

Where Water Is the Constant

ON KUKIO BAY, A HAWAIIAN HOUSE
AGREES WITH THE ELEMENTS

Architecture by Hugh Huddleson, AIA, and Warren Sunnland
Interior Design by Jacques Saint Dizier, ASID
Landscape Architecture by David Tamura, ASLA
Text by Paul Theroux/Photography by Mary E. Nichols

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“What we call Hawaiian style is kind of a fabrication—it comes more from people’s imaginations than from a historical source,” says Jacques Saint Dizier, who designed the interiors of a house on Hawaii’s Kohala Coast. ABOVE: A Japanese-influenced gate defines the front entrance.

In Hawaii, precise distinctions are made about the character of the sea—the inshore water is *kai*, the deep blue sea is *moana*. This house on the Kohala Coast of the Big Island is ideally positioned for access to both—as well as to take advantage of that other Hawaiian blessing, the soft, refreshing wind, *makani ‘olu ‘olu*. Its site is not far from where the futuristic movie *Waterworld* was filmed, and it too is water-themed. The water

features—waterfalls, pools and a meditation garden with flowing water—are not merely aesthetic enhancements; they also have practical uses, along with sentimental associations. The primary inspirations for them were the owners’ passion for sailing and love of Hawaii and its encircling ocean.

The house is sheltered and private and yet also occupies a magnificent vantage point. One of its striking aspects is the



way in which it seems part of the pools that surround it. As architect Hugh Huddleson puts it, the house was intended as “a soulful extension of its environment.”

“One great way of creating the notion of space is to use water,” says the East Hampton, New York–based Huddleson, who collaborated on the design with Warren Sunnland, of the Hawaiian firm Riecke Sunnland Kono Architects. “In Venice,” Huddleson says, “you can be 12

feet away from another house and yet feel apart, because of the water in between.” And so, on this relatively small site in Hawaii, water creates space, stifles noise and is itself a calming element.

The use of wood and the volcanic stone in the rock wall at the Asian-style gateway, and the glimpse of the mahogany footbridge across the water beyond, promises an experience of entry that offers more inside. It is impossible

A mahogany footbridge cuts over a shallow pool to the front door. “The rear of the residence faces Kukio Bay,” says Saint Dizier. “But the water theme was introduced from the outset.” Travertine marble foundations are cantilevered over the water to create the effect of floating.

The entrance hall—"a Jules Verne fantasy, with glass-and-iron orbs and a giant ship's prow"—leads to the rear terrace. Architect Hugh Huddleson designed retracting doors that open the space to the bay. William Switzer console. Slatted chairs and benches, Michael Taylor.





to build a house next to the ocean and assume that the hard, unforgiving sunlight and the salt air will not seriously affect it. These challenges dictated the materials for the house, which the architect designed to last.

The Zen concept of *wabi-sabi*—the noble weathering of natural things, like wood and iron and cloth—guided both Huddleson and the California-based interior designer Jacques Saint Dizier. They chose high-quality materials that would age gracefully. This is why the lanais are built of mahogany rather than cedar. And the volcanic rock, which is used throughout the exterior, was positioned to suggest that it might have occurred naturally. Travertine marble was used both inside and outside. The cut blocks for the exterior walls were offset to carve graceful slivers of shadow under the deep eaves.

“The size of the lot was a challenge,”



“The interiors have the shimmer and luster of elegance, but it’s not in your face,” remarks Saint Dizier. ABOVE: A series of four Hawaiian tapas by Puanani Van Dorpe hang in the living room. Chairs and chair fabric from Sutherland. John Boone daybed. Kravet sofa cushion fabric.

LEFT: As throughout the rooms, the dining area was lined with a textured wallcovering. “The natural fibers soften the architecture, relax the formality and establish a tropical feeling,” notes Saint Dizier. The chairs, covered in Jim Thompson silk, are from Henredon.



ABOVE: The dramatic master bedroom opens on three sides, revealing gardens and an unobstructed ocean view. “The palette is soft and toward green to accentuate the interplay with the landscape.” Lanai furniture, Michael Taylor. Pollack chenille on chaise. Edelman leather on ottoman.

BELOW: An Italian armoire carved with ferns takes a guest room “into an almost believable Hawaiiana.” Phillip Jeffries bedcovering fabric, shade trim and rear pillow fabric. Chair fabric and all other pillow fabrics, Larsen. Pindler & Pindler fabric on lampshade at right.



Huddleson says. In fact, it is such a modest-size lot that before the owner bought it, he needed Huddleson’s reassurance that it could accommodate a house and guesthouse—five bedrooms and six baths altogether. Huddleson came up with the footprint in a day but then took a year to plan and refine the structures. Illusion figured, too: “I used the longest diagonal possible to pull your eye across the pool, so that you look across the lengths of water to the sea.”

To make the interior of the house unfussy, even playful and durable, and yet with a certain formality, Saint Dizier chose textured reeds for some of the walls, textural fabrics, even copper leaf. Small bronze tiles are set in the floor of an elegant bath. These are stylized petroglyphs depicting each member of the family’s favorite outdoor pursuits—surfing, swimming, tennis and sailing.

The volumes of the high-ceilinged rooms are generous and restful. And the art walls are deliberate. The owner possesses a collection of early paintings of Hawaiian landscapes and seascapes, along with contemporary work, such as the koa-framed panels of tapa (*kapa* in Hawaiian) by Puanani Van Dorpe that hang in the living room. The paintings and artifacts, says the designer, “make you feel very grounded and Polynesian.”

But Saint Dizier admits that Japanese, Chinese, Balinese and Pacific island elements influence the style of his various designs. The masks in one bath are whimsical, but the columns in that same space are in fact old African drums. Elsewhere, rare ceramics and antique bowls are not far from more curious objects—a boat prow or an upright oar. The serene atmosphere is accomplished both by the interiors and by the way the outdoors seems to be part of the inner experience of the house. That is also the effect of water, which is not simply the sight of it falling but the sound of it, the feel of it.

“Hugh came up with the idea of cantilevering the house,” Saint Dizier says. “It seems to float.” □

Although the house is set on a tight lot, the architects succeeded in making it “feel like it sat by itself,” Saint Dizier observes. **OPPOSITE:** Landscape architect David Tamura, who incorporated natural lava outcroppings into the garden, oriented the pool and spa for maximum privacy.

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