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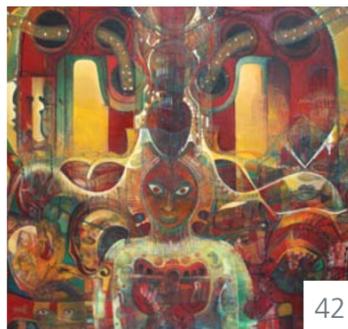
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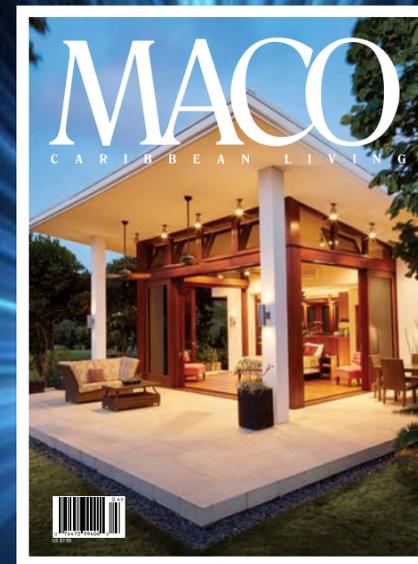
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## the bird house

HIGH UP ON A BREEZY NEVISIAN HILLSIDE WITH DRAMATIC VIEWS OF ST KITTS AND NEVIS PEAK, JAMES AND LAURA CRAIG HAVE SET OUT TO "MAXIMIZE THE EXPERIENCE OF LIVING IN A GARDEN SETTING."

"WE REALLY LIVE IN A GARDEN PAVILION," SAYS JAMES CRAIG OF HIS MODERNIST CREATION ON NEVIS.

Merging interior and exterior space is a recurrent aspiration among architects and landscape designers working in the Caribbean, and Les Oiseaux is a triumph of the genre. "We wanted to live with 270-degree views of the ocean and the Peak," remembers James. "And we could only accomplish that by using wraparound glass walls on three sides with 12-foot high sliding glass doors."

Behind such spacious simplicity, of course, lies a more complex story. "We met on Nevis in 1995 when I was managing the Hermitage Plantation Inn and James was working as a landscape designer with the Four Seasons," recalls Laura, who originally hails from Wales.

James, now 62, was brought up in Tarpon Springs, Florida, before he went on to study first botany and then landscape architecture. The couple love travel and have between them lived in exotic locales including Mauritius, Barbados, New Zealand and the British Virgin Islands. Now, Nevis is home.

"We love the island because it isn't overdeveloped like so many others. It's so natural, and we love the people—we have many local friends," reports James. "Visitors to Hermitage, where we were based when we first got together, are a little on the eccentric side, but very interesting. And that goes for many of the people who spend time on Nevis."

RIGHT The cottage nestled in a grove of *Coccoloba pubescens* (Seagrape Trees). The patio is coral stone



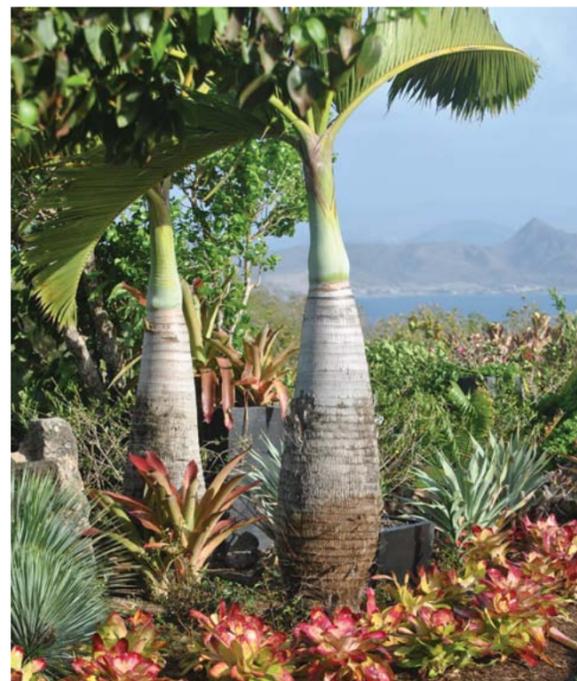
The island is only 36 square miles, but like others in the Caribbean has two distinct micro-climates: the eastern side, facing the Atlantic, which tends to be slightly cooler, windier and wetter, while the west is more open and hotter. "We wanted to build something modern, and we knew that wouldn't work so well on the east side where we used to live," explains Laura, who understands the three magic words in any successful property project: location, location, location.

They found their dream acre of land 800 feet up Red Hawk Ridge road on the northwest of the island in 2006. "The site nestles in the hills with commanding views and a nice steady breeze," reveals James. "The surrounding forested hills have soft contours, we see the Peak in full profile, and St Kitts straddling the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean. Here, we have all the natural elements we love."

The couple hired Manhattan architect Lee Skolnick, whom they'd worked with on Anguilla. "Our brief for the venture centred on capturing the various views in a large format within a programmed yet fragmented spatial organization," says James. "As the land is sculptural in quality, we wanted the architecture to reflect that."

After rock cutting and the introduction of 1,000 cubic yards of new topsoil, the couple started construction not on the 7,000-square-foot main house, but the smaller guesthouse. And, of course, the landscaping. Most Caribbean homes plan the house and garden separately. With Les Oiseaux, the two are indistinguishable—both part of one unified design concept.

"THE SURROUNDING FORESTED HILLS HAVE SOFT CONTOURS, WE SEE THE PEAK IN FULL PROFILE, AND ST KITTS STRADDLING THE CARIBBEAN SEA AND ATLANTIC OCEAN. HERE, WE HAVE ALL THE NATURAL ELEMENTS WE LOVE"



ABOVE Leading to the studio, the charcoal coloured concrete driveway is edged with zoysia grass  
 FAR LEFT Attracting humming birds, *Ipomea horsfalliae* cascades over walls rendered with venetian lime plaster  
 CENTRE The North Garden with *Hyphorbe lagenicaulis* (Bottle Palm), *Yucca rostrata* and bromeliads leading the eye towards the southeast peninsula of St Kitts  
 RIGHT The cottage is a contrast of wood and concrete living spaces



The contemporary house features a combined living room and sleeping area, plus a kitchen and bathroom, under a single sloping roof in just one plane surrounded by acres of hurricane-proof glass. The footprint is small but the feel spacious.

"We were concerned that such modern design might seem a little austere, so we've introduced unstained mahogany cupboards, door and window frames, detailing in sapele, and an ipe floor which is very practical in this climate," says James. The honey tones of the wood soften the effect of the angular design.

For privacy, the glass is tinted a smoky grey, while silk drapes can be drawn at night. Other natural materials include polished black granite countertops and natural stone wall tiles.

"We don't use the AC much, which is unusual for a house with so much glass," notes James. The natural breezes combined with carefully placed tree planting and screened windows keep the property cool. They usually eat outside on the terrace.

Under a "green" roof, actually the lawn, there is also a smaller studio seemingly built into the hillside, in which Laura takes care of the business side of Craig Collins International Landscape Architecture, while James works on his next creation.



ABOVE The kitchen features sapele cabinetry, black granite countertops and ipe flooring, with views to the surrounding hills and Nevis Peak

FAR LEFT The studio has mahogany doors and windows, sapele cabinetry, and marble tiled floor

LEFT Cottage interior illustrating the interplay between doors, windows, flooring and cabinetry. For privacy, embroidered silk drapes are drawn at night



VIBRANT PLANT COLOUR IS PROVIDED BY BRILLIANT FUCHSIA-RED  
 IPOMOEA CASCADING OVER A WHITE WALL.  
 “AND THAT PLANT, WHICH IS A BIG HUMMINGBIRD ATTRACTANT,  
 GAVE US THE NAME: LES OISEAUX”

The philosophy behind the plateau garden’s design has been informed by Lawrence Johnson’s work at Hidcote in the English Cotswolds and the Jardin Exotique in Monaco. “Essentially, the idea is to create accent compositions of plant material in islands,” explains James. “The genesis of that is, of course, the Caribbean archipelago which is itself a series of islands. I also wanted to concentrate on the diversity of form and texture inspired by the coral reefs I see when I dive.”

The result is a series of low-growing “islands” interspersed by native trees such as coccoloba, the mountain seagrape, to align distant views. Fragrant plants help create an ethereal ambiance, while angular topiary adds a touch of European sophistication.

Vibrant plant colour is provided by brilliant fuchsia-red ipomoea cascading over a white wall. “And that plant, which is a big hummingbird attractant, gave us the name: Les Oiseaux.”

Selling agent Suzanne Gordon of Sugar Mill Real Estate thinks the setting is magical. “Les Oiseaux brings the gardens of Tuscany, the rolling hills of France and the spectacular blues of the Caribbean together in one breathtaking experience.”

The cottage sits on a 33,000-gallon cistern, with a waste water system used to irrigate the garden. “We’re big believers in responsible sustainability,” says James. One of his current clients, Christophe Harbour over on St Kitts, takes the same principled stand. “Development in the Caribbean has to be gradual, and in tune with the natural environment. It’s the only way.”

The 2008 downturn came just as construction was due to start on the larger main house, but the couple, who also have a home on Virgin Gorda, have no regrets. “We’ve found for the two of us that our smaller home is just perfect,” says Laura. “Sometimes you just have to live in a space before taking a project to the next stage.”

The designs for the larger home have been through planning and all utilities are in place, so any buyer of the property will be able to realise James and Laura’s original dream of fully integrated house and garden living.M

For more details, visit [www.nevishouses.com](http://www.nevishouses.com) or [www.boutiquecaribbeanvillas.com](http://www.boutiquecaribbeanvillas.com)



LEFT ABOVE Bromeliads, *Dioon cycad* and dwarf Singapore frangipani around the “green” studio roof

ABOVE View to St Kitts framed by ancient lichen encrusted boulders, Euphorbias, cycads and bromeliads  
 RIGHT The steps between the cottage and studio bordered by *Aptenia cordifolia*, *Ipomea horsfalliae* and *Heliotrope curassavicum*

FAR RIGHT *Alcantarea odorata*, dwarf crown of thorns, cordyline string bean and Native *Anthurium cordatum*

