Reinterpreting the Classics

AN IDYLL IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC DRAWS ON POETIC PRECEDENTS

Architecture by Jaquelin T. Robertson, FAIA
Interior Design by MAC II
Landscape Design by Deborah Nevins
Text by Joseph Giovannini
Photography by Steven Brooke

In the Dominican Republic, a Palladian-influenced beachfront house was designed by architect Jaquelin T. Robertson. ABOVE: A cupola sits atop the entrance, which has arched doorways on axis with a tropical garden. RIGHT: An elevated portico spans the rear of the grand salon, a centrally located, freestanding structure.

Designer Mica Ertegun arranged the colonial-inspired interiors. OPPOSITE: For the grand salon, she created a pair of hexagonal mirrors and an octagonal table. The two inlaid rosewood tables are from the 17th century. Scalamandré floral armchair and sofa pillow fabric.

ABOVE: A stone table and pots mingle with wicker furnishings on the portico of the grand salon. "It's the main porch of the main building, the primary outdoor public living space," Robertson says. The locally mined coral stone was also used for the columns, piers, walls and floor.

Jaquelin T. Robertson, a Yale graduate twice over who worked as an architect and planner with such luminaries as New York mayor John Lindsay and the Shah of Iran, is one of New York's more worldly architects. But his voice warms, edging even into excitement, as he recalls Alice tripping through the rabbit hole. His mother read and reread the book to him as a child, and he encountered the story again as a Rhodes scholar in Oxford, where he studied politics and philosophy.

Designing space is a kind of writing, a physical narrative through time. Houses can be a form of enchantment, and for a commission in the Dominican Republic, Robertson, of Cooper, Robertson & Partners, started his tale by inducting visitors through a series of spatial locks, taking them from one world into another, down the rabbit hole into an entirely different state.

The fences on the six-and-a-half-acre grounds in Casa de Campo, a resort on the country's south coast, part to reveal a deep motor court. Bounded by a natural stone wall, the court converges on a three-arched portal, a primitive version of a triumphal arch. The wrought iron doors in the middle arch open into a tiny courtyard maybe 10 feet square.

Guests have entered the house but are still outside, facing another set of doors. Those open into a narrow, roofed chamber, with floors and walls constructed of a rich, golden coral stone embedded with tiny fossils and shells millennia old. Furnishings are spare. A portico at the end of the chamber leads to a second portico, beyond which light incandesces in a green shade.

Robertson has led visitors through the locks, which allow guests to shed their outside concerns and enter the light of a lush tropical garden, designed by Deborah Nevins, rustling with fronds. The front colonnade of a horseshoe-shaped house, built entirely in coral stone tailored in a classical language, wraps a hemicycle garden centered on a pavilion—a large 50-foot-by-50-foot freestanding structure with jalousie shutters. An axis originating in the motor court at the entrance doors bisects the formal garden, enters the pavilion and exits a grand portico on the far side, leading

Because the grand salon is detached from the rest of the residence—the house, loggia and crescent garden form a horseshoe around it—light streams in the mahogany-framed windows and doors from all sides. George IV wood vessel, left, from Christie's. Rosecore carpet.

directly to the pool in front and then out to a bay and the Caribbean beyond.

Perhaps there are neighbors, but once visitors drive into the motor court, the succession of walls and enclosing spaces edits everything out, leaving residents the center of the known world. "The axis focuses on the view, making it private," says Robertson. The architect has rewritten the site by controlling space: The sea belongs only to the house. He has cast geography as a fiction.

Robertson, who grew up in a Georgian-style house in Richmond, Virginia, and as a child visited the great antebellum estates, was once dean of architecture at the University of Virginia, designed by Thomas Jefferson, who championed Palladio in America. In his office on West 43rd Street in New York, Robertson keeps a bust of Jefferson over his right shoulder and draws under the president's paternal stare.

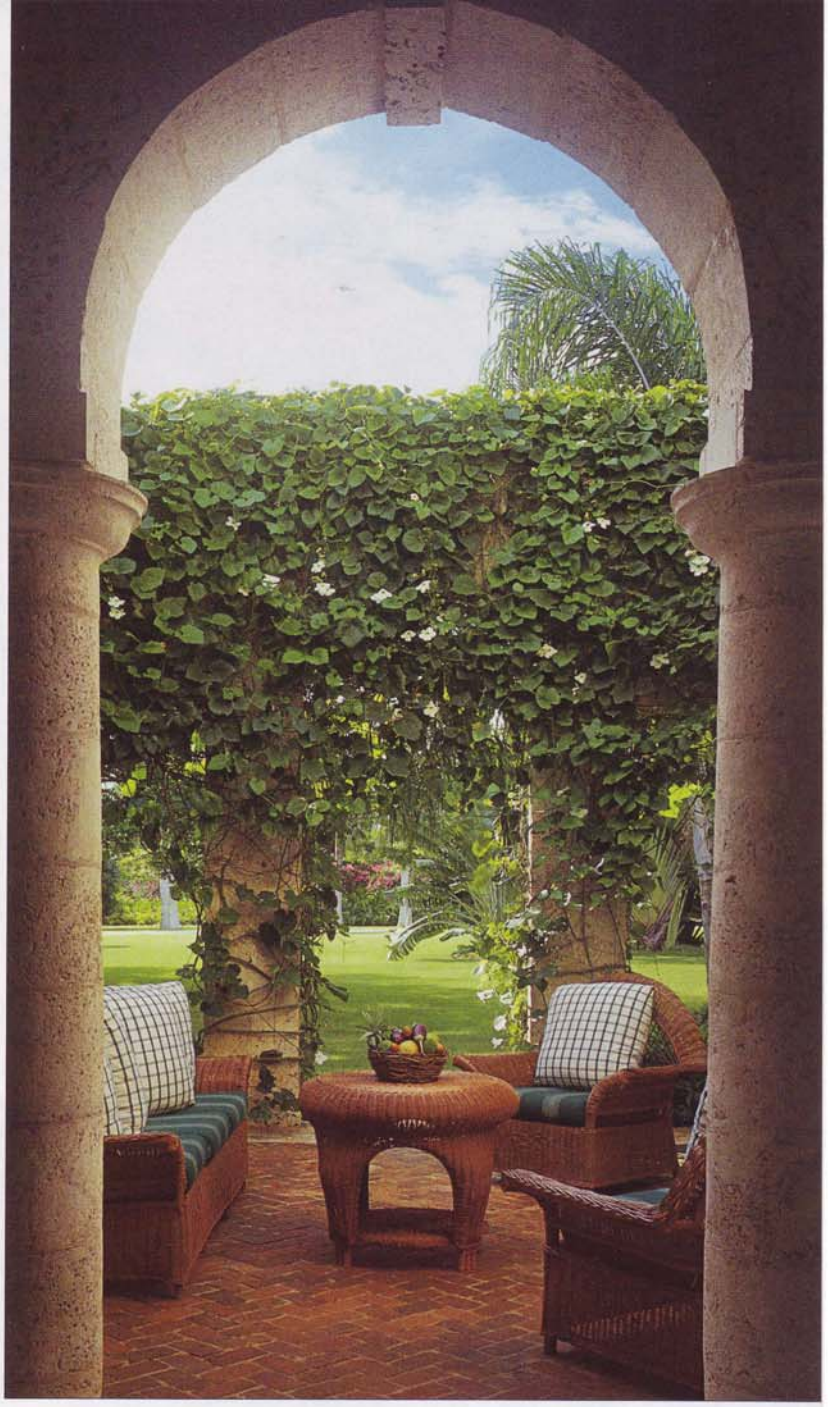
At Casa de Campo, Robertson was an unapologetic traditionalist, and in this sprawling, 19,000-square-foot house, he has reinterpreted classicism, adapting it to the materials and skills available and to the ethos of the island—or what he calls "the architectural gene bank of the Caribbean," which includes, historically, English enclaves from Barbados to Charleston.

In its simplicity, the pavilion might have been built two or three centuries ago, as part of the colonial empires Britain and Spain were establishing in the Western Hemisphere, or it might be a pre-Hellenic temple. "Archaic," says the architect-scholar, referring to a period when the ancients still detailed the stone as if it were wood. He acknowledges the papal Villa Giulia in Rome, with its semicircular wings, as an influence. "You draw on lots of different precedents."

But the proportions of the rooms and organization of the plan are principally Palladian. "The wings of the house are straight out of the Villa Barbaro in Maser, with pediments on the ends rather than the front," he says. But Robertson explains, too, the divergences. "Palladio gets amended in each country, whether England, Spain or France, and the same is true in their colonies."

Robertson drew from Heron Bay, a house built in Barbados in the 1940s (see *Architectural Digest*, August 1987). In the Anglo-Caribbean tradition, the English reinvented a lighter Palladio, with cross ventilation and ceiling fans. Robertson makes the tradition his own by layering the interiors with transitional outdoor spaces, "because glare is the enemy in the desert and the tropics," he says. Six paired guest rooms are located within the curved arms, off a long, covered loggia open on the garden side.

For the local workforce, he simplified all details and specified the use of a coral stone for which a quarry on the island was reopened: The stone was dressed on-site. Two hundred craftsmen worked there a full year. "Very low-tech," notes the architect. "The Romans could have built it." Beyond the stone, the only materials are



ABOVE RIGHT: A private seating area in the loggia—"the circulatory spine of the house," notes Robertson, and from which the bedrooms are accessed—is bounded by stone arches. "A quarry that had long been closed was reopened for this project," he explains.

RIGHT: The day room, says the architect, "was conceived as the place in the compound where daytime meals would be served or card games could be played—a second, less formal living/dining area." George III dining chairs offset the stone console, walls and flooring.

"There's a simple palette of natural materials, and the architecture is about those materials and achieving elegance through proportion and detail," Robertson says. ABOVE: An arm of the residence terminates in the master suite, which is dominated by a mahogany four-poster.

mahogany and brick, and the framing of the hip roofs was kept simple and left exposed, as in old plantation buildings.

The combined austerity of the design and sumptuousness of the stone established a suitable calm for interiors done by Mica Ertegun, of MAC II. Like Robertson, the New York designer took her inspiration from colonial traditions in the Caribbean. She had certain pieces, like the forged-metal lanterns and mahogany tables and chairs, crafted on the island —"where my associates David Barritt and Mica Duffy were instrumental in assuring their quality"—but bought a number of antiques in London, a traditional source of furniture in the Caribbean. As though affirming the area's long-standing role in trade routes, she had many of the upholstered pieces made in New York.

Reds—striped, floral, geometric—complement the dark wood of the tables and chairs in the pavilion's grand salon, where Ertegun arranged seating groups in each half of the space. She furnished off the walls, leaving the 30-foot-high volume of the room intact and pure. Blue-and-white porcelain vessels add a touch of the exotic, lowering the collective temperature of the reds. The cotton-and-raffia carpets match the walls, wrapping the

space in a golden hue that seems to suspend the furniture.

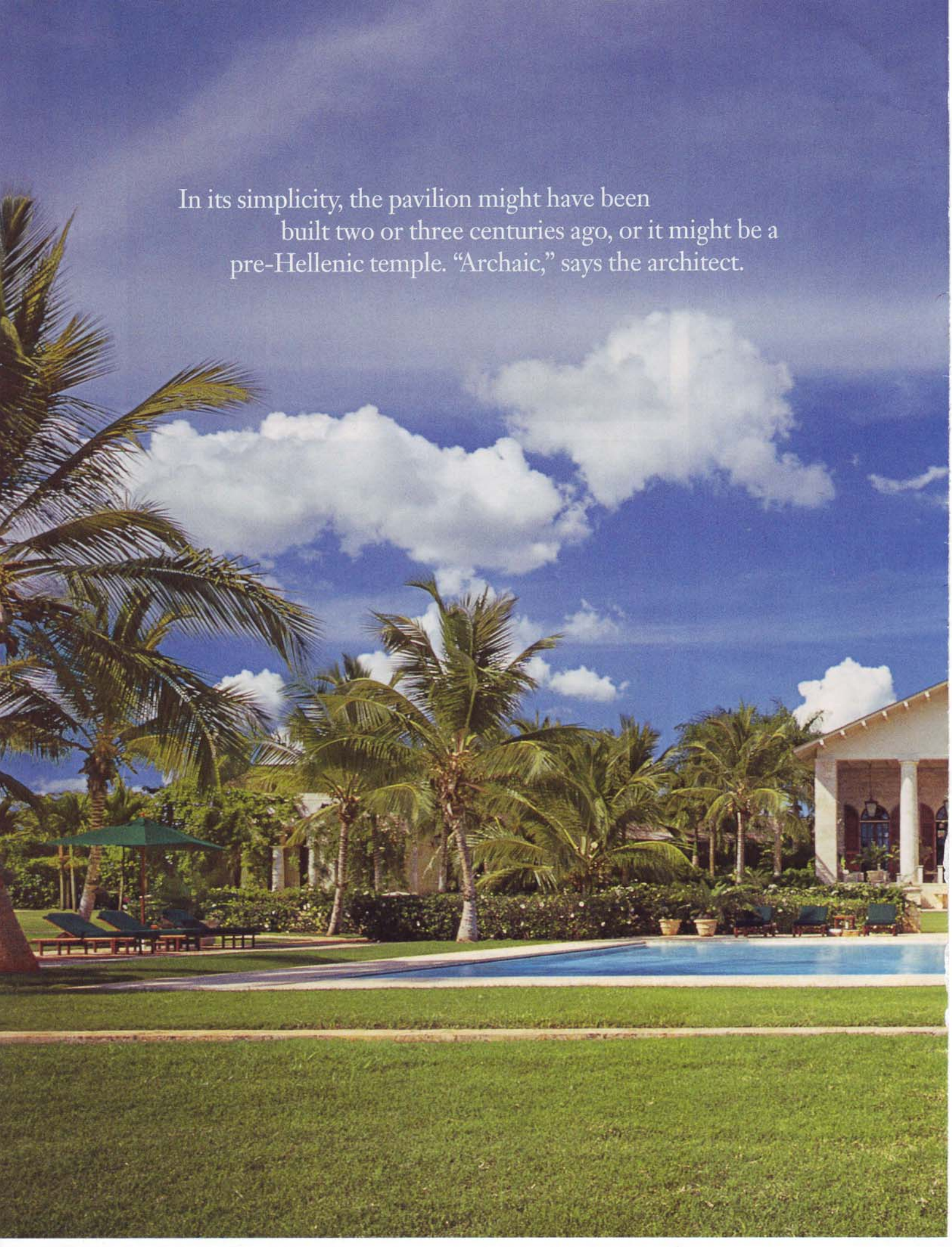
In the day room, the designer avoids the excessive formality of a stately dining room by placing two tables for 10 on either side of a seating group. The space is designed for easy sociability, as guests float between armchairs and tables and back. Again, Ertegun furnishes off the walls, leaving the architecture to its understated grandeur. Like the exteriors, the interiors look ancestral, as though generations of the same family have long owned and occupied the house.

In their collaboration, Robertson and Ertegun have contributed to the same story —the tale of a Palladian wonderland luxuriating in the tropics. Only sophisticates who know and love the colonies as well as the capitals could have made a classical world so simply and sensuously local. □

TOP: One of the few areas of the house without arches, "the day room anchors the east end of the crescent, a reciprocal pavilion to the master suite at the west," the architect points out. The 19,000-square-foot house also contains six guest suites, each of which has a private porch.

ABOVE: Visible from the day room is a vine-covered pergola located near the pool and not far from the beach. Lush plantings by landscape designer Deborah Nevins are interspersed with "brick walks, bordered in stone, that separate carpets of manicured lawn," Robertson says.

Robertson makes the tradition his own by layering the interiors with transitional outdoor spaces.



In its simplicity, the pavilion might have been built two or three centuries ago, or it might be a pre-Hellenic temple. "Archaic," says the architect.

The pool stretches out beyond the immense, gabled portico of the grand salon. "With the gardens and crescent framing it and providing a backdrop, the salon building is the centerpiece of the table, surrounded, literally and figuratively, by guests," comments Robertson.