

HARMONY HOUSE



AS SEEN IN
Ocean Home Magazine



MOREHOUSE MACDONALD AND ASSOCIATES CREATE A PRIVATE OASIS IN THE TROPICS

BY J. MICHAEL WELTON // PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAT REA PHOTOGRAPHY



Architect John MacDonald is not one to shy away from a challenge. So when a pair of new clients expressed their desire for a house in harmony with nature – on the side of a mountain on an island in the Caribbean – he stepped up.

First, he assembled a formidable team to tackle the project. There was a contractor, an interior designer, a landscape architect, and a battery of civil, mechanical and structural engineers. Then there was the feng shui consultant, brought on board to assure that the house was balanced, inside and out. “We consulted her on every decision we made,” MacDonald says. “It helped the design tremendously and was in line with client wishes.”

Those wishes were for environmentally oriented privacy. “They’re very centered, spiritual and in tune with the land,” says the owner and principal at Morehouse MacDonald and Associates in Lexington, Massachusetts. “And they’re outdoorsy.”

Taking advantage of the site and its views was paramount. A crescent-shaped, sandy beach lies below. Beyond that, an ocean view with island peaks peering out of corrugated waves linger over the horizon, while the mountainside the home is built on dominates the view behind.

So what was the structural solution to maximize the experience?

Morehouse MacDonald and Associates designed this home to be in tune with its surroundings.



The landscape features many thousands of pounds of cut coral stone and indigenous vegetation.

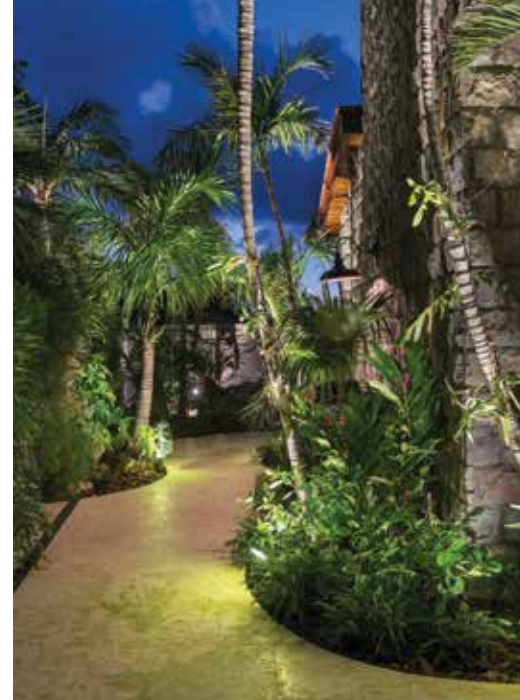
“The challenge was to build into a volcanic mountain at a 30-degree pitch, and make the home feel like it was part of the it,” he says.

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Cutting into the mountain maximized the ocean views but according to contractor Russel Fortenberry of Bennett Hofford Caribbean Construction, it also complicated the construction process. “There is no staging area for materials on a 30 degree slope,” he said. “So we had to work from one end of the house to the other, using the excavated platform for machinery and building materials as we progressed from start to finish.”

And how to protect the back of the home from a rush of storm water – and the occasional tumbling boulder – and still integrate it into the land? “We built three retaining walls that are seven feet tall, with five feet between them,” he says. “We created a terracing so there could be plantings in between and drainage behind the retaining walls.”

That’s where landscape architect James Craig, of Craig Collins International, stepped in. He wanted to encompass the views of water and land forms, then repopulate the site with the kind of vegetation that existed before construction started – and even before the island’s colonization. “The clients understood living in the tropics and wanted a garden to



embrace that awareness,” he says. “They said: ‘If there are very special and unique plants, we would like them to form the backbone or structure of the garden.’”

He designed curves for harmony and balance between yin and yang, adding a vertical water feature into a curvilinear wall. There, he used the same coral and volcanic stone that clad the house but “more prominently.



The coral stone blocks weigh 750 pounds each, and there are 40 of them applied in a curvilinear way,” he says. “At the very top of the water feature we transitioned to three natural pieces of coral as a finial that appears to be floating up into the ether.”

MacDonald also chose to work with the island vernacular in the home’s design so he clipped its gables to mimic the hipped roofs

that are common in the Caribbean. He also used indigenous materials known for their ability to hold up to wind, water and salt like mahogany trim, stucco cladding and windows that resist deterioration.

MERGING INSIDE WITH OUT

Inside, MacDonald collaborated with interior designer Shelby Simes, principal of Sterling Design of Hopkinton, MA. “We hit a home run right away,” he says. “The design lines just got better as we put ourselves into it.”

Merging inside and out was a priority. Doors open up to the outside on three levels, and in multiple locations for ocean and mountain views. And if the home looks a little Asian, there’s good reason for that. “The client is interested in Asian art, architecture and antiques,” he says

Simes zeroed in on that as well. “They had traveled around the world and their favorite place was Thailand, so I wanted to bring in aspects of that with fabric and color,” she says. “Not to flash them in their faces, but as souvenirs to remind them of their travels.”

In the living room, the clients wanted a sophisticated, inviting space, but they’re also casual in their lifestyle. The interior designer addressed that with a pair of glass chandeliers there and in the dining room. “The doors open up and when the breezes come through, there’s a wonderful clinking sound like champagne glasses,” she says. “It looks amazing and sounds great.”

They wanted no carpeting or rugs of any kind, preferring to walk barefoot on cool coral stone floors. “And they didn’t want window treatments, but there are other ways to soften the space and the sound,” she says. “We had to rely on upholstery to absorb the sound.”

Simes had the advantage of having worked on projects with MacDonald for decades. But she also had the last word on furnishings, art and accessories for the living room, dining room, kitchen and bath. “Pretty much anything in the house, we could provide.”

But her overarching concern was the 180-degree view. “We wanted everybody walking through the interior space to focus on that,” she says.

They will. ♦

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Asian art, architecture and antiques inspired the interior design.