

A POLO PLANTATION

AMERICAN ANTIQUES DISTINGUISH A SPORTSMAN'S FLORIDA ESTATE

Architecture by Francis Florewood, interior design by Naomi Leff, with
 Art by Steven M. J. Aronson/Photography by Scott Frazier



Two 18th-century southern plantation houses were merged to create a Florida plantation-style residence at the Palm Beach Polo & Country Club in Wellington, Florida. Artwork in the entrance hall is a recreation of John Philip's 1790s by Hugh Carl. The spiral staircase and cupola are from Philadelphia's

Plantation was the trick he was on," interior design Naomi Leff says of her client Neil Branch, a builder of companies and an impressioned patron of polo (he owns the Black Watch team and plays on it). "Where and

surrounds," echoes architect Francis Florewood, looking back to the seminal moment of the project. "I had designed a guest cottage on the grounds of his Hampton estate, and afterward he said, 'Branch, is this Single Style pretty much all you do, or

would you do a Louisiana plantation house on my property in Florida?'"

"I really wanted that gentleman feeling," Branch confesses. "All the houses down there looked pretty much the same—Bourgeoisie and Old-money-inspired." "That

here" is the Palm Beach Polo & Country Club in Wellington, an almost twelve polo fields, all the international high-level tournament players converge in proximity every winter. Branch had purchased five acres within the club's great grounds and

then acquired an adjacent farm on which to house his horses and build his own private polo field.

"One of the things that disturbed us about Florida is the fact that it's very flat," Florewood says. "We had to add character to the land."

"They built a six-foot hill—'That's big for Florida'—both as topographical relief and as the site for the residences. At the same time they extended the pond to front to three acres so that the house would have a water prospect, and later they built a stone

Naomi Leff divided the living room into intimate seating areas that attract energy. Neil Branch's favorite Queen Anne antiques and French oil paintings, which include The Builders of Williams, Connecticut, circa 1890, by Thomas Phillips. Walls and ceiling fabrics from Thomas House. Marble and glass cupola.





bridge, with planes of limestone ceilings curving over it. "You drive across that bridge on a series of alleys of fifty-foot beams and the 'presentation' of the house is complete," says the architect.

All fifteen rooms and almost 14,000 square feet, the full-bodied building evokes an air of wide-shouldered elegance, contemporary halls and long-wind-making main jolts—in fact, the great age of plantation, which remained over the grounds of the Mississippi with what one historian called the "vacillating indeterminacy of wild fire struggling jungle trees." Those houses were elegance, Grace and Time Proposition incarnate, to be sure, but they were also profaned by slav-

ery and ground to the point of insularity.

The outcrop designed by Flannery is fabricated in line and stone in construction—a Greek Revival-style house with six Doric columns (each present in a simple porch) across both the front and the back facades. A sunny veranda stretches along the first floor, a broad balcony along the second. The big roof is punctuated by three domed windows. One of the symmetrical wings is for staff quarters; the other contains a family room and an occasional fifteen-foot-high, mahogany-paneled billiard room. Thanks to traditional French doors, the house can virtually be thrown open like a pavilion.



Inside, the rooms are large and high. Making for a basic simplicity of organization is a wide central corridor that runs the entire one hundred-and-twenty-foot length of the house, its masonry and wood kept in check by columns.

The main floor, unlike the main in water "architectural glorification" houses, is paved not with brick or marble but with warm oak of random widths and lengths. The wood used a beautiful, porous, which is why it would be

the choice—despite the fact that it's already "sapped." Floorwood options.

The interior architecture, including the painting and the lighting, was executed simply, handily, by Nancy Lott, with the exception of

the mirrors, which she collaborated on with Flannery's tall light, painted wood table, that in a graceful world. They're big paintings for the door, back back, Lott says: "For instance, we used a lot of brasswork." Lott

there are, the claim, fifteen



different whites on the subtly glazed walls.

"There's a collaboration in this house that made it a little bit more like a house," she says. "The latter were custom made in tall, but in the marble-plantation

but with him. "The result is I never want dropping without him. He was involved in every detail, including—especially—the furniture." The latter were custom made in tall, but in the marble-plantation



"We finished a phase of our renovation," says Frank, who is part of the 10th generation of the family. "The room is bright and airy, with a warm, inviting atmosphere. The wooden chairs and table are perfect for a family meal. The view of the horses is a beautiful sight. We are looking forward to the next phase of our renovation."

"I love the green, blue and green of the designs," says Leff, who'd traveled America before their game with reproductions in the

master bedroom. Back to forward: Red hangings and blue and yellow table, decorative folk, Ralph Lauren artwork. Each unique.



The house is really busy with American primitive paintings, which Hirsch has long and actively collected. His own favorites reside, respectively, in the ivory-plated master bedroom (William Matthew Price's painting of

three children wearing red, white and blue, one of them waving the American flag) and in the warm-colored living room, which takes up the lion's share of the back of the residence (Anne Phillips's greatly realistic *The Instan-*

on of Washington, Connecticut, Ned Hirsch is also a long-time collector of American Queen Anne—witness the games table in the family room, the winged table in the living room, the chair in the kitchen and the child's

chair in the master bedroom. "It was challenging," Leff admits, "to work with a single lady of Queen Anne—and here of Queen Anne at that, which is very subtle and refined than its English counterparts—in opposed to

my Chippendale, which is big and sturdy, and will last the house for suitable for a single man."

Leff used the various pieces with not only understanding but ingenuity. At the top, "There are a lot of

"We worked very closely together," says Leff. "We went to every late estate auction. We had the greatest wall-to-wall flooring done about

the antique." Hirsch's Cottage Kettle table sits on American Queen Anne style chair in the master bed. Ralph Lauren table.



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beautiful things, but it's all arbitrary unless you have a plan—it's about their mood and how they fit and are they appropriate?" In the course of the decorating, Hirsch also became a collector of the American style—representations of it carved, wood-carved, inlaid, silk-stitched and etched can be seen throughout the house.

"We looked and looked and looked, and at certain points we just couldn't find what we were looking for, so we designed it," explains Leff. A pedral table with a curved top in the entrance hall, a pair of simple foot-

stools were specially made. The rug was an antique figure and Sultanabad (in the living room and dining room) and antique Florina (in the entrance hall, billiard room and wood-paneled family room). "There's very little color and pattern above the floor," Leff emphasizes, and indeed the fabrics and accessories are for the most part monochromatic: neutrals, blues and damasks.

The chair retained during the Georgian brass chandelier in the dining room also inlaid, representing that the space be lit entirely by candles. "We collected candlesticks for a year—mostly Queen Anne," Leff says. Hirsch among the treasures

they (Hirsch, evening after evening in a discrete Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington.

It is hard to imagine anyone responding to the house with anything less than pleasure. Francis Howard took the Greek Revival model, with its simple rooms, and fitted it admirably to his client's needs; then Stuart Leff, working with disparate elements, gave the place an equianime and a remarkable unity. From its first flimsy struggle down to its finished perfection, it remains a supreme plantation whose beauty is neither equanimous nor custom built but judicious and polished paintings and furniture. □

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