

St. Croix

TRANSFORMING A TROPICAL RETREAT

Interior Design by Carleton Varney, IDSA, and Daniel Parker, ASID
of Dorothy Draper & Company

Text by Wendy Moonan/Photography by Kim Sargent



Dan and Amelia Musser are island people; they live on an island in the summer, and they live on an island in the winter," says Carleton Varney, New York interior designer and president of Dorothy Draper & Company. He is describing his longtime clients from Laingsburg, Michigan, for whom he has designed four houses in the past 25 years, as well as redecorating Grand Hotel, their elegant 115-year-old resort hotel on Mackinac Island in northern Michigan (see *Architectural Digest*, August 1981 and August 1990).

His latest project is the Mussers'

newly acquired retreat on St. Croix. It couldn't be more different from their home on Mackinac, the epicenter of their extended family.

Inspired by St. Croix's traditional old Danish houses—the island was under Danish rule from 1733 to 1917—the Crucian-style yellow stucco house has large arches and wide terraces with 180-degree views of the town of Christiansted, on the eastern end of the island, Gallows Bay and the mountains beyond.

The house was an impulse buy for the Mussers, who had owned a private villa associated with Villa Madeleine,



ABOVE LEFT: "The object was to create an island home for casual living—and to avoid clichés, such as anything reminiscent of Moroccan or Spanish styles," Carleton Varney says of a 1950s house on St. Croix that he and his associate Daniel Parker modified for Dan and Amelia Musser.

a hillside hotel on St. Croix (see *Architectural Digest*, July 1991), for 11 years. It all happened one day when Dan Musser was waiting for his wife outside The Buccaneer hotel in Christiansted. While reading the ads posted in the window of a real estate office, he recognized a place they had admired on a

house tour. "I said to my wife, 'Let's go look at it,'" he recalls. "And we did, but we didn't like it. Then they showed us a second one. I loved it immediately, especially the views and setting."

So they bought it, even though, Dan Musser admits, "Amelia was a little flabbergasted." What they had was a

The town of Christiansted and Gallows Bay are visible in the distance from the living area. The herringbone rattan chairs and sofa and the bamboo tables were custom-made in Manila. Carleton Varney By The Yard striped pillow fabric and white chair and sofa cotton.



ABOVE: In a corner of the living area is a space for playing cards, arranged with a circa 1900 pine pie safe and a limestone pedestal table. The hand-carved and painted pine-apple chairs were designed by Varney; the fabric is from Carleton Varney By The Yard.

view with a house attached. "It was small," Amelia Musser says. "We realized we'd have to chop it up and start all over again."

Enter Carleton Varney. He knows St. Croix well. He has had a house there for more than 30 years—in fact, he introduced the Mussers to St. Croix.

He also knows his clients well, and vice versa. "We have a wonderful relationship," Amelia Musser says. "It's full of trust and mutuality. It's been great ever since we met."

As soon as Varney saw his clients' new place, he says, "I knew I'd have to rebuild it." Working with his associate Daniel Parker, Varney gutted the house and changed the configuration of the rooms to create one large space, which includes the kitchen, the dining area and the living area. A former bedroom became the den. "I wanted the house to be simple. That's really

OPPOSITE: Varney sought "a fresh, crisp, tropical expression" for the master bedroom, which accesses the pool and is dominated by a bamboo canopy bed and the dramatic views to the southwest. The banana-leaf-and-hibiscus-patterned rug is Varney's own design.

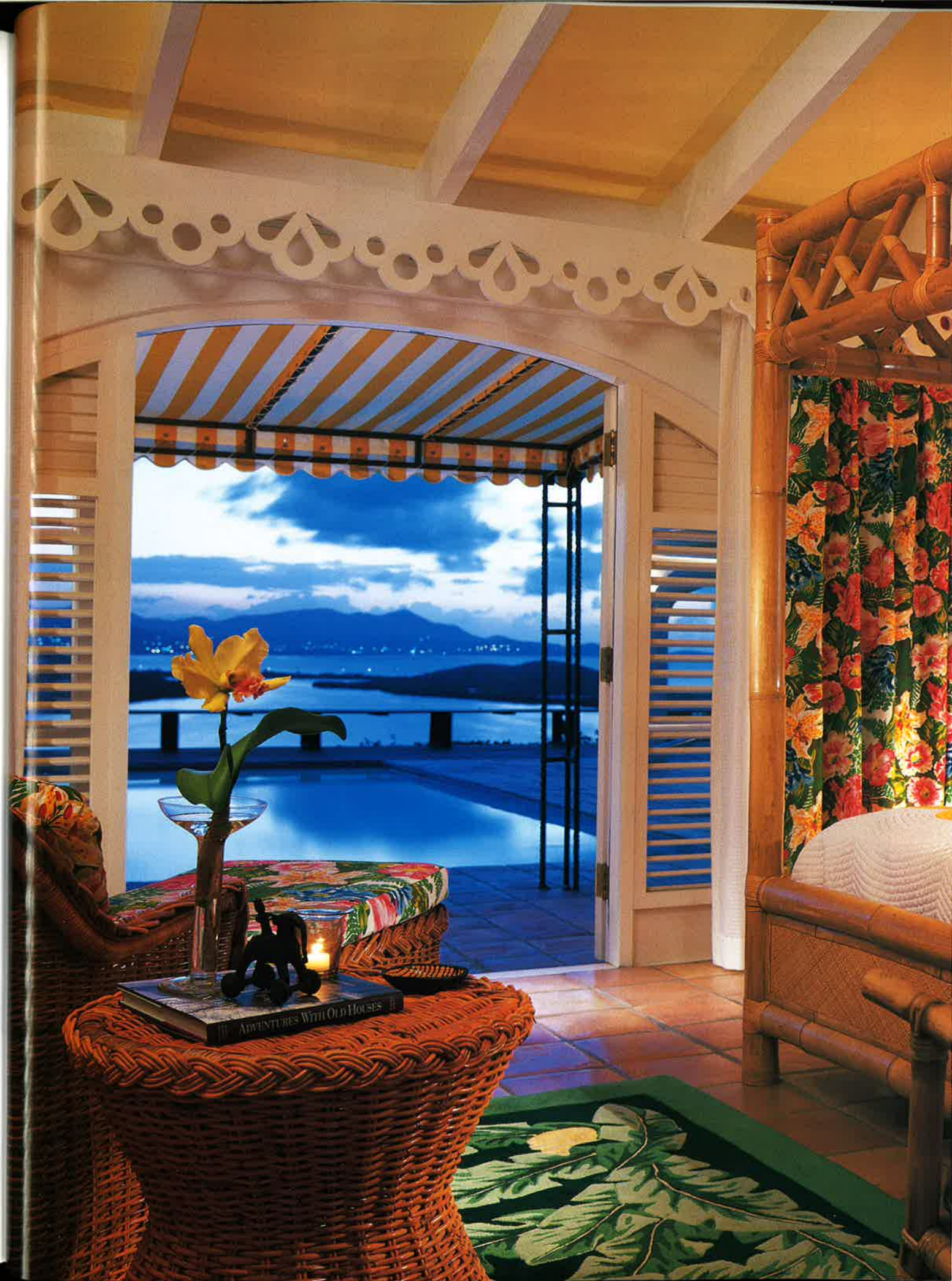
what an island house is all about. Who wants the responsibility of caring for a McMansion?"

The house is situated on a gently rolling hill and is oriented to catch the trade winds, so it does not need air-conditioning. Varney put in ceiling fans, new windows and shutters and replaced sliding-glass doors with louvered wooden ones.

The Mussers wanted the interiors to be unfussy. "I think the true West Indian homes are pretty casual," says Amelia Musser. "They're easy, breezy and open." The walls are white, providing a neutral background for the many works by local artists that the couple have collected and to emphasize the rooms' hand-stenciled borders of hibiscus, palm fronds and pineapples. Terra-cotta-tile floors, chintz draperies and upholstery fabrics, vibrant rugs and striped cotton pillow covers inject color into the décor. Varney designed the fabrics and the hand-tufted banana-leaf-and-hibiscus-patterned rugs, which were made in Ireland.

Outside, Varney redid the terraces and the pool to take better advantage of the site. Because the Mussers entertain informally on St. Croix, often hosting bridge parties and alfresco dinners around the pool, Varney turned the covered terrace into a sitting area for cocktails, centering it around an antique Spanish wood table. "There's a wonderful social life here," Amelia Musser notes. "People don't have anything to prove. We have more of a social life here than anywhere else."

In the living area, Varney created a card-playing corner, with a round limestone table and four hand-carved pine-apple side chairs of his own design. "Amelia adores playing bridge," he says. "This seating is the perfect arrangement." The herringbone rattan sofa and chairs and the bamboo low table were custom-made in Manila. Tucked away behind the living area, the dining alcove is decorated with more natural



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"That's what an island house is all about. Who wants the responsibility of caring for a McMansion?"



Typical of the island architecture, the house features large arches and wide terraces. Adjacent to the living room is the covered terrace, where the Mussers entertain alfresco around an antique Spanish wood table. The terra-cotta floor tiles are also used throughout the house.

rattan pieces, a handmade glass chandelier from Majorca and an antique Irish pine dresser.

For the Mussers, St. Croix is a retreat, a place to "kick back," as Amelia Musser puts it, from January to early April. They deserve the break—from April to November, Dan Musser oversees operations at Grand Hotel, which has been in his family since 1933. "It's a total commitment," his wife says. "Dan never takes a day off, he works seven days a week."

The hotel, one of the last family-owned hotels in the country, has over

550 employees and can accommodate 850 guests. "It's still a family affair," Dan Musser says. He is now chairman, having appointed his son, R. D., president. His daughter, Mimi, runs the flower shop and retail operations, and his daughter-in-law, Marlee Brown Musser, an artist, has a gallery at the hotel.

When he is on St. Croix, Dan Musser checks in every day by phone, but that's it. "He doesn't want much of a schedule here," says his wife. And does the family visit? "This is not a family compound," Amelia Musser says firmly. "It was designed just for Dan and me." □