unfinished *ipe* walls and cedar roof create a subdued visual counterpoint to the greens of the organic landscape treatment, the work of the owner, and the Bahamian sky.

