

GOOD VIBRATIONS RENOVATIONS BRING BEACH HOUSE TO LIFE

Sanibel Island wasn't even a consideration when Bostonians Karen Semmelman and her husband, Bernie Ortwein, began looking for a second home six years ago.

"We wanted a place to go in the winter that was warm, and looked at California and Hawaii," says Karen. "The last place we wanted to be was Florida."

Today, there's no place they'd rather be, especially since completing the renovation of their three-bedroom, three-bathroom pool home on Sanibel's waterfront. While it took nearly two years to transform the dated property into a sleek and stylish beach house, getting to that point was a much longer journey. »

STORY BY ELIZABETH W. PEARCE
PHOTOS BY JACK HARDMAN

Against a metallic, coppery-red backdrop, an oil painting called "My Journey," is a focal point of the main staircase. Homeowner Karen Semmelman says she was captivated by its bright colors when she acquired the piece in Quebec in 2002. "You'll notice everything in the house has water of some kind associated with it," she says.



“We liked this area because it’s right on the bayou, which gives us access to the Gulf, as well as the bay.”

— KAREN SEMMELMAN

Paradise found

Karen admits she used to think of Florida as a state overrun with strip malls and high rises. Her perception changed when she and her husband first visited Sanibel; a trip they made on a recommendation from her son. To their surprise, they found Sanibel’s natural charm and beauty irresistible, and within a year, they purchased the Dinkin’s Bayou home they had rented during their first season on the island.

“We liked this area because it’s right on the bayou, which gives us access to the Gulf, as well as the bay,” says Karen, who enjoys boating, kayaking and windsurfing. While the couple was sold on the view and location, they were less impressed with the home itself.

Built in 1984, the three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath dwelling was fine when the couple was spending most of their time in Boston, where they still own a home. Bernie is a law professor at Suffolk University Law School and Karen, an attorney, practices Eden’s energy medicine. But once they decided to make the 1,800-square-foot beach house their primary residence, the couple saw room for improvement.

Planning perfection

To maximize what was already there would require “some major corrections,” recalls Karen. Further, she and her husband wanted to redesign and expand the living area to make it more open, functional and accessible. “But we didn’t want it to look as if we’d tacked on an addition,” she says. “The whole point was to make it seamless,” inside and out.

Initially, Karen worked with a residential designer who offered little guidance or feedback, instead agreeing to “whatever I wanted. That’s not to say it wasn’t OK, but it was boring.” It

was also expensive, thanks largely to a massive addition that Karen says was as out of proportion with the structure as it was with their budget.

As a result, the couple temporarily shelved the project while they regrouped and reevaluated.

Ultimately, they hired Southwest Florida architect Joyce Owens, AIA, and Sanibel contractor Julie DeBord of Kennedy Construction to help them revise their plans to a more suitable scale. With Bernie’s blessing, Karen directed the project, collaborating with Julie and Joyce on everything from planning to demolition to reconstruction.

Joyce, who is also a Florida-licensed interior designer, agreed that the home “really needed to be rethought” to meet the owners’ year-round residential needs. She also provided the feedback Karen sought but didn’t receive from her original designer.

“When people hire residential designers and not architects, they don’t get the benefit of someone who understands space, light and proportion,” says Joyce. “Karen gets it. She was great to work with because she’s so visual and so in tune with her environment. She understands the relationship between outdoor and indoor spaces, and that they should reflect one another.”

Joyce says the fact that the couple had lived in the home for several years before renovation work began helped with the planning and design process. Specifically, Karen knew that she needed additional square footage for an office, an energy studio and storage. She also wanted to move the kitchen to the rear of the house and extend the lanai without changing the roofline.

Let there be light

The owners’ familiarity with the property was a boon to other aspects of the project, as well. “It was nice that

they understood what time of day they got the best light,” says Joyce, a lighting expert. “That really helped in determining where things were going to go and how things would work.”

What appeared to be an afterthought in the original house took center stage in its redesign. To brighten the interior, Joyce was extremely methodical in selecting and placing skylights, windows and fixtures.

“A lot of people will have a square room with four overhead lights and where does the light go? On the floor,” says Joyce. “What’s the point of that?”

Instead, she “very deliberately” installed skylights close to the wall so that incoming light bounces off the walls instead of falling to the ground. She did the same thing with wall-washing uplights and downlights, which reflect light off the ceiling at night.

Joyce also designed the space to facilitate the flow of air through the home and maximize its spectacular views. To take advantage of “the best view in the house,” the owners moved the kitchen from the front of the house to the back.

“Surprisingly, this had been a guest bedroom,” says Joyce. “What a waste of real estate!”

Artwork was another primary design consideration.

“With all of Karen’s artwork, it was a big deal to know where everything was going to go as we were building this house,” says Joyce. Karen’s collection comprises numerous original paintings, one-of-a-kind objects d’art, and commissioned pieces that include a life-sized, bronze heron, of which she is especially fond.

It now stands guard near the pool, which was designed around it. “I don’t think it could be in a better place,” says Karen. “You see it as you walk in the front door.” ▶▶



Clockwise from top left: • The waiting area outside Karen’s energy studio contains lively pops of color balanced by a bamboo wall in soothing shades of green. • Sparingly used as an accent color, a blend of burnt copper and red energizes the master bedroom. Along with the rest of the home’s color palette, it can be seen over the bed in a large framed photo of rocks in a stream that Karen shot in Glazier National Park. • A freeform pool and all-weather deck surrounded by colorful, native landscaping provide a calming oasis overlooking Dinkin’s Bayou. • An illuminated palm adds a touch of kitsch to the kitchen, with its white lacquer custom cabinets and green-hued granite countertops. The architect was adamant that the window should be an undivided piece of fixed glass to frame the tree outside. “It’s like a picture,” says Karen. “I love it.” • Karen and Bernie commissioned California artist Michael Gard to create “Grace,” a rotating, illuminated wire sculpture. “I think we went through four different renovations with that wall opening so that the piece can be seen from outside,” says Karen. “At night, it looks like it’s in the middle of a galaxy.” • A large screened deck overlooking the pool and bayou make it easy to be one with the outdoors any time of year. • Homeowners Karen Semmelman (sitting with Labradoodle Chessy) and Bernie Ortwein in the great room of their Sanibel home, designed by area architect Joyce Owens (standing).



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Architect Joyce Owens (left) and homeowner Karen Semmelman survey the outdoor living space, which includes a new pool, various seating areas and all new native landscaping. Everything was painstakingly cultivated to harmonize with nature and also blend with the home's interior. Shaded overhangs and bayou-cooled breezes help to ensure outdoor comfort, even during the summer.

The owners' love of wildlife is not confined to sculptures. "We had a tri-colored heron that kept landing on the deck and drinking the pool water," says Karen.

To discourage the bird's unhealthy habit, she placed a large ceramic pot with recirculating fresh water nearby, which the bird now seems to prefer.

Difficult decisions, delicious details

For the duration of the approximately 18-month project, the three-woman design-build team paid meticulous attention to every detail, from floor to ceiling. While many design decisions were based on the owners' desire to blend the home with its surroundings, color played a key role, as well.

Karen's color concept revolves mainly around turquoise, eucalyptus, sage and similar aquamarine hues, as well as shades of silver-blue, with copper as an accent. Most of the palette can be seen in the kitchen's Monet granite which was chosen first as a launching point for the overall color scheme.

The flooring involved a number of painstaking choices, as well, in order to create a seamless look, inside and out. Reflecting the same natural hue, the engineered wood floor (which resembles driftwood) blends beautifully with the porcelain tile, all-weather and pressure-treated wood decking and stained concrete outside.

Although Karen and Bernie lived in Boston while most of the construction was underway, Karen made sure that nothing was overlooked in their absence. Besides keeping in touch via phone calls, texts and e-mail, she made monthly trips to Sanibel and even "camped out" at the house for two weeks — sans water and electricity — during the kitchen installation.

A stickler for detail, Karen was extremely specific when it came to designing the staircases and handrails. The custom-crafted handrails are made of unstained white oak (to match the floor), dark stained maple and stainless steel cables that let light through. For all its simplicity, the installation was anything but.

Karen explained that each hole had to be drilled individually with an angled bit and that the railings had to be stained before the cables could be installed. It took craftsmen a month to install the handrails to Karen's satisfaction.

"But it was worth it," she says. "We love it."

Karen and Joyce both applaud the contractor for being "a phenomenal builder" who was "amazing" to work with.

Since moving back into their remodeled home last December, Karen and Bernie continue to marvel at the results.

"There's not one space that we haven't used during the last year," she says. "We have so many places to just be and sit and feel the warmth. We love it."

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