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A SOUTHERN SPELL

OUTSIDE CHARLESTON, A COUPLE CREATE A SPACIOUS ISLAND RETREAT FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS



Architecture by Mark P. Finlay, AIA
Interior Design by Elissa Cullman
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For their residence on an island off the coast of South Carolina, a New England couple hired architect Mark P. Finlay to design a sprawling Shingle Style retreat (opposite top). **OPPOSITE BOTTOM:** Warm hues relax the formal tone of the entrance hall. Along the staircase, which leads into the great room, are three paintings by Sarah Hinckley. The chandelier is from Christie's. Rug and stair runner, Elizabeth Eakins. **ABOVE:** The great room. Sofa fabric from Dedar. Drapery fabric, Cowtan & Tout. Lamps, Sentimento.

"The house had to function on two levels—with the lightness of a beach house but with the gravitas the architecture dictated," says designer Elissa Cullman. Robsjohn-Gibbings side table, Karl Kemp. Low table, Suzanne Golden Antiques. Sofa and tufted chair fabrics, Holly Hunt.



South Carolina's Low Country, where terra firma never rises more than a few feet above sea level, cuts a long swath from just below Charleston to the state's southern border. Running the length of the Low Country, scores of barrier islands shield the coastline from the pounding Atlantic. The islands are flanked by marshlands on the mainland side and forested with 1,000-year-old live oaks, cypresses and long-leaf pines—an "unturned city of no lights," in the words of Simons Manigault, the protagonist of Padgett Powell's novel *Edisto*. Manigault was given to grousing about Edisto Island's

overdevelopment ("[They] converted sand dunes to sand traps, and they cemented the rest"), but a number of neighboring islands retain their rougher charms.

One of these, a Nantucket-size enclave (with no strip malls or fast-food chains), holds a special place in the hearts of a New England investor and his wife. "The last time we were down there," he recalls, "we were driving home from dinner, and a 10-foot alligator meandered across the street. Bobcats come onto the boardwalk. If you love nature and the beach, it's pristine."

The couple, avid golfers with two school-age children,



ABOVE: Painted Doric columns punctuate the second-floor porch, which, says Finlay, "cuts down the direct sunlight off the ocean side."
LEFT: On a wall of the dining room is Roe Ethridge's *Young Pine* (*Summer 3*). Candlesticks from Amy Perlin Antiques. Beauvais carpet.



fell under the island's spell while vacationing there several years ago. "I grew up surfing in North Carolina, and my wife is from Florida," says the husband. "And we both thought, Wouldn't it be great if our kids could grow up with what we had—big wide beaches and the warm Atlantic surf in the summer." Toward that end, they hooked up with a real estate-savvy architect who steered them to two available lots spanning a little over an acre of oceanfront property.

As it turned out, the architect, Mark P. Finlay, hails from the same Connecticut town that the couple call home. He also knows the island intimately, having built 22 houses there, including his own. While the local building modes run the gamut from plantation to Italian Renaissance, Finlay favors the Shingle Style, a look that clicked with the couple. They commissioned him to design a residence substantial enough to accommodate large gath-



The second-floor breakfast room. "With wraparound views, access to the outdoors and comfortable seating, it functions more as a second family room," notes Cullman. An early-19th-century trunk acts as a low table. Club chair and sofa fabric, Travers. Beauvais carpet.







erings of family and friends, exploit the coastal vistas and, not least of all, withstand hurricanes, floods and the other natural hazards endemic to the area. "You're almost fighting the sun down there," Finlay points out. "That means more covered porches and being careful about the orientation of certain rooms. And you have to elevate the house. The first floor is 10 feet above grade, to allow for flood regulations."

In this case, the extra-wide lot made it easier to work with both the elevation requirements and the view imperatives in a graceful manner. Finlay sketched a design that "hit it right out of the gate"—a three-story house with picturesque gables and porches, a bell-topped gazebo and stair

tower, and a wide raised deck with an infinity-edge swimming pool. Flush with the pool deck, the first floor contains a family room and billiard room, the children's rooms and guest rooms. The second floor, where the views open up, comprises the main living area and includes the great room, dining room, kitchen/breakfast room and media room. The third floor is largely given over to a spacious master suite. As expansive as the house is—there are 28 rooms in all, counting the guest cottage—the human proportions of the rooms keep it from feeling too grand. All those porches and Category 4 hurricane-resistant windows help to maintain an airy and casual mood.

Early in the planning process

LEFT: "The wife is a passionate cook," notes the designer, "so the overscale kitchen has two large islands—one to serve the sink and one the range." Porthole ceiling fixtures, Ralph Lauren Home. **ABOVE:** Handmade bark paper lines the walls of the family room, providing a textural backdrop for three photographs of cabanas on a Normandy beach by Götz Diergarten. The console is a painted antique French grain box. Beauvais jute carpet.





LEFT AND ABOVE: The master bedroom. Mary Beth Thielhelm's solar etchings *Green Sea I*, top, and *Black Sea I* hang in the sitting area. Sky-blue Venetian-stucco walls envelop the space, which offers ocean views. "It feels like you're totally wrapped in blue," says Cullman. Drapery, chair and ottoman fabrics, Rogers & Goffigon. Sitting area lamps, John Salibello. Bedside lamps, Lee Calicchio. Tiered buffet, Sibyl Colefax and John Fowler. **BELOW:** An *ipe* boardwalk leads to the beach. Windows and doors throughout, Tischler und Sohn.



Finlay introduced the couple to Elissa Cullman, of the New York-based interior design firm Cullman & Kravis, who has done beach houses from Martha's Vineyard to Malibu—including one residence on another barrier island. "This is not what you would call a typical beach house," she comments. "The architecture is very robust and sculptural. A lot of the furniture we selected

is heavier and darker than what we would normally use, so we contrasted that with a light beach palette in the majority of the rooms." She and project manager Jenny Fischbach mixed signature pieces, flea market finds and furniture of their own design against tonal backgrounds of cream, sandy beige and terra-cotta to create "a version of modern tradi-
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tional," according to Cullman. "It's cleaner and bolder and has fewer layers of information than a lot of our other work."

The vitality of the rooms owes a good deal to the artwork they collected with the couple. "We had so many walls to fill, and because it wasn't their primary residence, we had to be realistic about budget," recalls Fischbach. They haunted art fairs and Chelsea galleries in search of large-scale photography and prints and a few oil paintings by mostly upcoming artists. They commissioned a series of six

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abstract oils by Sarah Hinckley to brighten the three-story entrance hall and tracked down images of unique significance to the family, from dog studies by Ed Ruscha and William Wegman to old black-and-white surfing pictures to four "aura portraits" of the couple and their children. "You go to Chinatown in New York," explains the husband, "you drink some green tea to get in the mood, and you get your photo taken. I don't know what it's called, but they illuminate colors from your picture, and a woman interprets the colors. My wife has amber coming from the center because she's the stable force in the family—" "I don't know if you need that kind of detail," his steadier half demurs. "The point is, it's a good example of something eclectic and unique. Ellie and Jenny did a great job of creating a balance between understated, elegant and fun. Those are the three best ways to describe our home."

When the family's in residence, the scales tip in favor of fun. They come down to the island eight to 10 times a year with their chocolate Lab and as many as 10 or 15 houseguests. According to the husband, "a typical trip with family and friends will be, we'll spend all day at the beach surfing and boogie boarding, walking and bike riding, then come back to the house and cook a big dinner. We'll all go to the media room, watch a movie and fall asleep on the floor." □

UNDER THE RAINBOW

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(including pale yellow walls—glazed, appliquéd and stenciled, as in almost every room here—and matching sofas of rich green brocade) conjure up a garden in spring. Floral accents, found on a wall hanging, sofa cushions and more, cheerfully perpetuate this illusion. Such mixed floral touches are very much a Draper signature. "Does the flower garden have only one flower and one or two colors? Absolutely not!" Varney has written.

The palette was the result of a gentle tug-of-war between the husband, who loves intense shades, and the wife, who prefers what she calls a "colorless" look. (Varney remembers her saying, "If it were left to me, everything would be cream.") "Their collection really dictated the color scheme," says Montalban. In fine Draper tradition, the colors can vary, sometimes radically, from one room to the next.

The master bedroom was brilliantly conceived in pale peach and blue gray. It's a tranquil space with more than a touch of glamour to it. As elsewhere in the house, the designers reworked some of the couple's existing furniture—here, century-old pieces of mahogany that once belonged to the wife's parents. "Carleton said, 'I'm making it Hollywood,'" the wife recalls, before having them refinished in a seductive, powdery bluish gray. Classic Dorothy

"It's all the threads of their life. They wanted me to use everything."

Draper chairs, upholstered in an apricot-and-white check, "are the most comfortable ones in the house," she adds.

Now that the project is complete, Varney's clients look back in wonder. "He mixes colors that don't go together!" the husband says, sounding almost incredulous and singling out one of the guest rooms—done in pale green and lilac, with accents of yellow, pink and white—as an example. "It works because Carleton makes it work." The designer, serenely, invokes his fearless mentor. "Dorothy said, 'If it looks right, it is right.'" He once wrote of this designer that "she could make it all work." What he neglected to mention, and what he handily demonstrates here, is that he can, too. □

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