

MARCH 2002

# HOUSE & GARDEN

10 GREAT  
IDEAS FOR  
GARDEN  
RETREATS



# PLAYING IT COOL

ARCHITECT JOHN KEENEN BRINGS THE MIAMI SUN  
INDOORS, WHILE LANDSCAPE DESIGNER EDWINA VON GAL  
CREATES A DARK, CONTEMPLATIVE GARDEN




TECHNICALLY SPEAKING, this is a renovation. But if one considers the scope of the transformation of this Miami home on an island in Biscayne Bay, the term “alchemy” seems far more appropriate. Architect John Keenen of the New York firm Keenen/Riley has changed lead into gold, converting an anonymous, crumbling, 1950s modern house into a contemporary refuge of extraordinary intimacy, refinement, and character. The metamorphosis is dazzling.

“Everything was reconfigured to meet Carlos’s needs,” the architect says of client Carlos Cisneros, a prominent Miami businessman and art collector. “The house was literally falling down. We reworked every surface, every material, every square foot.”

BY MAYER RUS    PHOTOGRAPHED BY WILLIAM ABRANOWICZ  
STYLED BY DAVID YARRITU

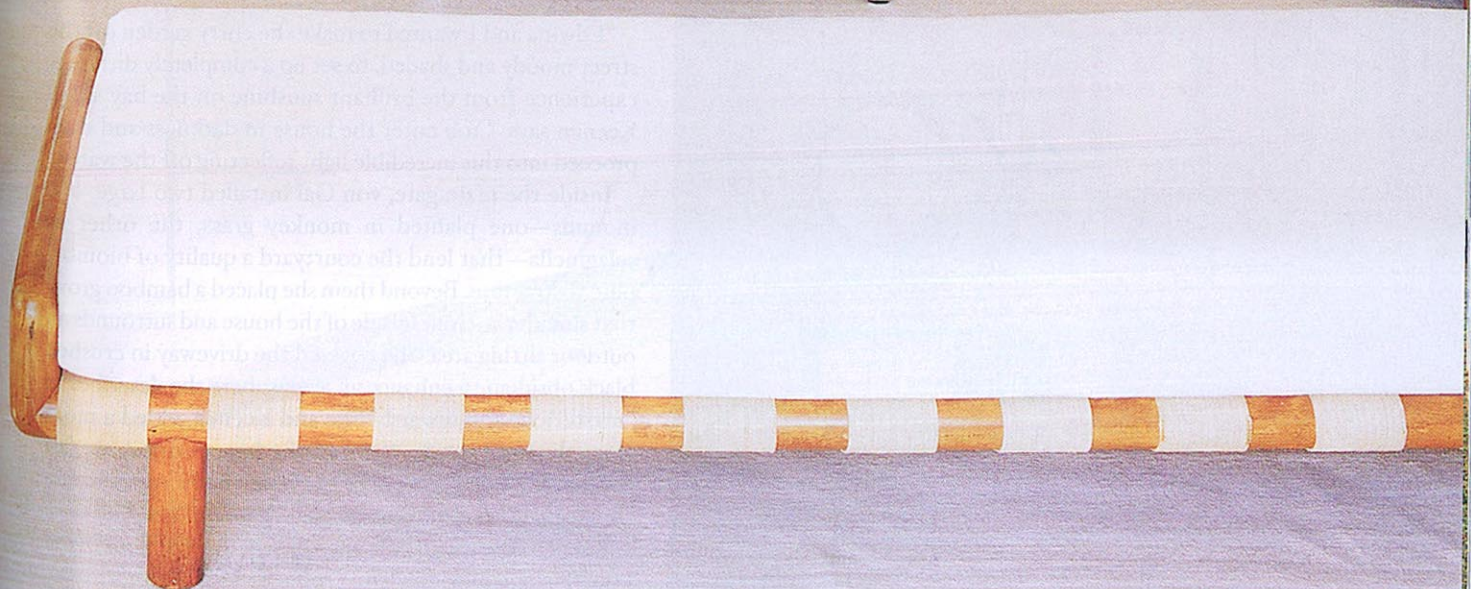
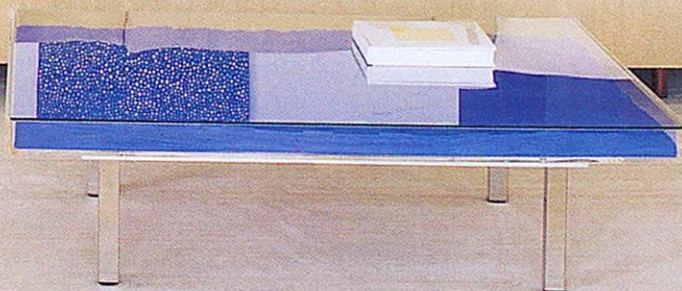
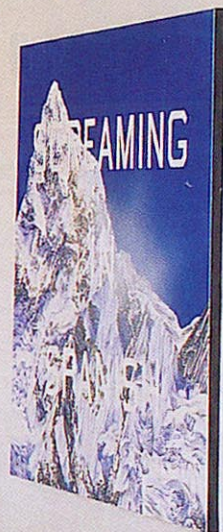
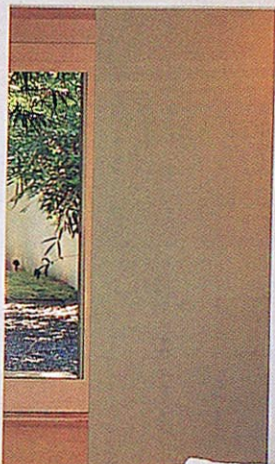
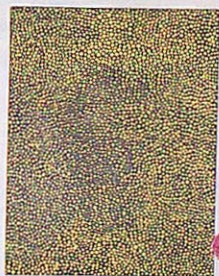
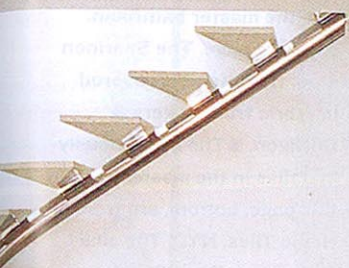


A photograph of a bamboo grove. In the foreground, there is a dense patch of low-growing, dark green plants. A path of light-colored concrete pavers leads from the right side towards a curved, light-colored wall that forms a sitting area. The wall is partially obscured by bamboo stalks. The background is filled with tall, thin bamboo stalks and dense foliage, creating a lush, green environment. A bright yellow square is visible in the top left corner of the image.

Curved walls forming a sitting area in the bamboo patch offer organic relief from the planar architecture of the house. ■ Visitors reach the purposely dark, moody entry, opposite page, via a path of concrete pavers that crosses a moat.



The Cisneros house, top, embraces the sun on the side facing Biscayne Bay. ■ The crisp lines of the living/dining room, above, are broken by sculptural furniture, such as a '50s Oswaldo Borsani rosewood screen from Form and Function, NYC, and Yves Klein's Blue Table. The Harvey Probbler armchair and Robjohn-Gibbins daybed are from Gansevoort Gallery, NYC. Both are covered in Gretchen Bellinger fabrics. ■ Another angle, opposite page, shows off the John Keenen terrazzo and steel stair design, executed by Aileron Design Inc. The prototype Franco Albini Fiorenza chair from Brian Kish, NYC, is covered in Carlton V fabric. Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Yellow Dots* hangs on the far wall, Ed Ruscha's *Screaming in Spanish* on the right.





Sliding doors bring bamboo into the master bathroom, opposite page. The Saarinen stool from Knoll is covered in fabric from Rogers & Goffigon. ■ The meticulously laid tiles in the master bath, this page, bottom, are from Nemo Tiles, NYC. The sink fixtures are from Speakman. ■ The master bedroom, left, features a custom-made bed by Keenen/Riley, NYC. The curved wall, which partially encloses the bathroom, is covered in Flat-Cut American Walnut wood veneer from Wolf-Gordon. The photographs are the “Blue (NY)” series by Donald Moffett.

**“THE BATHROOM FEELS AS IF IT’S FLOATING IN THE BAMBOO—VERY ‘CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON’ ” —EDWINA VON GAL, DESIGNER**



To open up the landscaping possibilities on the wedge-shaped property, Keenen did what few architects and clients do in these “more is more” times: he made the house smaller. By excising a decrepit carport and various inelegant additions, the architect freed the front yard for use as a dramatic arrival sequence. He then called upon landscape designer Edwina von Gal, a frequent collaborator, to realize his grand vision of environmental chiaroscuro.

“Edwina and I wanted to make the entry garden off the street moody and shaded, to set up a completely different experience from the brilliant sunshine on the bay side,” Keenen says. “You enter the house in darkness and then proceed into this incredible light reflecting off the water.”

Inside the main gate, von Gal installed two large, low mounds—one planted in monkey grass, the other in selaginella—that lend the courtyard a quality of biomorphic abstraction. Beyond them she placed a bamboo grove that shields the front facade of the house and surrounds an outdoor sitting area. She covered the driveway in crushed black obsidian to enhance an atmosphere she describes as “mysterious and inward.” She and Keenen added a moat along the front facade. “Instead of a dreary carport, we felt the landscape in the front of the house had to offer something you don’t get in the bay-side garden,” von Gal says.

Keenen accentuated the open plan of the first floor of the house, which joins the living room and dining area in one



**“THE WHOLE PROCESS HAS BEEN ABOUT CREATING AN IDENTITY FOR A PLACE THAT NEVER REALLY HAD ONE” —JOHN KEENEN, ARCHITECT**



spatial sweep, with large expanses of glass offering views of the bay. Presiding over this arena is a sculptural staircase made of free-floating terrazzo treads on a spine of tubular stainless steel. The second level became a single master suite comprised of a bedroom, a dressing area, a den, and a bathroom contained in an oval enclosure clad in walnut veneer.

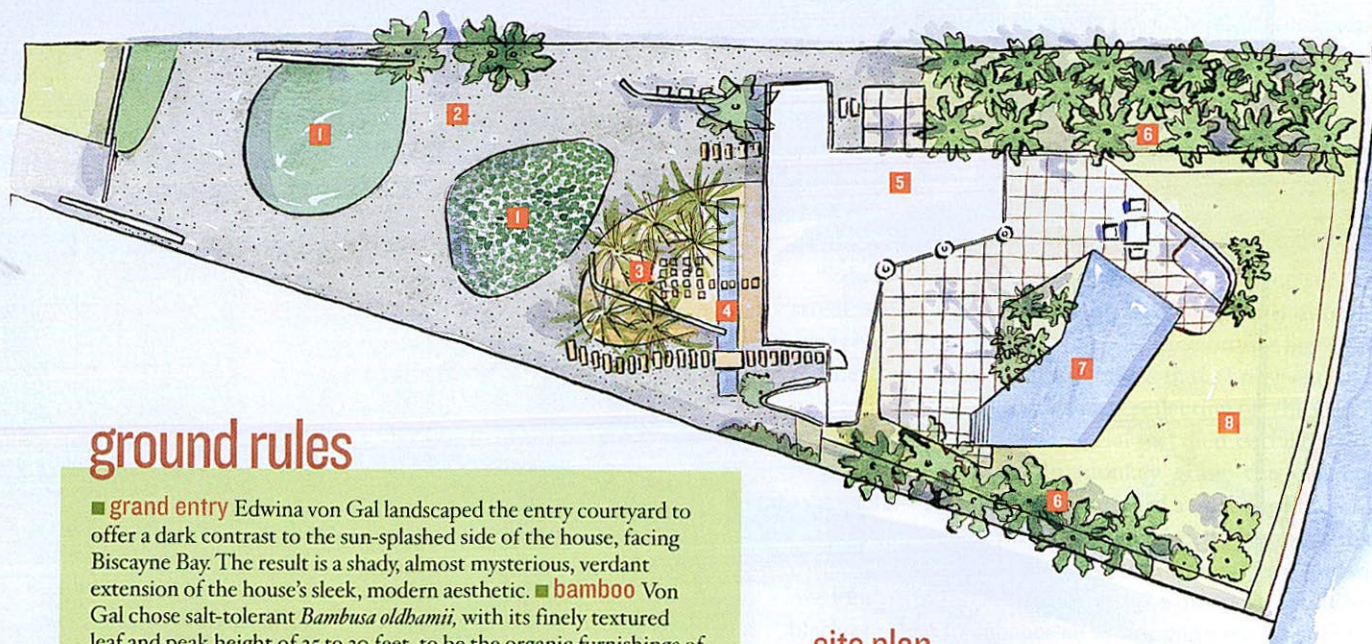
With the master bath, Keenen and von Gal eloquently fuse architecture, interiors, and landscape. Partially enclosed in its walnut cocoon, the tiled bathroom faces sliding glass doors that open onto the tops of the tall bamboo plants at the front of the house. “The bathroom feels as if it’s floating in the bamboo—very *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” says von Gal. “It’s so serene to hear the click-clack of the bamboo and the gurgling water in the moat.”

Keenen is primarily an architect—he’s at work on a new master plan for the Miami Design District—but he relishes the roles of interior decorator and art adviser. Here, he paired lesser-known midcentury Italian and American design with art by Yayoi Kusama, Tony Smith, Yves Klein, and others. “It all really suits,” Keenen says. “The whole process has been about creating an identity for a place that never really had one.”

Royal palm allées, left, provide privacy.

A Willy Guhl Loop chair sits next to pots from Asian Ceramics, Inc.

Form furniture by Van Keppel-Green sits poolside, opposite page. The pieces, in Sunbrella fabric, are from Patio, L.A. Sources, see back of book.



## ground rules

- **grand entry** Edwina von Gal landscaped the entry courtyard to offer a dark contrast to the sun-splashed side of the house, facing Biscayne Bay. The result is a shady, almost mysterious, verdant extension of the house’s sleek, modern aesthetic.
- **bamboo** Von Gal chose salt-tolerant *Bambusa oldhamii*, with its finely textured leaf and peak height of 25 to 30 feet, to be the organic furnishings of an intimate outdoor extension of the house’s library garden.
- **moss and grass** Low mounds planted with selaginella (club moss) and *Ophiopogon japonicus* (monkey grass) make islands of greenery in the crushed obsidian driveway, and offer a textural contrast to the smooth bamboo canes. Both plants grow well in shade.

## site plan

- |                       |                     |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1 Low, planted mounds | 5 House             |
| 2 Obsidian driveway   | 6 Royal palm groves |
| 3 Bamboo garden       | 7 Swimming pool     |
| 4 Moat                | 8 Lawn              |



