A NATURAL WONDER

Trees play a prominent role in this unbundled home design

By Kim Catanzarite | Photography by Holger Obenaus

At the Anderson Studio of Architecture and Design, they call this Kiawah Island abode the Tree House, and it doesn't take a stretch of the imagination to understand why. Raised high above the ground, the view from nearly every window is one of sprawling tree limbs and the vibrant marsh and creeks beyond. The pavilion-style structure, chock-full of windows and wood, appears to balance upon a system of live oak branches. As a matter of fact, the driving force for this design was the surrounding vegetation and vistas.

"In this case, it was about bringing nature in," explains Scott Anderson, AIA, ASID. "The homeowners wanted to preserve the natural features of the property and to tread very lightly upon the ground. They wanted their home to be about nature and warmth, and they wanted it to be very casual."

The architect's task for this job, and every design job really, is to first identify the best features on the lot and then marry those with the owners' preferences. Anderson was determined to take advantage of every aspect of the landscape, which he sees as a form of art. "People who buy premier lots in the Lowcountry are buying the natural features that come with it," he says. "When you look through a window, it's like looking at art."

So, rather than cut down trees, he salvaged as many as possible and worked around them. This meant the house would have to be pulled apart. That is, instead of a fashioning a customary design that features one large lump, or square, of a house centered on the lot (as so many are), this home would be broken into several pieces to make best use of the landscape. Mark Permar, chief consulting planner for Kiawah Partners and a business colleague of Anderson's, calls this way of designing a home the "unbundled concept."

Says Anderson, "The trees walked right through the middle of the lot, so the only way to preserve them was to

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pull the house apart. This house on another lot simply would not make sense."

A Home Divided

The great room and kitchen make up the main living area, the part of the house that looks and feels most tree-house-like. With the sun streaming in through windows that double as walls, artificial light is nonessential.

"This house was a unique opportunity to use an abundance of glass," says Anderson. "When you have essentially a one-room-wide house, with windows on at least two sides of a room, you get a lot of soft natural light that's very easy to live in."

You also get some stunning marsh and creek views that make it hard to believe anyone would opt to turn on the flat-screen television or even bother to gaze at its next-door neighbor, the fireplace, even if a blaze burned there.

Second to glass, wood is the prevalent material here—in the form of columns, flooring, ceiling beams, breakfast bar and cabinetry. Much of it is pine, though it has been treated with different stains to bring about a harmonious color palette. The great room's modern furnishings, made in simple shapes and with natural hues, reflect the homeowners' love of the contemporary. The artwork and décor spread throughout the home displays their eclectic characters.

In the adjacent kitchen, the countertops feature a unique, green-brown granite, called Umburana, that reminded the homeowners of an aerial marsh view. The breakfast bar adds brushed metal and impenetrable glass to the variety of natural materials used. Those

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elements, paired with the wood floors and beamed ceiling, lend the kitchen an outdoorsy air.

Anderson kept the cabinets to a minimum to preserve window space and promote an open, uncluttered look. A spacious butler's pantry handles the stowing of dry goods, nonessential tableware and other items.

The great room's high vaulted ceiling does not continue into the kitchen because there's a bedroom above. If you stand in the great room and face the kitchen, you'll see a large glass enclosure that invites a view of an elegant white divan with a ceiling fan overhead. This "glass box" preserves that bedroom's second-story view of the marsh. "Otherwise, the bedroom would have been closed off with an ordinary wall," Anderson explains. This unusual component is a special feature for both bedroom and great room as well. "Every room needs a special quality," he says.

The 2011 AIA South Carolina Robert Mills Residential Design Awards Jury honored the great room with a special citation award in the new construction category.

Making the Connection

The bridge (literally a bridge with open area below) connects the living area to the master suite—the two main parts of the unbundled house. Outside, the bridge imparts a ship-like quality. The stairs on either end resemble gangways rising up to outdoor spaces. The top of the bridge is a sundeck, and there's a cupola even higher up. The bridge shades the patio below, and a breeze is encouraged to flow

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through the open area, keeping it cool by the pool even in the summer.

The dining area and office fill the spaces over the bridge. A partial wall with glass fireplace divides them. "The idea," says Anderson, "is to keep it open so that you can have views from one end of the house to the other. You can stand in the kitchen and look all the way across, through the office, and see a window that frames yet another view."

His design also encourages views of other parts of the house. If you're in the office, for example, you can look out the window and see the porch that connects to the great room. "No matter where you are," he says, "you always have a visual connection to other parts of the house."

An interesting wall element in the office

stems from the lower level of the house. The dark wooden lattice that covers the exterior of the home continues inside. It's the same material, only a lighter color. Anderson says that this interior lattice is an answer to the question, how do we find decoration in really simple ways?

The master bath's special quality takes advantage of the home's natural (and secluded) setting: One full wall of the shower is a window that frames the marsh view.

The exterior of the home is built for outdoor living. Almost every room connects to a porch, deck or patio. The hot tub, a few steps up from ground level, cascades into the infinity edge swimming pool, which is eye level to the immeasurable marsh. An eating area basks in the shade provided by the bridge above. There is also a half bath, so those in wet bathing suits do not have to reenter the house. A stone path leads to the dock and boat landing beyond. And in the creek, dolphin can sometimes be seen strand feeding on the bank.

It's a nature lover's dream, one that treads lightly and lives harmoniously. "If you're boating on the creek, or on one of the nearby islands, and you look back at the house," says Anderson, "you'll see that it blends into the natural surroundings—the color palette, the materials—and, because we kept all of the trees, the house is almost hidden."

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