The Art of Living

Bunny Williams, one of the world’s most respected interior designers, has spent her career teaching folks that style doesn’t trump comfort—and that there should always be room for the dogs.

By JULIA REED

photographs by WILLIAM WALDRON

Afternoon Stroll
Bunny Williams and one of her beloved rescue dogs on the lawn of her Connecticut home.
Almost every time I’ve arranged to meet with Bunny Williams, I’ve been hopelessly late (and not just slightly embarrased), but Bunny herself has never been anything but unflinchingly gracious. When we were colloaborating on a book about the houses of Furlow Gatewood, the iconic interior designer who is her great friend, I not only forgot about the time difference between my house and Furlow’s (where we were spending the weekend), I got almost irrevocably lost (apparently Shangri-la doesn’t turn up on your average GPS). When I finally arrived, complete with beagle in tow (Bunny is forever exhorting folks to bring their pups to her houses and those of her friends), whiskey and cheese straws were immediately on offer, and everyone (including Bunny’s husband, John Furlow, the über–antiques dealer who has also been Furlow’s business partner for decades) acted as though they always ate dinner at 11:00 p.m. Fast-forward a few years to this summer, when, stuck in Friday traffic between JFK and Bunny’s Connecticut retreat, I managed to delay yet another lovely meal. Again, I was welcomed effusively with a glass of rosé setting one of her famous tables and of placing something as banal as a tomato-soup-red-and-white plaid rug hand-dyed at home with daffodil dye and covered with a small, hand-woven basket by Maria Scutieri. I sat down on a soft, commodious porches. And everywhere there are the dogs, which curiously mimic their master’s ease in the saddle, preferred dressing up the dogs in her dolls’ clothes and pushing them around their two-hundred-acre property in a buggy. Bunny, who failed to inherit his ease at the saddle, preferred dressing up the dogs in her doll’s clothes and pushing them around their two-hundred-acre property in a buggy. Her most recent tome, A House by the Sea, was published in September and a love letter to La Colina, the colonial villa she and John built from scratch in Punta Cana, a seaside community in the Dominican Republic, and modeled, she says, “on the houses of the Mississippi Delta, a style of architecture we both adore.” Though the books could certainly serve as manuals for fine decoration, the houses on view are clearly backdrops to botanical prints, but there are also shots of a casually dressed Bunny setting one of her famous tables and of John napping on one of La Colina’s commodious porches. And everywhere there are the dogs, which currently include two rescue mutts in Connecticut and four in Punta Cana. “While I surround myself with lovely things, they never get in the way of living or make any room off-limits to my beloved dogs,” Bunny says. “I am always slightly suspicious of people who don’t like dogs in the house.” Bunny’s love of dogs, like her knack for welcoming guests and passion for classical architecture, comes from her childhood. Her father, a horse breeder who was the head of the American Horse Show Association (now the United States Equestrian Federation), was a beautiful rider and showman who often hunted with his pack of beagles. Bunny, who failed to inherit his ease at the saddle, preferred dressing up the dogs in her doll’s clothes and pushing them around their two-hundred-acre property in a buggy. Her mother, says Bunny, was an amateur decorator with “great flair,” the person all her friends asked to help with their houses. “She was always fussing with things, going to auctions, having curtains made,” Bunny says. “I remember going with her to the curtain lady when I was maybe ten years old.” She also recalls vividly—her family’s living room, a chic space featuring a tomato-soup-red-and-white plaid rug hand woven in North Carolina and beige toile curtains with a touch of red. The main residence on the grounds was built in 1840 and is the subject of Williams’s best-selling A House by the Sea. Opposite: The sunken garden, complete with a fox pond, is one of many outdoor features on the property. Opposite: Williams, ready for guests. But if you sit there, where are you going to put your drink?” Although the books could certainly serve as manuals for fine decoration, the houses on view are clearly backdrops to botanical prints, but there are also shots of a casually dressed Bunny setting one of her famous tables and of John napping on one of La Colina’s commodious porches. And everywhere there are the dogs, which currently include two rescue mutts in Connecticut and four in Punta Cana. “While I surround myself with lovely things, they never get in the way of living or make any room off-limits to my beloved dogs,” Bunny says. “I am always slightly suspicious of people who don’t like dogs in the house.” Bunny’s love of dogs, like her knack for welcoming guests and passion for classical architecture, comes from her childhood. 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Opposite: The sunken garden, complete with a fox pond, is one of many outdoor features on the property.
For someone to have a cotton plaid rug in 1958, that was sort of out there," Bunny says. "And do-able that room today and it would be just fine.

The house itself, a Georgian brick structure with a screened porch across the back, had an Oriental rug in the entrance hall that Bunny still puts to use. Like her own homes, it was also full of books and lots of chintz, which her mother collected. "I remember her blue lastuever tea service," she says. "It was special, but we used it all the time." The habit stayed with her, and now, possessed of countless sets of porcelain herself, she's a big believer in people using their stuff, even (or perhaps especially) the good stuff, all the time. "Clients will say to me, 'I need a coaster,'" she says, picking up a small porcelain dish on the table beside her. "This is my coaster! Buy a tea saucer for fifty dollars and put it on your table."

In her teens she was sent to a strict boarding school where the students wore hats and gloves and where she was forever getting in trouble for such renegade acts as reading in her closet past lights-out and turning up late for class. "My demerits on the hockey field," she says. Much as she disliked the discipline. "The biggest of her world-class education is in her ability to incorporate modern elements into her interior design and learn invaluable lessons in volume and scale, which she worries are no longer taught. "If people don’t go look at rooms and measure them properly and figure out the proportion, it doesn’t work. Mrs. Parish could walk into a room, go off and buy a sideboard, and it would fit within four inches. So many rooms today look as though you went shopping first and then tried to make things fit."

Another key part of her education came from exposure to the greatest homes of the firm’s illustrious clients: Bill and Babe Paley’s Fifth Avenue apartment; Jock and Betsey Whitney’s Long Island estate, Greentree. "We were exposed to the most extraordinary interiors that ever happened," Bunny says, adding that at one point Hadley was asked to redo a whole wing at Greentree in preparation for a visit from Princess Margaret. On her own first visit to the Paleys’ apartment to drop off a package, she opened the doors and opened a showroom in Manhattan’s Fine Arts Building to display the 15th-plus designs for Bunny Williams Home in one place. "If I’m not saying I’m an artist, but a painter has to paint," she says. "A musician has to play the piano. Have to do this, have to do this. That is what I get up every day and want to do." Even her downtime is full of activity. She puts her garden or tweaks its design. She sets elaborate tables with the linens and glassware and china stored in her enormous butler’s pantries. She gives tours to other people’s gardens or nearby museums. "You have to stretch yourself. You have to look at new stuff."

This is what Bunny loves about her job. She has turned it into her daily life. When Scarlett has a dress made from Tara’s elaborate curtains, one of the harder assistants, but she does always step up.

"Bunny was right there," he says. “She had no reason to look out for a needy assistant, but she does always step up.”

Clearly, she derives great joy from doing so. Every winter weekend in Punta Cana is always party, and on the slower weekends in Connecticut, she is, again, ready. “Someone could walk in here right now and we could get dinner on the table,” she says. “There’s always something in the freezer, or John could make pasta. We just love doing that.” When the Wall Street Journal asked what she considered the most fashionable place in the world, she replied, “Wherever it may be, I don’t go there.” She meant, of course, that she doesn’t intend to travel, but she’s happy to depart from her own exotically stylish world, where dogs rule the roast and even the tardiest guest is embraced wholeheartedly.