

Casa de Sueños

The House of Dreams that Hoffman built

by Suzanne Tissier LaBounty

Stepping onto the grounds of Casa de Sueños is like stepping onto a palatial estate in Andalusia on the southern coast of Spain. From the vine-covered entry complemented by a bubbling fountain, to the private terraces fenced in fish-scale terra cotta, one feels infinitely closer to the Mediterranean than the Caloosahatchee. This Spanish-revival home is truly a “house of dreams,” as its name translates.

Built on two and a half acres directly on the Intracoastal Waterway with a view that is unrivaled, Casa de Sueños is the vision of Dawn and Al Hoffman, founder of WCI Communities, Inc. and United States Ambassador to the Republic of Portugal. The Hoffmans put their heart and soul into the creation of the home, traveling throughout Europe to bring back and recreate their most favored architectural elements in the dwelling’s design.

Long-time admirers of 1920s architect Addison Mizner, known for his Moorish-Mediterranean-revival designs, the Hoffmans set out to create their own Mizner-inspired masterpiece. Important to the Hoffmans, however, was that the home feel like a home and not a formal manor. “We made sure that the rooms,



A two-story foyer with suspended stone and wrought iron staircase (above) greets arriving guests after passing through the entrance gardens (right) more reminiscent of the Mediterranean than the Caloosahatchee.



PHOTOS BY RHONDA MANDEL

though large, weren't so big that it became impossible to keep them within the limits of scale for personal living," says Hoffman. "Also, the personalized touches—artwork, photos, throws—all point to the fact that it is a lived-in home."

From floor to ceiling, each room of the over sixteen-thousand-square-foot manse is drenched in authenticity. A brazier, once used in palaces throughout Europe for warming the rooms, is the centerpiece of the two-story foyer which is also graced by a suspended, stone and wrought-iron staircase and stone columns indicative of European manors. Throughout the home, shades of blue, ochre, and deep red mimic the colors found in Mediterranean homes. Even the water in the negative-edge swimming pool, poised at river's edge, appears a deep sea blue rather than everyday turquoise.

Just beyond the foyer, guarded by four-foot foo dogs, the grand salon greets guests with breathtaking awe. A remarkable view pours through picture windows warming each piece of rich fabric-covered furniture and illuminating every design element. In one corner stands a baby grand piano, whose formality is softened by family photos and children's sheet music. A fireplace dominates the opposite wall, its design taken from one found in the only Mizner-designed home in the state of California. And large niches on either side of the entry hold elaborate bronze monkeys, a tribute to Mizner's own pet monkey perhaps?

Stepping through the iron-gated formal dining room almost feels like stepping into another time. The courtyard fountain can be heard through the windows, creating a romantic ambiance. Velvet drapes puddle on the tile floor in the style of a

Moorish castle. Deep sienna-colored walls, an iron chandelier, and an intricately stenciled, beamed ceiling all add to the old-world feel, as does the pecky cypress door leading into the hall. There are forty-nine doors like this one throughout the house, every one unique, every one a work of art.

In conversations with interior designer Joan Simonsen-Hickok, one discovers that each armoire, each majolica vase, each impressive piece of artwork was hand-picked or custom crafted to authentic specifications. "The Hoffmans wanted a home that was elegant but comfortable...more rustic than formal," says Simonsen-Hickok. "It took two and a half years to build and furnish the home. Dawn [Hoffman] was very hands-on during the process. We shopped for many of the pieces together."

One of the reasons the home emanates its authentic charm so successfully is the work of faux artist and painter Molly Anderson, whose talent can be seen



The formal dining room, with velvet drapes and iron chandeliers, adds to the old-world feel of a Moorish castle.

throughout the home—on walls and most notably in the perfectly replicated stenciling on the pecky cypress ceilings and beams. "Ceilings are most often overlooked in thinking about architectural detailing, but they are the largest expanse in a room and will catch your eye if done



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Although built on two and a half acres overlooking the Intra-coastal Waterway, (left) Casa Sueños was designed to feel more like a home than a formal manor. The master bath (top) features a claw foot tub painted to complement the tile and stenciled trim, and water in the negative-edge pool (middle) is a deep sea blue.

by holds a pedestal sink that is, perhaps, the most unusual piece in the house. Designed by Dawn and inspired by one she saw in her travels, it is formed from concrete and covered with a random pattern of mosaic tiles. “We formed the sink right where it stands, and a tile artist set the broken old tiles in it,” says Hoffman. “It was so heavy it was going to stay put no matter how it turned out.”

On the other side of the house is the master suite. The bedroom has a fireplace surrounded by built-in shelving and a private balcony overlooking the river. Described as having a “light Gothic feel” by Simonsen-Hickok, the focal point is a sixteenth-century Italian bed above which carved cherubs hover on the wall. Indoor and outdoor chaise lounges further embody the room’s relaxing aura. The master bath rivals the bedroom in square footage and features a walk-in shower and a claw-foot tub as a central focal point. Again, the key word here is detail. The outside of the tub is painted to complement the tile and the stenciled trim throughout the bathroom. Truly a stunning centerpiece, it is rivaled only by a custom-designed, dark wood armoire/cabinet nestled between his-and-hers pedestal sinks.

And, of course, there is the master closet. Rich, thick carpeting welcomes bare feet. It is built for maximum storage and organization, as one would expect, but it also hides a spiral staircase that leads to a second-floor workout room. Also on the second floor are three more rooms for guests and for the Hoffmans’ daughters.

Three guest suites grace the property. Although all were built with the same exterior architecture as the main house, the interior detailing of each has a different look and feel. A breezeway connects the main home to the first guest quarters, a one-bedroom suite with a living and dining area and full kitchen with a casual, 1930s feel.

After the home was originally built in

properly,” explains Hoffman. “That is what makes some of the old homes so great. We took many photos of ceilings in older homes and tore pages from books that contained ceiling pictures and details of old homes.”

True to Mizner’s fondness for designing tongue-in-cheek elements into a home, Anderson did the same: Just around the corner from the grand staircase at the entry appears to be yet another winding staircase at the end of the hall. Upon closer inspection, one comes to find an expertly painted trompe l’oeil mural—a staircase that leads to nowhere, a trick that Mizner, too, employed. The convex wall it is painted on serves as the perfect canvas to truly perplex the viewer. When asked why he would do such things, Mizner often replied, “Why not?”

The walls, too, match old-world specifications—twelve inches thick with rounded corners, sans baseboards or trim. Says Simonsen-Hickok, “I stood right there with the contractor as he troweled the walls, experimenting until we achieved

just the right texture—not too bumpy, not too smooth.”

The same care translates into the flooring. Except for the kitchen, which utilizes pillowed limestone for a warm, brighter look, Mexican tile graces the home throughout. The pattern in each room is different—some arranged in a herringbone design, some with decorative edging, and some, like the powder room off the grand salon, with brightly painted tile squares sprinkled among the terra cotta.

To further accent the casual feeling of the home, a family room and informal dining area feed off the kitchen. A down-filled sofa and an oversized coffee table and chairs serve as the perfect spot to relax and kick off your shoes while taking in the mesmerizing water view. These rooms, while still in harmony with the rest of the décor, are more relaxed and are clearly the heart of the home where the day-to-day activities occur.

Also in the heart of the house, tucked behind columns, is a morning room that overlooks the courtyard. A half bath near-

1998, two more guest quarters were added. Fashioned after an old Palm Beach hotel, the guesthouse features a stunning circular foyer with inlaid limestone and honed granite flooring, while walnut floors run throughout the rest of the quarters. The third guest suite, a studio apartment, is accessible through a double door and also has its own private entrance from the outside. Though not as remarkable as the other, more dominant elements of the home, the kitchen counter is fashioned from acid-washed granite, creating a unique, less modern texture...further testimony to the home's exquisite attention to detail.

It is not surprising that Casa de Sueños has hosted heads of state that include President George W. Bush and Governor Jeb Bush. Nor is it a surprise that it has been the backdrop for elegant fundraisers for such notables as Jane Goodall. What is a surprise is that this grand palace, which could be cool and formal, is clearly a home that is inviting and loved.



An array of pots and pans hangs over the butcher block counter in the kitchen, where meals have been prepared for visiting dignitaries.

Thanks to their attention to fine craftsmanship and the desire to host a warm and welcoming environment, the Hoffmans have created a beautiful home that is meant to be lived in. 🏡

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