



Photography supplied by Steve Simonsen

Design of St. John home takes nature as its inspiration.

Renée Serino and Garrick Lau were falling for one another, swept up in the dopamine-fueled joy that accompanies new love, when they traveled to the US Virgin Islands together in 2003. The Chicago based couple were vacationing in St Thomas when they took a serendipitous day trip to the neighbouring island of St John. The majority of St John is designated as Virgin Islands National Park, and it was a match made in heaven for the couple, who prefer spending their time outside among nature. As their love for one another deepened, so, too, did they fall in love with St John.



Nearly nine years after their first brief encounter with the island, the couple had tied the knot and were pregnant with their third child when they finally made their way back to St John. This time, Renée and Garrick were on a mission. “Garrick kept an eye on the real estate market in St John for investment opportunities and as a distraction from the cold Chicago winter, so when we vacationed there in 2011, we contacted a real estate agent to see some of the properties for sale,” says Renée.

“We didn’t love any of the villas we saw for sale, but there was a parcel of land available and we ended up buying it on that trip.” The land the Laus purchased was a rare waterfront parcel in the popular Great Cruz Bay neighbourhood on the island’s southwest shore. The couple eased the anxiety of being thousands of miles away during the home’s construction project by asking Evanston, Illinois-based architecture firm Morgante Wilson Architects to partner with St Thomas firm Springline Architects on the St John home’s design. The island’s hilly terrain often guides the design process, playing a big role in the architecture of each St John home.

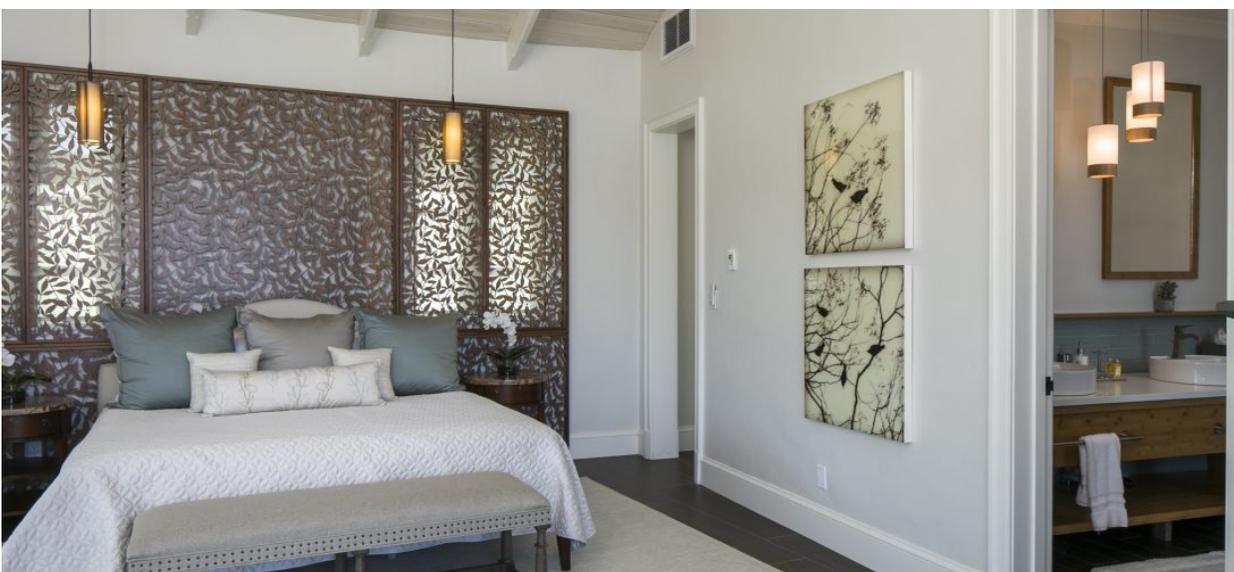


“We understand that building creates a lasting footprint and we wanted to respect the land’s geography, so we were very careful about how we proceeded,” says Renée. “We didn’t think it was wise to go in and level everything; we wanted to work within the contours of the land. The architects came up with a curved concept, so the house would mirror Great Cruz Bay.”

Several influences are evident in the home’s design choices. From a relaxing and spa-like feel evoked by the clean, modern finishes to traditional architectural details and finishes that give a nod to the Laus’ 1890s Victorian Illinois home, the result is a sprawling sanctuary that the couple hope could offer a family vacation escape for generations to come.



Another guiding force in the home’s design was the island’s vacation villa market, which has evolved to include certain must-haves, including en-suite bathrooms, plenty of covered outdoor space, and of course, a pool. The Laus wanted to make their home accessible to all types of travelers, which influenced their decision to include a first-floor bedroom in the two-storey home’s layout.



There’s one aspect of the typical St John villa rental the Laus chose not to incorporate into their home: a pod-style layout, where bedrooms and their respective en-suite baths stand alone in their own individual structures, joined with the great room and kitchen via outdoor walkways. With the exception of what the couple calls a cabana bedroom, right at beach level and featuring its own separate access, all of the home’s rooms are joined under a single roof.

The single most important element of the home's design is the view of Great Cruz Bay, where the Westin St John Resort is located, and where many island boat owners moor their vessels. As you enter the foyer, your attention is immediately drawn to the bay, its sparkling waters framed by a two-storey column of windows. Double staircases of rich, dark mahogany ascend to the second floor, where three bedrooms each offer their own outdoor shower, private balcony and water views. The home's palette is calm and subdued, allowing the natural St John landscape that Renée and Garrick initially fell in love with to take centre stage.



Other nature-themed elements inside the home complement the striking presence of Great Cruz Bay's placid blue waters. A formidable live slab dining table is the focal point of the dining area, while bamboo cabinetry lends a light, airy feel to the kitchen. A root table, made from a tree's solid whole roots, displays the home's guest book in the entry way. Ceramic tile floors in a handsome dark brown are a nod to the Laus' Illinois home, where the floors are dark wood. Pieces from Chicago-based artists are featured throughout the home. Impressive Lee Mosser works in abstract blues are free-mounted in glass frames in the living room, and a large installation of several Leslie Emery watercolours in the upstairs hallway also brightly displays abstract ocean colours, pulling elements of St John's natural beauty inside the home.



"All of the artwork was carefully chosen to be complementary, and very soft and natural," says Renée. "We tried to incorporate subtle elements of the island with an elegant approach." The newly constructed home's exterior, where Renée expects the couple and their four children will spend plenty of time with extended family, offers numerous amenities and seating areas. The large pool curves along the shoreline, and just beyond, there's a small sandy beach that joins the home with a rocky path that leads to the water's edge. Several chaise lounges beckon visitors to relax poolside, while a large covered chaise lounge, nestled on the sandy beach, is the perfect place to ease into an afternoon nap. A covered outdoor dining area, complete with a grill for cooking out, seats 12. It's only fitting that the home's name honours the natural beauty of the island that first drew Renée and Garrick to St John.



While reading about the island's history, flora and fauna during the home's construction, Renée came across a plant called ardisia. A member of the primrose family, ardisia is not a particularly notable or showy plant, but it is a species found on St John, and that was important to the Laus', who wanted to pay homage to the beautiful island that's so captivated them. "We wanted a beautiful sounding name that was meaningful to the island," says Renée. Ardisia will be planted at its villa namesake, along with native, low-maintenance plants, some fruit trees including mango, papaya, and banana, and perhaps the most special plants of all, four baby palm trees, one for each of the Laus' children.

