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CARIBBEAN POINT OF VIEW

THE EVOLUTION OF AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SUGAR PLANTATION ON ST. CROIX

Architecture by Michael Helm/Text by Steven M. L. Aronson/Photography by Dan Forer

PRECEDING PAGES: Estate Clairmont on St. Croix, which Twila Wilson and Erik Johnson rebuilt with the help of architect Michael Helm after Hurricane Hugo in 1989, incorporates the ruins of the property's original circa 1750 stone sugar mill.

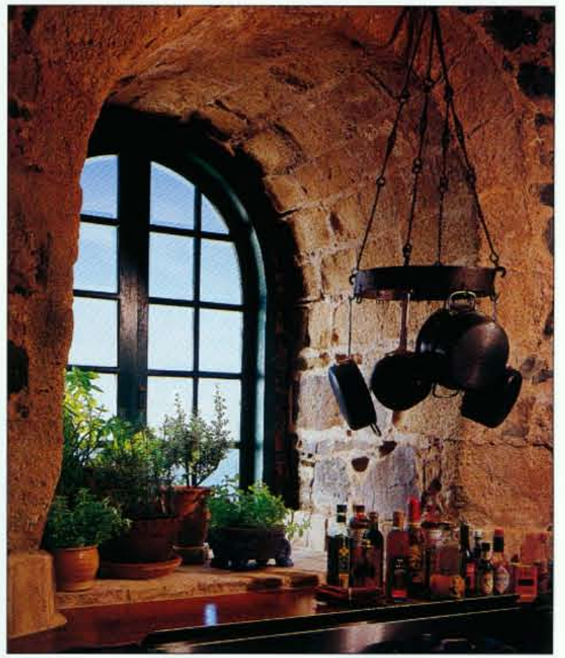
ABOVE: An arcaded gallery looks out to the courtyard, where "we like to have lunch under the gumbo-limbo tree," says Wilson. The house's hip roof with no overhang, balustrades and variety of shutters are characteristic of Danish West Indian architecture.

Rethought, rebuilt and re-embellished, Estate Clairmont now sits secure on —indeed, embedded in—its supraterrestrial site in the U.S. Virgin Islands: a hilltop swept by trade winds on the north shore of St. Croix. Discovered by no less than Columbus in 1493, the slipper-shaped island has long been lauded as "the garden of the West Indies." A valley with unfolding sheets of green, and then—across a swatch of cobalt Caribbean—Tortola, St. Thomas, St. John and Puerto Rico are what the house commands a view of.

Estate Clairmont, thanks to slave labor, prospered as a sugarcane plantation in the early 1700s—until the suffering serfs took the liberty of torching the plantation house. To the right of that long-since-extinguished building still stand the sun-slapped ruins of the old slave quarters—a burning reminder of the past. In time the place was purchased from its French owner by a Danish colonial family (Denmark had bought St. Croix in 1733 and went on owning it until 1917, when the American flag became the seventh to fly over the island: No wonder Crucian architecture has been receptive to a stream of cultural influences). But nothing resembling a house was built on the property until the 1950s, when an old island family tacked a simple frame structure onto the side of the existing sugar mill (the stone having outstayed the flames) in the heart of the original six-hundred-acre plantation.

It was this structure that Twila Wilson bought in 1979, and she and her husband, Erik Johnson, have lived there full-time since 1981. (Wilson—a textile and fashion designer and the founder

OPPOSITE: A view of Hams Bluff, the northwesternmost tip of the island, is framed by an arched window in the living room. On the veranda are caned teak chairs and a Dutch colonial teak table. "Our guests always gather here for breakfast to watch the sunrise," notes Wilson.



LEFT: "We wanted to integrate the living room, or great room, with the mill's ten-foot-thick wall while accentuating the arch to the kitchen," explains Wilson. At left is a 19th-century carved teak settee placed before a table fashioned from a Javanese guard bed.

TOP: The dining area, which is accented with Javanese teak louvered doors used as shutters, opens to the gallery, right. ABOVE: Indigenous herbs grow before the kitchen window, the only glass window remaining from the pre-hurricane house. Viking range.

and president of Java Wraps resort wear, based in St. Croix—and Johnson—also a textile designer as well as the cofounder and co-owner of the resort-wear company Back East, based in Santa Barbara, California—had met in Central Java and were married on the veranda of Estate Clairmont.) "The house was a shed, really—bohemian, eccentric; it didn't make any design sense whatever," says Johnson. "But the location was spectacular. And it was cool, because you put windmills where it's windiest—wherever you see a sugar mill, you know you're going to catch a breeze."

Some breezes are better left uncaught. In 1989 Hugo struck, with biblical vindictiveness, and after sixty-one hurricane-free years the island of St. Croix was almost blown away. Wilson and Johnson took refuge in their half-basement. "The noise from the two-hundred-mile-an-hour winds was deafening—it was like lying between train tracks as a train roared over you," Johnson recounts. "I had one hand around Twila and the other hanging on to the tool chest because it was the heaviest thing around." When the winds died down, the couple peered through the broken floorboards overhead and declared themselves wholly disestablished: There was nothing but the sky itself where there had just been two more stories of their house.

Again, as after the sugarcane mutiny of the slaves, the original mill with its stout stone walls survived. Its silhouette on the mountaintop

"Erik asked for a 'tree house' overlooking the large expanse of native vegetation and the Caribbean," says Wilson. "It's a typical West Indian bedroom with a high tray ceiling to cool the space." The Crucian sweetonia mahogany bed was crafted by David Dennis.

now had an almost mythic quality. "Suddenly we had Stonehenge," Johnson says. All of his and Wilson's belongings had gone with the wind—their antique batik and ikat textiles, gathered over years, were whipped to fringe and strewn cruelly on the hillside by *Hugo Furioso*. They picked their way among glass daggers—shards from their blown-out windows. For a few nights they slept in what was left of Wilson's car. The reality, endured, had still to be accepted.

To the rescue came their good friend Michael Helm, British-born and, since 1965, Tortola-based—one of the foremost architects in the Caribbean (see *Architectural Digest*, January 1986). Helm, it so happened, had always longed to raze the shed and build something with an architectural dignity worthy of the site. Wilson remembers: "Michael arrived with blankets and flashlights and bags of groceries, and it was half an hour before I noticed he'd brought his sketch pad. We were in shock, but he said, 'This is a golden opportunity.' He got us out of the doldrums and into the future."

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"Erik laid out the materials and worked alongside the crew as they constructed the house," says Helm, (above, right, with Wilson and Johnson). RIGHT AND COVER: **Old brick stairs lead from the living room veranda down to the limestone-paved courtyard and the pool.**

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All agreed the new house would have to be impregnable. "Erik wouldn't allow anything less than twelve-inch blocks of masonry, filled and reinforced, and four-inch-thick timbers—and all the rafters had to be fastened to steel straps cast in concrete ring beams," says Helm, adding, "The place is a bunker. It gives a great feeling of security." Johnson explains: "It's very humbling to have had your house down around your ankles."

Slowly the building evolved. "It wasn't the normal pace of construction," Helm acknowledges. "We weren't going to go out on a limb." The test was to build a house in both functional and aesthetic harmony with the mill, whose form was bold and iconic, even noble in its passive strength. Helm started by incorporating the mill foundations into the new structure, and ended by taking differing roof shapes and levels and building them up in a sweep of converging lines to the crescendo of the mill tower. If the place from the front looks like a nineteenth-century industrial building, it must be remembered that a mill was historically a work structure. To balance the preponderance of long roofs, low eaves and massive elevation, the rear, or western, side—the lee—of the house was designed to appear exceptionally graceful in scale and altogether friendly to the world: a white-painted wooden great house adorned with both Danish and French West Indian vernacular forms (shutters, porches, balustrades and arched colonnades). It's a sustained piece of architecture, with the two styles successfully melded.

The house is entered through a barrel-vaulted hallway, which, with its thick masonry (the walls, interior as well as exterior, are plastered with rough lime), has the feeling of a catacomb. The eye is soon drawn through a series of arches. "I don't like houses where everything's disclosed at once—I like things to reveal themselves," Helm states. "I want some theater in it; I want to make you stop and enjoy something through an archway. Most people here want all of the view all of the time; they want sliding glass doors on three sides of a room. That's not architecture—that's like sitting on top of a bare mountain. I try to teach people to use a photographer's eye to frame a view." The view through one of the archways Helm created is of the lush rear courtyard crowned by a gumbo-limbo tree that looks nothing if not sculpted. "It's wonderfully twisted," the architect observes. "The ultimate, blown-up bonsai. It got pruned by Hugo, needless to say."

Off to the right is the gallery, where a Crucian mahogany ledge holds antique maps of the West and East Indies (highly prized by Wilson and Johnson, as they live in the West Indies and do business in the East) as well as carved wooden toy soldiers dressed in the uniforms of the colonial Dutch East Indies era. Up a few shallow steps is the living room, or great room, one of whose walls is the ten-foot-thick rubble-stone exterior wall of the sugar mill. The room, slanting up and then soaring to a height of twenty feet, has been luxuriantly opened to courtyards and verandas—it's casual, colonial, and rich in tone, with a harvest of antique hardwoods at its disposal. Through the archway here can be seen a valley dotted with stone ruins and then the island ending in sharp, sheer cliffs.

To the left of the gallery is the square blue-and-white master bedroom, its four windows open on a sea of shimmering vegetation. "We call it our tree house," Johnson says. "You'll notice there's no glass here—the whole philosophy of living in the Caribbean is to look out past open shutters, not through windowpanes." Helm offers a deeper reason: "Erik hates glass after Hugo—his house has less glass than any house I know." The shutters are imbuia, a Brazilian rosewood; the room also features one of a handful of four-posters made from native sweetonia mahogany—a use sanctioned only because of blowdowns from Hugo.

A serious, working kitchen was created within the thick circular walls that form the base of the thirty-foot-high mill—a space integrated with the living room by means of a central arch. Wilson and Johnson's friend James Langston, trained as a shipwright in England, applied his experience in heavy-frame

wooden shipbuilding to the mahogany cabinets, not only designing and building them but expertly fitting them to the tapered walls of the mill.

"It was the hurricane that pushed Twila back into interior designing," Johnson volunteers. Wilson says simply, "I was determined to redo in a beautiful way." (From Estate Clairmont she went on to open the Java Wraps Home Store and is today involved in interior design projects such as the old Hotel 1829 on St. Thomas.) Together Wilson and Johnson mined Indonesia for antique teak furniture, doors and shutters; terra-cotta floor tiles; and Dutch colonial chairs and tables. "A lot of it we found down back roads," Johnson confides, "but remember, since we both spend a couple of months a year in Indonesia, we had intimate knowledge of the stuff. And access." The seven-foot, one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old Javanese guard bed in their living room—painted cinnabar and black, then pressed into service as a low table—was first glimpsed on a porch in Central Java. "Workmen were sitting on it playing cards," Wilson recalls. "It was so rustic-looking, with those great big chunks of

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teak. I knew it would be perfectly at home in our house because Erik and I both love the irreverent mix of tropical hardwoods and old brick and antique terra-cotta and rough plastered walls."

With its own built-in defenses, Estate Clairmont may now be ready to withstand any twist of weather. These days, washing through its arched and vaulted rooms, happily, are not storms but streams of a different nature. "Teak is fairly indestructible, and it's all tile floor," Erik Johnson proudly points out, "so when it's cleaning time I bring the hose in, and I can start at the front door and water the whole house down." □