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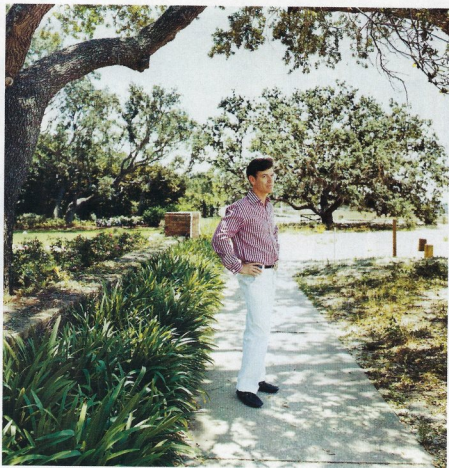
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A photograph of a porch with wicker furniture, green shutters, and a large fern. The porch is covered with a white ceiling and supported by white columns. The walls are white with green shutters. The floor is dark wood. The furniture is wicker with light-colored cushions. A large fern is in a dark pot on the left. A lantern hangs from the ceiling. A small table with a pitcher and glasses is in the foreground. The background shows a walkway and a large tree.

The rebuilt porch offered the house greater protection during last year's hurricanes. RIGHT: Designer Michael Whaley stands on the walkway between the house and the water.

BY LYDIA SOMERVILLE
PHOTOGRAPHED BY WILLIAM WALDRON



With tradition in mind, designer Michael Whaley imbues a water-front house in Point Clear, Alabama, with casual style



All too often, you fall in love with an old home's exterior, only to discover an interior

that's been ruined by ill-conceived renovations. For Ralph and Gail Reynolds, however, it was their great fortune to fall for a house that had remained unharmed over the years. A few delicate changes later, they had made the place their own.

Growing up in Mobile, Ralph spent summers working for his father's roofing business, developing a deep and abiding reverence for the gracious old homes of the area, especially those in the communities of Fairhope and Point Clear, Alabama. Although he later moved away and eventually settled in Connecticut, it was inevitable that he would return to Point Clear when he began looking for a summerhouse for his family. Gail, unfamiliar with the area, instantly fell under its spell. "We go down quite frequently to see family and friends," she says. "I love the little town of Fairhope, the artsiness of it. It's such a special place." With houses in Watch Hill, Rhode Island, and Darien, Connecticut, she can compare it to some of America's most charming towns.

The 1881 house they bought had been added onto over the years but, luckily, had escaped slapdash updates. The couple hired architect Lea Verneuille to design a sensitive renovation. "We expanded spaces to create more open but distinctive rooms with new trim work, columns, and architraves," says Verneuille. One of the most important elements he preserved was the porch on the



Inspired by the living room designed for Bill Blass by New York firm Mac II, Whaley used screens to define the space. Glass panels allow light in from the south-facing windows, and window treatments are kept simple to emphasize the 11-foot ceilings. OPPOSITE PAGE: The central axis of the house divides living and family rooms. Antique heart-pine floors are in keeping with the original feel of the house.



"Although the table is an antique, I didn't want antique chairs because I wanted the house to feel accessible and relaxed," says the designer, who chose an iron chandelier for the same reason.





bay side of the house. "The rain porch, with its extremely deep gallery and attached shed roof, is an architectural motif found on old Mobile Bay homes," he says. "They were designed to provide extra protection from hurricane winds and horizontal rains. We completely disassembled the porch, raised it, and rebuilt it stronger and with strict adherence to the original detail." Devotion to historical accuracy paid off when the house survived Hurricane Katrina with minimal damage.

In addition to architectural updates, the house needed fresh interiors suitable for a young family. Designer Michael Whaley, who had worked with Ralph and Gail on three previous projects, gladly took on the assignment. "We asked Michael to make a gracious, cozy place for our family," says Gail. "He's very good at making things look pretty, but in such a way that they're livable." Whaley knew the couple's likes and dislikes intimately. "Oh, and did I mention that we were living in London the whole time he was doing this house?" Gail adds with a laugh. Via phone, fax, and e-mail, the designer was able to communicate with his transatlantic clients to help realize their vision. "Their house in Darien is more formal, with silks and taffetas," says Whaley, "but since this was basically a beach house, I thought we could be more playful." To that end, he implemented a neutral palette and experimented with more casual furniture. The broad living room facing the bay exemplifies his approach: Solidly traditional surroundings, such as wide-plank floors, double-hung floor-to-ceiling windows, and a paneled ceiling, lend character to an easy arrangement of antiques and comfortable upholstery.

"I wanted this house to be serviceable," says Whaley, "and Gail wanted it to be a bit minimal—in a spa-like way—and low maintenance." Restraint in the ornamentation and decorating turned out to be an advantage after Hurricane Katrina, when a foot-and-a-half of water stood in the first floor. Whaley was able to have most of the draperies cleaned and the antiques refinished, but the rugs and upholstery were ruined. "On the whole, though, I'm thrilled with how the house survived the hurricane," he says. Thanks to the quaint porch and appreciative new owners, the home is ready for its 125th summer on the bay.



ABOVE AND BELOW: Architect Lea Verneville modeled the ceiling in the kitchen after a design Whaley and the couple had seen in a book. Old-fashioned appointments and black-and-white accents lend timeless appeal. RIGHT: "In the library, I used embroidered fabric to add warmth and richness of detail," says Whaley. ♦
For details, see Sourcebook, page 203.

