

A CLASSIC, REBORN

A FAMED, AND CONTROVERSIAL, HOUSE IN SEASIDE EVOLVES WHILE MAINTAINING ITS ORIGINAL ARCHITECTURAL INTEGRITY

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Walter F. Chatham / Leo Casas, AIA, NCARB, Braulio Casas Architects PA, ARCHITECTURE

John Fernandez & Jennifer True, Fernandez & True Interiors, INTERIOR DESIGN

Jodi Hamid, The Arkon Group, BUILDER

In Seaside, the celebrated planned community on Florida's Panhandle, everyone knows the "Chatham house." This modern dogtrot structure, brilliant in its simplicity, created a stir in the quiet beach town when it was built 23 years ago, before Seaside's quaint, coastal Florida vernacular structures ever existed.

At the time, architect Walter Chatham designed it for himself

and his family as a house that was very much in tune with the surroundings, living almost like a modern camp. The two structures of the dogtrot opened completely to the outdoors via 10-foot doors, and materials were kept simple and rugged. There was nothing precious about it.

In that simplicity lay its allure. When the new owner, New Orleans attorney John Houghtaling, first saw it, he was so





The dining room, on the ground floor of the newly built tower, is grounded by a cast stone table that looks like the cross section of a tree. “At first, I thought it was a slice of a tree, but upon further inspection I found that it was cast stone,” Fernandez says. “It feels very organic, in line with the architecture, but it’s practical too.”

mesmerized by it that he bought it the same day. Though he had a passion for the architecture and history of the house, he had serious concerns about its livability.

As architect Leo Casas tells it, “Walter designed the house not so much as an architectural tour de force, but for living at the beach in an unassuming way. That was fine in the early 1990s, when there were no neighbors. Things have changed. Now, it feels like more of an urban setting than it did when Walter and his family lived in it.”

At a minimum, the house, in its new context, had to afford more privacy. The pavilions of the original house were like glorified porches that were totally transparent unless all the doors were closed. The new owner wanted not only to add a

sense of privacy, but also to infuse the structure with modern elegance. “He wanted it to be modern and sexy,” interior designer John Fernandez says, who also designed Houghtaling’s primary residence in New Orleans. “Beyond that, he gave us carte blanche.”

Houghtaling’s primary objective was to connect the two structures of the dogtrot, and to add a swimming pool on the existing deck space. The connection came via a tower, designed to harmonize with the original architecture, that provided a dining space, library and observation tower.

“From the very beginning, we studied the house as thoroughly as possible to understand its language, its effortless forms,” Casas explains. “My fear was that, whatever our intervention was, if we weren’t





The master, which is located off the living room, opens up on both sides to the outdoors, so fabrics and materials had to be kept simple.

careful, it would look like it was added on to. We took the time to understand its architectonic legibility enough to take it apart.”

In the restoration process, the team was respectful of Chatham’s original intent. Materials were upgraded rather than wholly changed. The corrugated metal roof was replaced with heavy-gauge

galvanized metal that looked the same while providing better protection from the elements. The pine flooring, which had weathered over the 23 years, was replaced with Ipe, a wood that better stands up to the climate.

The entrance experience also was upgraded. Because part of the Seaside code called for a







porch of some kind, Casas built upon Chatham's original design by creating a "porch" that consisted of a Plexiglas bridge over a koi pond, a feature that connected the house to the street line. "The idea was to bridge the house to the street," Casas says. "In effect, we thought of the whole front yard as a porch. It was a very innovative thing for Seaside. It took a little bit of convincing."

For his part, Fernandez approached the project "as if I were designing a yacht." Because the home opens up completely to the outdoors, materials had to be durable and weatherproof, yet modern and sleek. "I didn't want it to feel in any way cottagey," the designer explains.

His solution was to combine organic forms with modern profiles and dramatic expressions, all while keeping the notion of extreme

indoor/outdoor living. Though the owner's original intent was to place the living room within the new tower structure, Fernandez moved it to a long space just off the main entrance.

"That long room didn't have any solid walls or way to create a seating arrangement," Fernandez says. "I designed a resin and stainless steel panel that served as a divider from the kitchen, which gave me a back rest for the Ghost sofa, from Artefacto, and a foundation for the seating. Then we floated an orange day bed on one side, and placed two beautiful cognac leather and steel chairs on the other side to complete the conversation circle."

The organic feel comes via a cowhide ottoman, fawn-colored cowhide rug, and two teak root benches that "look like they were plucked right out of the earth," Fernandez notes. To bring down

The two guest bedrooms were designed by Chatham as architectural twins, so Fernandez decided to create an almost identical scheme. The beds and bedside tables are the same, but the art and seating vary. In one Fernandez placed a pair of Cobonpue's Portia chairs, which, he says, "remind me of windswept fences you find on the beach."



In a second guest bedroom above the bed is “North of Nowhere,” a painting by Florida artist Cheryl Troxel. Seating consists of a pair of Tilt chairs by industrial designer Kenneth Cobonpue.

the scale of the space, he hung two monumental polyethylene light fixtures from the corrugated metal barrel ceiling.

The space originally intended for the living room became the dining room. The design began with a table that Fernandez found. “At first, I thought it was a slice of a tree, but upon further inspection I found that it was cast stone,” he says. “It feels very organic, very much in line with the architecture, but it’s practical too.”

Fernandez combined the table with Ghost chairs slipcovered in washable white linen fabric. That added a softness to the space while contributing to the low-maintenance approach that the house itself necessitated.

On the back side of the dining room, and continuing out to the pool deck, is a checkerboard wall

that made up the exterior of the original house. The wall is actually a set of panels that open up to the outdoors.

“That was part of the trademark of the Chatham house,” Fernandez explains. “It seemed sacrilegious to change it. But the original checkerboards were multicolored - white with orange, yellow and royal blue - because that was considered the ‘art’ of the house.”

Fernandez struggled with whether to touch it, but ultimately decided to “quiet the pattern down” by painting it in shades of “ghost and off-ghost” inside, while maintaining the black and white pattern outside.

The three bedrooms were designed in a simple, modern style. The master, which is located off the living room, opens up on both sides to the out-



doors, so fabrics and materials had to be kept simple. A stainless steel canopy bed is flanked by two white Giatti nightstands, on which rest midcentury-modern Nelson Ball Lotus lamps.

The other two bedrooms were designed by Chatham as architectural twins, so Fernandez decided to create an almost identical scheme.

The beds and bedside tables are the same, but the art and seating vary. Above one bed is “North of Nowhere,” a painting by Florida artist Cheryl Troxel; above the other is “Faces in a Crowd,” by New Orleans artist Steve Martin.

Seating in one bedroom consists of a pair of Tilt chairs by industrial designer Kenneth Cobonpue. In the other, Fernandez placed a pair of Cobonpue’s Portia chairs, which, he says, “remind me of windswept fences you find on the beach.”

When Houghtaling walked into the house, a year after the renovation began, he was duly impressed.

“The house itself is such a work of art that we felt a huge responsibility to get this right,” the interior designer muses. “I got the nicest compliment possible from the client when he said, ‘What you did was pure genius. I can’t tell you how well the house lives now.’”

Casas had the opportunity to find this out for himself. When he and his family were between houses, they stayed in this house for a week with the owner’s permission.

“The house lived beautifully,” he says. “There’s an effortless quality to it. As hard-edged as the materials seem, there is a comfort and a softness to the house, in addition to a sense of transparency and connectivity. It’s a very special place.” ▲

A three-story tower was built to connect the two structures of the original house. Though the vernacular is different, the tower fits in remarkably with Seaside’s architectural signature.