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A Special Section
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March 2008





Tropical Designs

Mexico and Hawaii home interiors are inspired by the local landscapes

By Jenny Quill

So you've taken the leap and purchased your tropical getaway, an idyllic, plucked-from-a-Corona-commercial retreat or a steps-from-the-surf Hawaiian *hale* that comes with endless white-sand beaches, azure skies and miles of glassy ocean. Designing the interior of such an abode requires a deft hand, one that takes advantage of the lush surroundings, seamlessly incorporating the colors, textures and natural elements of the landscape. No, this is not the time for tiki torches and overwhelming floral patterns. Today's tropical design is refreshingly modern, with an emphasis on alfresco living, clean, minimalist lines, plenty of natural textures and neutral palettes with splashes of bright colors.

"Tropical design" is a pretty broad term, one that, not surprisingly, has a variety of definitions. In Mexico, designers say you can expect to see Spanish and Moorish influences, no doubt a result of nearly 300 years of Spanish rule. Today's architectural standard is minimalist-leaning, with an emphasis on simple, back-to-basics designs that include clean, linear lines, geometric shapes and a lack of superfluous visual clutter.

"In Punta Mita [about 25 miles northwest of Puerto Vallarta] in particular," says interior designer Katherine Nidermaier, "the color palette tends to be more subtle and is dictated by the hues and textures of the naturalist landscape and the simple architecture that is here." Part-time Punta Mita resident and interior designer Lisa Bruno, who worked with Nidermaier on the design of Bruno's home, describes her region's style as "Mexican coastal soft contemporary—an effortless fusion of interior and exterior living spaces with the coastal scenery."

Just across the Gulf of California in La Paz, Marlene and Jim Fletcher also went with contemporary decor, though their version is slightly different from that of Nidermaier and Bruno. Inspired by the modern architecture of their CostaBaja Resort & Marina condominium, which was designed by noted Mexican architect Jose de Yturbe Bernal, the Fetters mixed bold colors with dark woods and modern art.

"You have to be moved by the structure and the surroundings," says Marlene Fletcher. "When [my husband] and I walked in [to our condo], because of the contemporary design we knew we had to go contemporary with the interior." This translated to bursts of bright color—a yellow leather sofa with coral throw pillows—contrasted with onyx and pewter lamps, a dark-wood coffee table and hutch, and abstract art.

Hawaiian design, on the other hand, is something of a cultural mix, with Asian, traditional Hawaiian and New England influences. "If you look at the history of Hawaii," says Honolulu resident Robert Carpenter, "it's very traditional, very Anglophile. From the 1800s on, there were East Coast missionaries that brought over the architectural styling that I grew up with in Charleston, South Carolina."

However, for part-time Kauai resident Rodney



Interiors and exteriors blend at interior designer Lynn Yellen's Los Cabos home (left), as well as at this stylish Honolulu home (right).

COURTESY: JOHN MCKINNEY

COURTESY: ARCHITECTURE REFINED ISLAND INTERIORS



COURTESY: ROONEY MORGAN (2)

Morgan, tropical design means, quite simply, "the plantation-style, double-pitched roof and a large lanai."

While interpretations of tropical design may vary, many of the key principles are the same, from making the most of views to choosing climate-suitable materials.

An oft-repeated tenet of tropical design is to bring the outdoors in, an idea that has both practical and cultural applications. "Luis Barragán, who is considered the father of Mexican minimalist architecture, once said that houses should be gardens, and gardens should be houses," says Nidermaier, a Parsons New School for Design graduate who has spent 18 years designing homes throughout Mexico. In Nidermaier's work, Barragán's philosophy translates to blending the interior with the outside through the use of particular colors, especially those that echo the sea, sand and sky; climate-appropriate textures,

such as woven palm; and artwork made by indigenous peoples. "I'm of the philosophy that your eye shouldn't stop," says Nidermaier, "that the interior should blend with the outside, the colors of the sea, tropical flowers, sand—that nothing should contrast too much with that."

Designer Nicole Collins, whose company, Designed Living International, provides turnkey furniture packages for second homes in Mexico, echoes this sentiment. "In Cancún, where it's more Caribbean style, we pull from the elements outside," she says. For Collins, a color palette in a Cancún home would include crisp whites that echo the talcum-color beaches, turquoise to mimic the clear, blue water, and verdant greens and yellows.

In Puerto Vallarta, on the other hand, Collins says, "We'll build on tans and creams by adding pops of color—corals, a mango-stripe fabric or a siesta fabric with

blue, green and yellow."

For Patty Crawford, who owns an Estrella del Mar condo about 30 minutes outside of Mazatlán, living in Mexico presented an opportunity to go all-out with color. "One of the things that people in Mexico say is that they express their warmth and vitality and love through color," says Crawford. "When you're down here, using a lot of good color makes you feel like you're in Mexico. We looked to bougainvillea leaves, and pulled some of those colors inside our house."

Crawford used the same red, green and golden hues throughout the home, changing things from room to room by choosing slightly muted versions of the same color. In one room, she painted an accent wall with a bold bluish-red that echoed the blue-red flowers on the bedspread, offsetting it with black-and-white wall art. She also used bright shots of color inside niches to add depth.

For Honolulu-based interior designer Mary Philpotts McGrath, bringing the outdoors in means maximizing Hawaii's natural assets—namely the cooling trade winds and stunning views—something she credits to the work of Vladimir Ossipoff, considered by many to be the father of

Top two photos: This Kauai home makes the most of its tropical location with 1,800 square feet of lanai space.

Left: Bold colors, dark wood and modern art infuse this CostaBaja Resort & Marina condo with a contemporary feel.



COURTESY: COSTABAJA RESORT & MARINA

contemporary Hawaiian architecture. "If I could describe Ossipoff's work," says Philpotts McGrath, "it would be that he treats the whole home as a lanai, with 'disappearing' walls [which make it seem that the room opens seamlessly to the outside], covered lanais and breezeways."

In place of walls that would limit scenic views, Ossipoff often relied on floor-to-ceiling sunscreens and windows, ensuring that the spectacular scenery was always within the line of sight. In one Oahu residence, he included removable sliding-folding panels that opened up the home to the elements, taking the concept of disappearing walls to a new level.

To open up homes to the outdoors, Philpotts McGrath will go through a house in the early stages of construction and change the windows in bedrooms and hallways to sliding doors. She will also maximize views by having the architects design the windows a little lower from the ceiling than the standard height. "One of the things people need to be careful of is setting their windows 34 or 36 inches high, because when you sit, you can't see out anything," says Philpotts McGrath.

Honolulu residents Robert Carpenter, of Residential Design Concepts, and Dr. Garrett Saikley—along with the help of architect Jim Matchuck, and interior designers and brother-and-sister team Rick and Tiare Cowan of Archipelago Refined Island Interiors—went to great lengths to make the most of their million-dollar ocean views. Building upon the original footprint, they raised their home's elevation 4.5 feet from its prior location, which resulted in endless, unobstructed views of the Pacific, and the marine and bird-life sanctuary in which the property is located. It also allowed the owners to keep a large deck that extends to just 10 feet from the shoreline, so that the house seems almost to float on water.

But making the most of a home's views doesn't always have to involve large construction budgets. "Find an exterior focal point, and use that instead of accessories or art to set the tone of your

space," says Lisa Bruno, the interior designer who resides part time in Mexico. "Let the natural beauty and the elements shine instead of cluttering up the space with man-made items."

In Bruno's Punta Mita villa, keeping windows clean and drapery-free helps to place the views front and center. She also limits the number of distracting pieces of art or accessories to minimize competition with the spectacular scenery.

Designed Living International owner Collins takes a similar approach when finalizing a floor plan, ensuring that all eyes are drawn to the ocean. "You don't want to have too many focal points," says Collins. "Because resort homes are usually on the water, we will design around the view and out to the water. We make it so [the layout] is not overly cluttered, with very minimal furnishings."

Because outdoor living is an intrinsic part of Hawaiian and Mexican cultures, the patio, or lanai, becomes more than a covered outdoor space—it's an extension of the home. For part-time Kauai resident Morgan, the inclusion of lanai space in his North Shore home was a must, so architect Bruce Whale designed a lanai that wraps around three sides of the house, with the front and back being slightly larger in size. All in all, the Morgan residence has 1,800 square feet of covered lanai space, which, says Morgan, is plenty of room for entertaining out-of-town guests.

For Carpenter and Saikley, who have thrown parties for 20 to 200 guests at their Honolulu residence, the lanais had to be both functional and beautiful. The homeowners had extra-large eaves installed over most of the deck, leaving enough open space to bask in the sun but protecting the sitting areas closest to the house from the rain, sun and wind. To balance out the coral-stone walls (made from land-based, quarried, prehistoric and limestone-covered coral versus from ocean coral) and marble flooring in the covered lanai space, the Cowans installed tongue-and-groove mahogany floorings on the underside of the eaves, which also add warmth and texture.



Designer Mary Philpotts McGrath favors natural materials such as the wicker and sea grass in the chair above.

On sunny days, the owners take advantage of the lanai's sliding doors, which virtually disappear into the house when opened, giving the appearance of a seamless extension of the interior space.

"We have an extra 2,000-square-foot-plus of terraces and lanai, which really opens up the house considerably," says Carpenter. "We spend our time out here. The walls just disappear; they're hidden. It's truly indoor-outdoor."

Opening up the house to the lanais also brings in the cool ocean breezes—so much so that Carpenter and Saikley have not yet needed to run the house's central AC, even on Honolulu's hottest summer days.

Homeowners can take the bringing-the-outdoors-in notion a step further by designing their terraces as they would interior rooms. A popular approach is to use the same type of flooring found inside the house on the patio, and choosing furniture fabrics and accessories that pick up on the interior color palette.

"My floors are all polished marble," says Crawford. "I took the marble used inside my house outside, and made a border and honed it, so it's not glossy. It's a little rougher, so it wouldn't become slippery."

PHOTO FROM HAWAII: A SENSE OF PLACE BY MARY PHILPOTTS MCGRATH

Using luxurious items that you wouldn't normally think to add to a patio—such as an all-weather outdoor SunBrite LCD TV; outdoor kitchens complete with stainless-steel barbecues; outdoor-fabric throw pillows and rugs; and sturdy wrought-iron chandeliers—is another way to achieve an indoor ambiance in an outdoor setting.

“We use lamps, rugs and throw pillows outside, so everything looks like just another room of your house,” says Lynn Yellen, a part-time resident of Villas del Mar in Los Cabos and an interior designer with Ladco's Washington Park Design Center, a Houston, Texas-based design firm that works throughout Mexico.

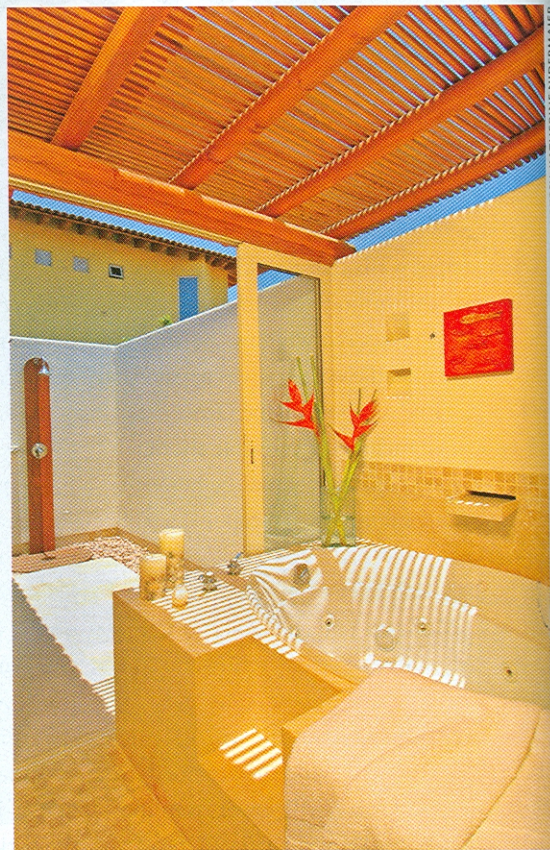
With alfresco living spaces, it's important to select materials that are suitable for the climate. Nearly year-round sunshine, along with plenty of rain and humidity, can cause fading, mold and mildew, and deterioration. Many designers recommend fade-proof, stain-resistant Sunbrella fabrics, which are available in sheer,

Here, designer Katherine Nidermaier chose colors inspired by the Mexico setting.

open-weave and ribbed textures and in a variety of rich colors for both indoor and outdoor furnishings.

Natural, woven fabrics, which can be used on just about everything—from furniture cushions to draperies; rugs to accent pieces—add texture and visual interest, and also work well in a tropical climate. Materials to look for include sea grass, bamboo, jute, linen and *lauhala*—leaves from the hala tree that have been used by Hawaiian peoples for centuries to weave such items as mats, floor coverings and baskets.

The latest trend is woven materials on a larger scale, such



as textured wallpapers and ceiling treatments. The Carpenter-Saikley residence features lauhala ceiling insets, a design that creates a textural interplay between the warmth of the lauhala and the coral stone, fossil stone and granite used on the floors, countertops and walls. The insets also have the added benefit of absorbing noise, resulting in an acoustically sound, quiet setting for the owners' frequent fetes.

Wood furniture adds a bit of heft to light-and-airy tropical spaces, but not just any wood will do. Certain species are better suited for the tropics than others. "You want to watch the wood pieces you pick because of the humidity [in Hawaii]," says Tiare Cowan, the interior designer from Archipelago Refined Island Interiors. "Balinese wood imports are really big, but if they're not built or dried correctly, they're going to crack and warp when they get here." Teak is well suited to tropical environs, thanks to its natural oils, which protect it from the elements. In Mexico, says Nidermaier, locals rely on *guayabillo*, an indigenous hardwood, and termite-resistant *parota*.

Other materials commonly used in both furnishings and accessories include leather, wicker, rattan and woven banana leaf. "We went with a resin wicker material for the furniture, which doesn't fade and doesn't change with the climate," says La Paz resident Marlene Fletcher.

Natural stone is also popular, particularly for outdoor sculptures and fountains. "We've used a lot of granite, marble and cantera stone outside," says Crawford. "Granite takes the wear and tear, and the salt environment. We had figures carved out of cantera, which we can leave outside and not worry about because it takes the climate. The salt air doesn't bother it; the humidity doesn't bother it."

Natural stone is also highly sought after for flooring, thanks to its proven durability and resistance to moisture. And both wood and concrete flooring offer good looks, durability and resistance to dampness. Philpotts McGrath says homeowners thinking instead about installing carpet should consider the home's traffic patterns

and frequency of use, as carpet tends to trap moisture and mold, not to mention sand dragged in from the beach.

Another pointer, especially for infrequently used second homes and guesthouses, says Philpotts McGrath, is to keep beds and bedding off the floor (no bed skirts) to allow for airflow and eliminate dark, damp spots where mold can grow.

Other climate-proofing suggestions include installing UV-tinted windows, which keep furniture and artwork from fading, and using stainless-steel, specially treated curtain rods that won't rust. Window coverings also prove helpful. Collins recommends placing a blackout liner on the back of woven-wood blinds that roll up and down, to protect furniture from the sun when the owners leave. Crawford, on the other hand, chose to hang sheer drapes instead. "They let the light in, and you can still see ... outside, but it cuts the harsh sunlight so the [furniture] fabrics keep better."

Tropical design is all about utilizing your greatest asset: the paradise in which your home is located. Connecting your interiors to the great outdoors can be achieved using colors that echo the dazzling hues of the ocean, sky and beach; turning your outdoor lanais and terraces into extensions of your home; and adding textures from natural, indigenous fibers and woods.

Then, all that's left is to pick up a few seashells, colorful throw pillows and a hammock for midday siestas. **R**

Jenny Quill is a freelance writer based in Honolulu.

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