Tropical Integration
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 envision a house that reflects the island's sense of place. Among the innovations of the design is the pivot-pool shower system, which wraps around each of the three small, function-specific wings (sleeping, living, kitchen). Opposite, Top: The property's back door, Opposite, Bottom: The guest-wing entrance.
The indoor-outdoor living room. The white stucco walls of the building’s concrete deck area are surrounded by living-space-extending partitions. With its beams, rafters and windows elements exposed, the space has a distinctly architectural aesthetic. Interior designer Missy E. Connolly’s selection of furnishings includes Indian sofas and tables. Kravet sofa fabric.
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 Lee Ciavarra. “She was our Medicis,” 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 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-side 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-

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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 more like a 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 cubebike space, 24 feet high and 24 feet on each side. Lubrano likens it to a Rubik’s Cube with the puzzle. As in most other portions of the house, that cavernous cube is lined with a very dense South American wood called ep. “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. “It is a house of discipline and simplicity,” O’Connell says. “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 Cavarrarso 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 Cavarrarso 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, create a patio space with a trellis. As the architects intended, the unfinished ip walls and cedar roof create a subdued visual counterpoint to the green of the organic landscape treatment, the work of the owner, and the Bahamian sky.