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SOUTHERN GRACIOUSNESS RESTORED IN A FARMHOUSE NEAR CHARLOTTESVILLE

Architecture by Robert L. Paxton, AIA/Interior Design by Bunny Williams
Text by Jennifer Kramer/Photography by Ron Blunt

That the New York interior designer Bunny Williams was chosen to decorate Kinloch, a venerable Georgian farmhouse in Albemarle County hunt country, near Charlottesville, Virginia, surprised no one. Not only was she born and brought up in this most aristocratic of southern counties, but she has devoted her career to re-creating the sensibility of lived-in elegance that characterizes the region's houses.

ABOVE: In Virginia, architect Robert Paxton and designer Bunny Williams have restored and expanded Janice and Robert Aron's farmhouse, mixing contemporary elements with the region's vernacular style.

LEFT: A circa 1875 tole-top table, from George Subkoff Antiques, is visible from the entrance hall. Clarence House wallcovering. RIGHT: Furnishings in the living room include a Florian Papp lacquered low table and Patterson, Flynn & Martin rugs. Lee Jofa drapery fabric.

Like her predecessor in design Nancy Lancaster (another Albemarle native), who influenced generations of decorators in Britain as the doyenne of Colefax & Fowler, Williams has her roots in this rich Virginia soil. "When I was growing up in Albemarle, houses were always warm and welcoming," she remembers. "And no one minded if a bit of mud was tracked in, because this was the country."

For Kinloch's new owners, Janice and Robert Aron (she's a South African and he's a New Yorker), who were moving from Manhattan, there was one choice. "We only considered Bunny," says Janice Aron, who was familiar with Williams's work in Litchfield County, Connecticut, and had traveled with her on a garden tour of England. "We'd wander around together and seem to comment simultaneously on what we loved."

With this aesthetic baseline and her intuitive understanding of the Arons and Albemarle, Williams set to work. "What we wanted was simple, just two words: 'elegant farmhouse.' Bunny got it immediately," Janice Aron continues. "They're an unstuffy young couple," Williams says. "The house had to be cosmopolitan and casually sophisticated—but underdone, if anything."

The day the Arons first walked through Kinloch's undulating fields, it was only minutes before they were seduced by the property. They hadn't even gone inside the house. "But when we did, it was a real 'oh dear' moment," says Janice Aron. The house was beautifully situated, but it hadn't been touched since the 1930s. "It was dark, the ceilings were low, and it had a completely inward feeling," adds Robert Aron.

And so, after getting Williams on board, the Arons turned to Robert Paxton of

the Charlottesville architectural firm Dalgliesh, Eichman, Gilpin & Paxton, who has redone many of the area's most extensive estates. "Kinloch's greatest charm is its scale," says Paxton. "The challenge was to make it livable by adding two wings, one for the kitchen and another for the master suite, without having them dominate the historic core," part of which dates to 1839.

The architect began by raising the roof at the house's center by several feet; with a stronger exterior core, the house now unfolds more gracefully to its wings. The raised roof also enabled him to conceal a skylight, which floods the new two-story entrance hall and gallery with sunlight. He visually anchored the master suite at the far end of the house with a large brick chimney, evoking the vernacular style of kitchen outbuildings. The kitchen wing is marked by a series of arcades at ground level, and above by a large porch overlooking the gardens. "It's hard to imagine, but you couldn't even see the gardens from the house before," Paxton says.

The study has a lodgelike quality that reminds Janice Aron of South Africa. At the east end of the house, on the kitchen porch, Paxton built a large brick fireplace, which is surrounded by wicker furniture and is well used even in the dead of winter. A large terrace off the living room and study provides a transition from inside to outside and a perfect vantage point for watching ripples dance across the new ten-acre lake

French doors were added to the dining room "to give a vertical line of light that makes the room feel taller," says Williams. A crystal-and-gilt-metal chandelier, from John Rosselli, hangs above the 19th-century gilt-mahogany table. Brunschwig & Fils drapery fabric.

and sunsets over the Southwest Mountains.

Of all the changes that needed to be made at Kinloch, first and foremost the entrance had to be moved and the house reoriented. The old driveway ran right along what is now the rear of the house and interrupted the gracious greensward and views. "Now, as you drive down the allée of old Virginia cedars," says Williams, "you get a glimpse of the house atop its knoll and then wind by those very southern old dependencies into the boxwood-rimmed car court. Only then can you really see Kinloch. It's like a surprise."

Though the rear of the house is dramatic, with its sweeping terrace embracing huge vistas, the front of the house is demure and charming, protected by the enclave of outbuildings and trees. In the new front vestibule that Paxton built in a hexagonal bay, two baskets for barn boots flank the door.

Throughout the interiors, pine floors, warm colors, plumped-up pillows and the gentle layering of decorative

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ABOVE: The study, with a wood-beam ceiling, is a relaxed area "for watching television as well as working," Williams says. "The beams bring the long, narrow room together and make it cozier." Leaf-pattern chintz pillows from Clarence House. Patterson, Flynn & Martin rug.

ABOVE: Placing the master bedroom in an addition "gave us the opportunity to create a space with a higher ceiling and larger windows," says Williams. Brunschwig & Fils wallcovering; Cowtan & Tout chintz. Bench, bedside table and chandelier from John Rosselli.

BELOW: A porch that overlooks the gardens was inspired by one the clients had seen in South Africa. Pierce Martin wicker furniture. FOLLOWING PAGE: A pergola's columns frame a view of the ten-acre lake from the terrace. Lounge chairs from Brown Jordan.

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objects make one feel at home. There's a seemingly casual blend of comfortable furniture with period pieces: An inviting chenille-covered Chesterfield and linen-covered chairs play off more formal pieces. A fine Ushak rug in the dining room and sisal carpets in the living room are equally at home. True to Williams's sensibilities, the well-worn blue leather seats on the dining chairs were left alone. Their informality offsets the grandeur of the nineteenth-century mahogany table, with its extraordinary parcel-gilt pedestals.

More local talent was commissioned for Kinloch's grounds. Landscape architect Rachel Lilly was given carte blanche to restore and build upon the dilapidated gardens. Originally there had been six walled gardens; Lilly redesigned five of them and separated them with a great lawn whose gray swimming pool gives the impression of a shallow reflecting pool. The gardens are formal in their geometric structures, but their flowers and plants reflect a relaxed, naturalistic attitude. A mix of all-white plantings—crape myrtle, rugosa rose, buddleia, spirea, phlox, daisies and white wisteria—fill the beds bordering the pool.

One problem she encountered was that the gardens had to appear mature. "We needed to bring in very large trees," Lilly says. "To do this we built a huge earthen ramp over the old stone walls so the backhoe could get in." Despite the many obstacles faced by Lilly, Paxton and Williams, however, the entire project, inside and out, was completed in eighteen months.

"Kinloch has been blessed by the Arons," says Williams. "From the outset it was clear that they wanted to do what was right for the house and the land." The triumph of Kinloch is its timeless quality, the sense that it is comfortable in its own skin. "What's in a house is important, but it should never dominate our lives; it should feel as though it has evolved over time," she continues. "My goal was to walk away without anyone knowing I'd been there." Those who have visited Kinloch will recognize this as entirely too modest a statement, but it's characteristic of Bunny Williams—who for all her years spent in New York is still a soft-spoken Virginian at heart. □

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