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A place in the sun

At Home on Daufuskie Island

By Diane McMahon. Photography by Nancy McGregor.



On a morning that boasts an endless blue sky, a cool breeze and no humidity, I hurry toward the boat dock in Harbour Town on the south end of Hilton Head Island. Buzzing in my brain, the words of James Russell Lowell query, “What is so rare as this day in... the low country?” I check my watch and look around for a pleasant young man I’ve only spoken to on the phone. I am meeting architect Michael Vaccaro and we are taking the 9:20 water taxi to Daufuskie Island (accessible only by water) where he will give me a private tour of one of his custom waterfront homes. The house’s builder, Ken Crast, and interior designer, Donna Coudes, join us at the dock. The water taxi transports our entourage across the sparkling Calibogue Sound toward Daufuskie. Rising from the eastern shore, an Italianate stucco villa crowned in red tile—almost the length of a football field—shimmers in the distance. Our destination. My eyebrows raise in a silent wow. The architect, builder and interior designer all smile. It was a successful collaboration.

We disembark at Haig Point landing and settle into the super-size golf cart that awaits us. We are meeting the owners (who wish to remain private) at their home. Mike points out some tabby ruins, markers of the island’s long history, and other landmarks. Bumping along the dirt track through unspoiled vegetation and sculptural trees Donna remarks, “Sometimes the island reminds me of Jurassic Park.”

Mike, Ken and Donna are greeted like family by the owners. There is mutual respect and appreciation among all of them. Standing on the entry stone steps, my eye sweeps the 147-foot façade facing the street. I will have to come back outside on my own to take it all in. If an entry door is a portal to high expectations, this arched and glazed mahogany door with intricate grille work (custom made in South America) sets the tone. “The whole house is built around that door,” someone remarks as we enter the foyer.





The house has a grandeur that risks being reduced by superlatives. The 13-foot 4-inch ceiling in the foyer soars to an elliptical dome in the Great Room that is 23 feet 6 inch high. The curved, double story exterior window wall faces east, framing a panoramic seascape and looking beyond the sound to Hilton Head in the distance. Watching the morning light sparkling on the water the mistress of the house—aptly

referred to as “Queen” by her family—says, “look at the diamonds out there.” Prisms of light create patterns on the stone floors and plastered walls. The open twin staircases rise to an open central hall and balcony that overlook the first floor. The dome’s massive chandelier is mechanized so it can be reached for cleaning. The volume of space and light creates a feeling that borders on reverence. The owners’ yoga instructor has said, “It feels like I’m in church here.”





The house is brought down to earth by the owners' humor and grounded geniality. (Although the encyclopedic-size design book where Donna catalogued their thousands of design decisions and selections is called the "bible.") The grand spaces are complemented by intimate, human-scale rooms. It is all made livable by the owners' extraordinary attention to detail, skillfully executed by Mike, Ken and Donna—who I now think of as the "triumphant triumvirate." Mike and Ken are calm, competent and seemingly unflappable. Donna brings the effervescence; that rare human who appears equally comfortable with men and women. Though slender as a palmetto blade she can go toe to toe with the men, including the husband—decidedly the alpha male.

Mike Vaccaro has designed several custom homes on Daufuskie, including his parents', but this house was his first Italianate style home. He likes the challenge of researching the history and learning the design elements of different periods. In the United States, Italianate architecture was popularized as an alternative to Gothic or Greek revival architecture as early as the 1840s. Blandwood, built in North Carolina in 1844 and the former residence of North Carolina governor, John Morehead, is the oldest surviving example. Various reinterpretations of the Italianate style became indigenous to American Victorian architecture from the mid to the late 19th century, up and down the East Coast.

The Daufuskie home's owners believe there is magic in arches so an Italianate style home was a perfect choice. The architectural design is rich in arched windows, doors and thresholds. Mike employed other characteristic elements: Tuscan columns; balustrades on porches and entry steps; balconies with wrought iron railings; deep over-hanging eaves supported by brackets; an arched stone entry with a richly detailed archivolt; both hipped roofs and flat roofs. The red roof tiles were custom crafted in Mexico. The use of symmetrical architectural features—matching stairways, paired columns flanking thresholds, twin upstairs/downstairs master suites—are mixed with asymmetrical details and spaces that add to the house's visual interest.

“elegant, inviting personal
and private sanctuary”

The architectural drawings are beautiful; like artwork. Building the house is a different task. Ken Crast looks up at the elliptical dome and the 14-inch deep crown molding that surrounds it and shakes his head with the slightest smile. “Anytime you bend wood you quadruple the price.” There are a lot of curves in this house. Even the walls have radius edges. Structural engineers had to go deep to find something solid enough to anchor this 8,200 square foot house to the site. The building crew used 30,000 pounds of structural steel to support it. The stone used on the floors and stairways flanking the foyer were from Turkey and had to be fabricated on site. The cast stone fireplace surrounds had to be drawn on AutoCAD and sent to Architectural Cast Stone in Charlotte, N.C. for fabrication. For the fireplace in the Great Room, the owners couldn’t visualize the proper height of the surround compared to the domed ceiling height. On a seemingly endless roll of paper either Mike or Ken sketched it out to scale, then climbed a very tall ladder and pinned it up so they could see if it was right. Each cabinet, vanity and display case (with inset French wire) was custom made, as were the wrought iron stair banisters and railings for the balconies. The millwork and stonecutting was done on sight. Every piece of machinery, building material, finish material and furnishing had to be scheduled, shipped, freighted and ferried to an island whose only access is by water. Ken developed special software to handle the massive logistics.

With the amount of glass, iron and stone, the interior could have felt cold. The “triumphant triumvirate” prevented that. Wood is used extensively in the architectural details, finishes and furnishings to counterbalance the coolness. The stone floors in the central public spaces transition to warm wood floors and soft Persian carpets in the private zones, including the master suites (upstairs and downstairs,) the two guest rooms, the fully equipped gym, the kitchen, keeping room, family room, study and his and her offices. Mahogany windows, interior doors and wood cabinetry contrast with stone and granite surfaces. Hand-cut bricks are used in the barreled kitchen ceiling, the surround of the keeping room fireplace, and accent the arched thresholds to the Great room and dining room adding rusticated texture.



Haig Point Lighthouse on Daufuskie Island.



Donna Coudes, who has worked with the owners for more than 20 years, has translated their tastes and preferences into an elegant, inviting personal and private sanctuary for the couple. “Together, the couple has traveled the world. They have lived in New Zealand. They have built, decorated, moved in and moved out of numerous homes. They say this is their final house. Donna carefully selected furnishings, treasures and personal keepsakes to showcase in this house. She masterminded the furniture layouts and placement of every decorative accessory on paper, and then crated and coded each item by room to expedite the move-in process.

In the wife’s water-view office—a personal and romantic room with a curved Victorian desk, carved mantel fireplace and a chaise upholstered in apricot velvet—her mother’s gardening hat and an intricately beaded Indonesian baby carrier are displayed among the many books that befit a former librarian. The matching husband’s office on the first floor is paneled mahogany and fully soundproofed—a marital compromise so he wouldn’t be bothered (or bothersome.) The top of a closed grand piano in the hall beneath the south stairs displays framed pictures of friends and family. The owners’ art collection includes: an explosive painting of seagulls in flight by renowned New Zealand artist Peter McIntyre; blazing expressionist works by American artist LeRoy Neiman; and an oriental screen formerly owned by Elton John.

There is a strong Asian influence in many of the personal objets d’art and furnishings displayed throughout the house. Perhaps this contributes to the pervading sense of orderliness and serenity. Except for the mahogany paneled study (which is the wife’s favorite place to read), her husband’s paneled office, and the wallpapered powder room and baths, the walls are a creamy Venetian plaster with light taupe trim. Throughout the house Donna, hand-in-hand with her client and now long-time friend, selected a palette of taupes and creams with accents in “pinky, apricot colors” for the soft furnishings and fabrics. The neutral background gives a quiet cohesion to the multiple spaces and gives light, nature and the outdoor seascape center stage.

The “ladies” were given one inviolate rule by the “master of the house.” Under NO circumstances were they allowed to cover any of the glass in the doors or windows. Not anywhere. Donna managed to soften the expansive great room window wall with ingeniously designed stationery drapery panels. Bedroom drapes are decorative and steer clear of the windows. Guests will be happy to wake up with the sun.

The owners invite us to lunch on their patio overlooking their waterfront beach. After touring the house we get to experience it. The conversation among these old friends is as warm as the sun; the peacefulness as palpable as the cool breeze off the water. In each direction is nature—wild and beautiful. In my head I address Mr. Lowell, “What is so rare as a perfect day?”

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