

KEY WEST CONTEMPORARY

Nautical Touches Punctuate a Streamlined Florida Escape

Architectural and Interior Design by Stephen Knollenberg | Text by John Loring |
Photography by Dan Forer

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Simplicity and complexity make excellent housemates when a love of originality and adventure is thrown into the mix.

Birmingham, Michigan, designer Stephen Knollenberg thrives on “disparities of style and the tensions of juxtaposing opposites,” terms he favors in describing his adventure of creating an airy island pavilion for fellow Birmingham residents in far-off, tropical Key West.

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The island had been chosen not just for its lush flora and celebrated shoreline but also for its rich history and picturesque architecture, which resonated with some of America’s most colorful celebrities, such as Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and Harry Truman—a midwesterner who wintered there in his Little White House.

Although acutely sensitive to the charms of the local architecture, Knollenberg designed a winter white house with a modernist edge for his Michigan neighbors that was exactly what they were looking for—“something more

opposites.”

adventuresome, fresh and hip than buying a 19th-century house and renovating. This,” he explains, “was a separate trajectory for them.”

The project began with basics. “They put me on a bicycle,” he recalls, “and we just pedaled all over, looking at shingles and tin roofs and board-and-batten siding, getting the flavor of the island.”

They eventually found the right house for a makeover. It was in a pleasing beach vernacular, built inland in the mid-20th century and later moved close to the water—part town house, part beach house. “It was not,” the designer notes, “one of those places that looks like nothing from the street, giving no idea of the Shangri-la within. It was not pretty.”

Today the seamlessly reconfigured house offers not the slightest hint that it was ever anything short of a Shangri-la within and without.

“We embraced the spirit of the house, giving it a face-lift and contemporizing its structure while remaining sensitive to the island’s traditional, historical aesthetic,” Knollenberg explains.

An open floor plan—centered on a vaulted two-story space with a floating staircase and gallery, multiple skylights and walls of French doors opening onto gracious loggias—endows the spacious interior with a sense of the ethereal. Throughout the 3,500-square-foot house there is an amplifying ambiguity of boundaries. Board-and-batten siding, Bermuda shutters, exposed trusses, plank ceilings and roof overhangs imbue the architecture with the requisite Caribbean flavor.

The graphically arresting minimalism of the stair and gallery railings, with their nautical references, define and focus the flow of the interior’s open volumes. The simple steel post and rail elements were installed and lacquered white, then a master boat rigger was called in to thread rows of white rope through the uprights and tie nautical knots that attach to the newels. “Almost everyone sails in Key West, so we were drawn to experiment with the idea of rope,” says the designer. The crisp lines of the taut rigging visually intersect with a large-format print by German-born photographer Renate Aller, giving the double-height hall the feel of a sizable ship under full sail. A circular steel-and-sandblasted-glass chandelier sustains the minimalist tone.

Every available surface (including the floors) was painted white. The conspicuous absence of color on this relentlessly colorful tropical island, and the insistence on simplicity in the all-white interiors, lets the furnishings, a meticulously executed blend of the antique and the now, stand out. Clearly, nothing was left to chance as Knollenberg orchestrated the mix of the owners’ art collections with the highly varied furnishings he found for their house.

“Everything that entered the house had to have real quality,” the designer states. “I’m kind of a policeman that way. I pick things up everywhere; and if they’re all of great quality—although from different times and different places—they reach a point where a certain balance is struck. They do connect and find their places. Fortunately, the owners attuned themselves to be surprised and let me roll with what I thought.”

Stephen Knollenberg believes the greatest compliment to the house came from a “conch” (the name members of the so-called Conch Republic use to refer to themselves): “I’ve never seen anything like this before, but it still feels like it’s part of Key West.”

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