DREAM HOUSES
AT THE BEACH
IN THE DESERT
OUT WEST
DOWN SOUTH

PLUS: TIPS FOR BUILDING A HOME OF YOUR OWN

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Dress by Oscar de la Renta
Luminous in the early-morning sunlight, the oceanfront porch off the great room holds chaise longues designed by Oscar de la Renta for Century Furniture, and cotton cushions in stripes and batiks. The lanterns are from Treillage, Bunny and John’s Manhattan garden shop.

Photographs by Fritz von der Schulenberg

What does it take to set up house in the Dominican Republic? For design pros Bunny Williams and John Rosselli, the answer is simple: each other.

By Sarah Medford
A family photo with Bubby, one of their Dominican-born dogs. Portrait by Brian Doben.
In the great room, vintage textiles (Bunny’s passion) and blue-and-white porcelains (John’s) commingle with seating covered in durable cotton duck. The mirror, from John’s furniture line, has been scaled up and painted a chalky white. Opposite: The house, designed by Ernesto Buch.
“I THINK WE CAN SAY that we had the baby, then we got married.”

Bunny Williams is a nice girl from Charlottesville, Virginia, who grew up to become one of this country’s most esteemed decorators, so it stands to reason that her out-of-wedlock adventure a few years ago produced not a child but a house. What’s surprising is that the building process, which for most couples is fractious at best, would in her case lead to both a new sanctuary in the Caribbean and marriage to its codesigner.

“This was something John and I could do together,” Bunny explains, referring to her husband of three years, antiques dealer John Rosselli. The two have known each other since the 1970s, when Bunny was a young associate at Parish-Hadley, New York’s tastemaking decorating firm, and would pick through the inventory of John’s Second Avenue shop every few weeks. They’ve been a couple for fifteen years and are business partners in Treillage, a Manhattan garden store, as well. It’s likely the shared parenting of that now-teenaged retail venture, including annual buying trips to the Far East, had almost as much to do with their marriage, in 2004, as dreaming up a new house did.

Whatever brought them together, the result is paradise as far as their friends are concerned, because Bunny and John share unimpeachable taste and the kind of generosity that turns everyone around them into cherished companions. But more on that later.
 Appropriately, their offspring is in paradise, or at least in one of the world’s current versions of it: Punta Cana, a resort community on the southeastern tip of the Dominican Republic. Annual winter stays there with their good friends Annette and Oscar de la Renta had shown Bunny and John the sunny character of the place; the Dominican-born fashion designer is a partner in the oceanfront development, which comprises three residential neighborhoods, a hotel—the Punta Cana Resort & Club—and a golf course, with a second on the way. Though the hotel’s been around for thirty-five years, residential sales have been going on for less than a decade, and in pockets the venture feels unfinished or barely begun. The enclave where the de la Rentas built their house in 1997 is a different story, however, with mature palms, sea grapes, wild ginger and jacaranda all jostling to camouflage the well-endowed houses from view. You wouldn’t guess that Oscar’s friends Julio Iglesias and Mikhail Baryshnikov are just down the beach, or that the de la Rentas’ houseguests routinely require security details. Only the birds really know what’s going on along this newly fashionable stretch of Dominican coastline.

Somehow Bunny and John resisted looking at property until the frozen winter of 2003, when John, a lifelong lover of steamy climates, declared on the day before he was due back in New York that he’d never leave. Oscar must have hustled them right into his golf cart; the couple fell for three and a half acres just down the road, on a rise a short distance from the ocean. Behind them would eventually be the fifteenth hole of the new golf course.

Before committing, Bunny and John came to terms with the fact that if they really wanted to spend a significant amount of time in Punta Cana, they would have to give up at least one of the four other dwellings they’d managed to acquire, separately or together, over the years. Ultimately they decided to part with the farm John had inherited in New Jersey and his town house in Savannah; they would keep Bunny’s Colonial-era weekend retreat in Connecticut and their New York City apartment. They were confident that the friends and relations scattered between New York and California would come to visit them in Punta Cana if invitations were extended. (“They really built the house to give themselves a new place to take their family and friends,” explains Jonathan Gargiulo, John’s nephew and alter ego in his antiques business.)

Flash forward two years. Bunny and John are sitting with a few of those friends on the terrace of La Colina (“the hill”) after a late lunch, reliving some of the highlights of its short life. Their three dogs, all local adoptees, circle the table in hopes of a handout.

“Our first idea for the house was to build a Southern-style raised cottage,” John says, bribing the dogs with butter cookies to stay on the porch as a hen and four chicks march across the front lawn. “Something you might see in Mississippi or Georgia. We both respond to that style.” (Mission accomplished—the flock safely scoots under a bayberry bush.)

“Then we got mixed up with Palladio—of course, John loves Palladio; they’re both Italian—and we ended up combining the two,” Bunny says. “We shared a philosophy of what we wanted: a house for entertaining, with great light, high ceilings and porches. It’s never cold enough that you don’t want to be outside.”

“The property called for a large house,” John interjects.

“I don’t know what he’s saying—we had to build a large house to hold all
"The guesthouse might just pass for a villa in the Veneto."
of John’s furniture from the other two places. John loves big furniture.” Pause. “Of course, I do, too.” Neither of them mentions that only a big house would do for all the near and dear arrayed across the country, waiting for their rooms to open up.

The couple worked on a plan with Ernesto Buch, a Cuban-American architect they’d known for some time, whose fluency in classical building styles and detailing they admired. Having designed the de la Renta’s house in Punta Cana, Ernesto knew the local contractors, and his New Haven office wasn’t too far from Bunny’s weekend place.

They quickly settled on a two-story, four-bedroom cottage of coquina, or coral stone, and hand-troweled stucco. It would have a single high-ceilinged great room on the second floor, with deep porches on either side that would face the ocean to the east and the less windy interior of the island to the west. In a nod to Thomas Jefferson she’d been wanting to make for decades, Bunny requested Monticello-style triple-hung windows that could double as doorways between the great room and its porches. Opening to a height of eight feet, these have proved to be so much fun to walk through that no one actually uses the French doors Ernesto included as a less eccentric alternative. Just to the north of the main house, the architect designed a pool and a two-bedroom guesthouse that might just pass for a villa in the Veneto.

La Colina took nine months to plan and another eighteen to build. Starting in the spring of 2004, when ground was broken, Bunny came down about once a month to review progress. John often stayed in New York, but his absence didn’t shield him from the wallet-emptying realities of construction.

First the couple discovered that the egregiously expensive copper gutters they needed hadn’t been factored into the estimate. “They aren’t used to working for people with budgets down here,” John observes with deadpan accuracy. Next, they were told that they required two full feet of topsoil over the entire stony acreage if they wanted a garden. What would Bunny and John, not to mention the chickens, do without a garden? Then there was the roof. On one of her trips, Bunny saw the half-framed house peering down at her from its hillock and decided the peaked roof they’d planned would make the whole building too prominent—distinctly not what they’d had in mind. “So I borrowed the hipped roof from Drayton Hall, in Charleston,” she says. “I gave a drawing to Ernesto, and he incorporated it.”

The freewheeling nature of the Dominican building process was a novelty for Bunny, who found Ernesto’s beautifully detailed plans filed in garbage bags during a particularly galling visit. “But once you have the baby, you forget the pain of childbirth,” she says, in hibiscus-colored hindsight. “There isn’t a day I don’t walk around and feel in awe of the craftsmanship—and I love knowing it’s handmade. Sometimes I think we have too much perfection in the U.S. Here there were very few tools involved—there was barely a toolbox on-site.”

Furnishing the new house was equally improvisational. John crated up his furni-
John often spends the late afternoon watching movies or TV in the library, where elegant antiques and objects drawn from the natural world mix. This page: A massive tortoise shell meets an Italian table, a Dutch mirror, an English leopard-print chair and Indian mother-of-pearl-inlay side chairs. Opposite: Swedish bird prints top a ten-foot-long sofa.
ture from New Jersey and Savannah and shipped it to the nearest Dominican port. Bunny found places for everything. “I would have felt very disconnected had I not done that,” John admits. “Your home has to represent who you are. Otherwise, it’s ersatz and superficial.”

Bunny enjoyed the freedom to compose rooms instinctually, without needing to sell a client on some of the more arcane relationships she created: a hulking hand-painted Siennese chest, for instance, sits next to a tufted armchair wearing a floral-printed linen. “In a way, this place was really about antidecorating,” she says matter-of-factly.

Maybe so, but it lacks none of the qualities that make a house in the tropics delicious. “It’s just Bunny and John, that house,” says novelist Jane Stanton Hitchcock, a recent guest. “We’d go out during the day and then just long to get back to the house on the hill. It’s that cozy comfort they do so well. Dogs, food and children are always part of the landscape.”

The house came together as beautifully as Bunny and John did—and continue to do—to the point that it should be no surprise that they married before the project was completed. They knew how it would turn out. And so, it seems, did their many friends and relations, who are no longer scattered between New York and California. They’re all on their way to Punta Cana—or at least it appears that way to Bunny and John, who couldn’t be happier.

A Room That Feels Right

When Bunny Williams was working with architect Ernesto Buch on the floor plan for La Colina, she did what she would have done for a client: she paid close attention to the relationships between wall dimensions and ceiling heights, making sure the rooms would both function well and feel good to be in. Though such expertise takes time to develop, Bunny has a few suggestions that anyone can use to assess a floor plan—and a few tips for rescuing a poorly scaled room.

**In traditional architecture,** the larger the space is, the higher the ceiling can be. A small bedroom of ten by fifteen feet feels right with an eight-foot ceiling; if the room gets any bigger, the ceiling height should go to nine feet or more. A big room, like La Colina’s thirty-by-fifty-foot great room, can take a dramatically high ceiling. But beware of going above fifteen feet without a cornice or other architectural reference point for the eye to settle on, or the room will start to feel like a well.

**In modern and contemporary architecture,** glass walls can mitigate the effects of a low ceiling, even in a large room. Still, a ceiling height of ten feet or more adds exponentially to the pleasure of being in a large room of any style.

**Awkward proportions can be downplayed** with furnishings. In a low-ceilinged room, hang pictures or a mirror up to the ceiling to make it look higher. In a room whose ceiling soars, avoid scaling up all the furniture or you’ll feel like a doll. A few big pieces will help. Then vary the sizes of the remaining furniture, for excitement and balance.
Crisply detailed stucco-work on a ground-floor porch points up the high level of craftsmanship that the architect had at his disposal. Bunny arranged a Georgia-made bench and wicker chairs around a Chinese provincial table, which holds a horse sculpture. For design contacts, see page 177.