

The NEW Palm Beach

SWATHED IN A SEA OF NEUTRALS, A FLORIDA AESTHETIC IS BORN





Designer Marjorie Shushan, along with architect Thomas M. Kirchhoff, conceived a 6,500-square-foot residence for James and Eleanor Woolems in Palm Beach, Florida. Garrow Kedigian was the interior architect. LEFT: The living room. Chelsea Editions drapery fabric.

Palm Beach! Rattan! Pink and green! Bring on the hibiscus! On second thought, maybe not. “Haven’t we seen enough houses in Palm Beach that are oom-pah-pah?” Marjorie Shushan asks. Never one for an insistent beat, this interior designer believes in the power of subtlety, in a buttery-soft atmosphere that leaves her clients feeling all wrapped up in a cashmere throw, preferably a beige one. “Peace, quiet and some luxury” is what she says most of us want. It does sound rather nice, doesn’t it?

“I had no idea how luxurious it would be,” says Eleanor Woolems, after months of touching the sensual fabrics that are the designer’s signature, and waking up in a big downy bed encircled by matelassé draperies, and nestling into furniture from Shushan’s secret source in Los Angeles. She and her husband, James, enjoy these luxuries year-round; they are full-time residents—natives, in fact—of this winter resort. He is a contractor who builds and renovates residences; she has been selling real estate here for 15 years. Their new 6,500-square-foot house in the quiet North End was designed for them by the architect Thomas M. Kirchhoff, of Jupiter, Florida, with all the home offices and family rooms and walk-in closets that anybody could want, and a yoga room too. But still, it was just a white box. We all know the feeling Eleanor Woolems describes: “Sometimes you have something in your head and you don’t know what it is, but you know you can’t do it yourself.”

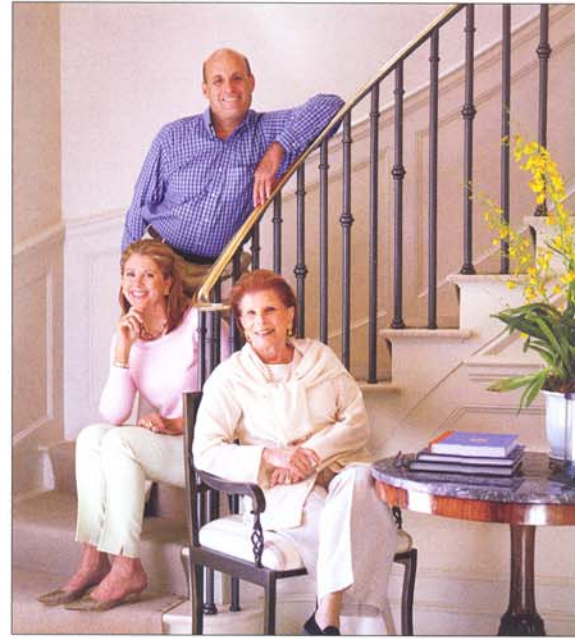
To refine the layout, cabinetry and detailing, Garrow Kedigian was brought in from New York as the interior architect. He’s a new name to many of us and definitely someone to watch. So crisply pressed, so perfectly put together, he has a vaguely Edwardian, Aubrey Beardsley

Architecture by Thomas M. Kirchhoff, AIA
Interior Architecture by Garrow Kedigian
Interior Design by Marjorie Shushan
Text by Stephen Drucker
Photography by Dan Forer





“Marjorie has such a well-defined palette,” says James Woolems (below, with Eleanor, left, and Shushan). “It’s so soothing, you just want to enjoy the space,” he remarks.



air. The fastidious young man made a fine partner for the highly focused Shushan. They share the gift of perfect pitch for rooms; their eyes are so finely tuned, they are constantly picking up vibrations that do not penetrate the rest of us but that make all the difference.

Eleanor Woolems had a vision of powder blues for the new house. At her first meeting in Shushan’s Manhattan office, powder blues were presented, but so was another fabric that the designer had been saving for just such a day. Most designers start with a rug, but Shushan likes “to find the main fabric and work from there.” There’s always some new one on her mind that she can imagine spinning an entire house around. Here was one of those fabrics and the perfect house for it: a hearty natural linen decorated with ivory crewelwork in a tree of life pattern. Full of character, it somehow felt contemporary and traditional, sophisticated and handmade, beachy and not, all at the same time. Powder blue no longer seemed like such a good idea. “People should use a decorator to go beyond their expectations and get something they would never imagine,”

“The scale and proportion of the house had to be just right,” says Kedigian. “The dining room is a perfect little niche.” LEFT: “All the pieces mirror each other to widen the space,” says Shushan. The 1940 bronze *Femme Nu aux Bras Levés* is by Joseph Csaky. Stark carpet.

BELOW: A pair of 1930s French sconces, from Bernd Goeckler Antiques, flank Milton Avery's 1931 oil on panel *Red Blouse* in the library. The sofa fabric is from J. Robert Scott. Lee Jofa drapery stripe. Chair and ottoman chenille, Brunschwig & Fils. Elizabeth Eakins rug.

"We had the initial concept all laid out," says Kirchoff. "Then Garrow came in and did all the sketches freehand." RIGHT: The family room. The print on the sofa is from Clarence House. Cowtan & Tout fabric on chairs and ottoman. Console table, Profiles. Beauvais rug.



says Eleanor Woolems, who quickly realized that when Shushan said, "Trust me," she had to take a deep breath and do just that. "Why have a decorator if you're not going to let her do it?"

One of the most interesting aspects of this project is that it was not the result of a long, tortuous, intercontinental search for antiques. There are a few, but the sumptuous atmosphere comes more from the highest-quality traditional furniture—Shushan is a devotee of Paul Ferrante and Rose Tarlow's Melrose House—and mostly from color and fabric. Shushan began with the crewelwork and other linens in the living room; used chenille in the library; lined those matelassé bed hangings with a stripe and put a striped sheer on the dining room windows; and brought everything full circle by hanging portieres between the living and dining rooms, faced with the striped sheer on

one side and the tree of life crewelwork on the other. The closest she comes to the classic Palm Beach look is a linen floral print on a sofa, though it is blissfully quiet and definitely not of the tropical school. The sense of harmony from room to room is astonishing. "Marjorie has a holistic approach," says Kedigian. "The chenille on a pillow in this room affects her thoughts about the next room. She has an amazing ability to understand the whole."

It is hard to name a designer who has given more thought to the science of neutrals over the years, going back to her days in Los Angeles with Kalef Alaton. "If you start with a neutral palette, you can introduce as much color as you want," Shushan says. "Color has a life of its own. If you start with color, you're already there." She makes every stop along the grisaille spectrum, from beige to gray. The most intriguing demonstration of







OPPOSITE: A sea grape tree from the front yard was placed outside the master bedroom window. The bed linens are from E. Braun & Co. Night table lamp, Marvin Alexander. Bennison bed drapery stripe. Bed drapery and bench matelassé, Old World Weavers. Stark carpet.

BELOW: The rear façade. James Woolems designed the landscaping. "It looked pretty wild and scruffy. I tried to keep it calm and uncomplicated. I subscribe to the 'less is more' philosophy," he explains. "When I pull up to the house, all of my cares are gone."



“People should use a decorator to go beyond their expectations and get something they would never imagine,” says Eleanor Woolems.

her palette is the library, which is anchored by a plaid cotton drugget in a color called pigeon. (Think dove, if you prefer.) With it Shushan used four different greige fabrics and had the walls striéd in a driftwood color. James Woolems can hardly be extracted from the room, his wife reports.

There are no rattan pieces, no tole palm trees, but instead clean-lined iron and *wenge* furniture with a strong graphic quality, which keeps these ethereal rooms from floating away. But it's all really in the

fine points. “The details are so simple... but so complex,” Eleanor Woolems says. The plain bronze curtain rods, if you look closely, wind around the corners and connect the windows, introducing a strong horizontal line that adds structure to the rooms. You could stare all day at the custom-woven, custom-colored welting in the library, in four shades of an impossible-to-describe noncolor. The 15-inch-long bullion fringe on the dressing table stool is outrageously luxurious yet doesn't

shout at all. And every room benefits from those sharp Florida shadows cast by Kedigian's beautifully proportioned moldings, doors and mantels. The result is a house that, Shushan says, is “sophisticated and lasting.”

Between the two of them, the Woollems have built, renovated, sold or at least seen most of the great houses of Palm Beach. And so it is not to be taken lightly when they say, “There is simply no other house we want.” □