

Cultural Collaboration

ON LAMU, KENYA, A HOUSE CAPTURES
THE SPIRIT OF ITS OWNER AND ITS SITE



"It gives me great calm and serenity and joy," Suno Kay Osterweis says of her oceanfront retreat (opposite) on Lamu, an island off the coast of Kenya. Architectural designer Claudio Modola drew inspiration for the house from the area's Islamic building idiom; landscape designer Bruce Hobson planned the gardens. THIS IMAGE: The living area overlooks the Indian Ocean.



That Suno Kay Osterweis calls Lamu, an island off the coast of Kenya, home for at least a few months out of the year seems improbable even to her. Born in China to Korean parents and raised in Tokyo, Kay Osterweis eventually moved to the United States for college and graduate school (she has a master's degree in East Asian studies) and settled permanently in San Francisco. When she traveled, it was usually to Asia or Latin America. Over the years, however, she kept hearing about the island. "I had read about Lamu," she says. "So it was there in my mind. I first managed to visit after a safari in 1996."

Kay Osterweis was immediately seduced by the island's heady mix of stylish, easy living and the eclectic crowd of regular visitors. She returned often and, by chance, became acquainted with Claudio Modola, an architectural designer who lives on the neighboring island of Manda. In 1998, when she acquired a narrow, steep plot of land facing the Indian Ocean, Kay Osterweis quickly enlisted him to help her fulfill her dream of building a house of her own there.

Modola worked for weeks on sketches and eventually presented Kay Osterweis with a model he describes as "an immaculate tower of palatial appearance" that would fit the site's topography and unusual dimensions. A fountain, to

mark the transition from the outside to the inside, was to be at the entrance; the living spaces and master bedroom were to be placed on the upper levels to take advantage of the views and the ocean breezes. The ceilings were to be 23 feet high, and a swimming pool would be perched nearly 20 feet above the ground. The style would be inspired by the island's Islamic architecture but would also incorporate elements from Asian and Latin American design, "a distillation," Kay Osterweis explains, "of the many journeys that I had been going on out of cultural curiosity."

Realizing Kay Osterweis and Modola's vision proved a difficult proposition. Building on Lamu is never easy—it is accessible only by boat or air, and cars are not allowed. Thousands of blocks (composed in part of coral topsoil and cement) had to be fabricated on Manda and transported in small boats across the channel's often rough seas. The site presented its own challenge: Hundreds of tons of sand had to be removed before the foundations could be dug.

Despite the obstacles, a year and a half after construction began, the house was finished, and Kay Osterweis focused her attention on the finishes and interiors. For the former, she wanted to replicate the traditional plasterwork found on many of the island's buildings. She turned to Paul Weaver, an American and former banker, who had painstakingly restored,

Kay Osterweis sought out Paul Weaver, an American who had restored a house on the island, to create the interior finishes using a traditional Swahili plasterwork technique, a process that took over two years. **RIGHT:** The living and dining areas. Because there are few public gathering places on the island, "you just have people over for dinner. It's a very relaxed place," notes Kay Osterweis.







ABOVE AND BELOW: "Claudio insisted that I have an open master bedroom and bath. I am very private, so we did battle it out," Kay Osterweis reports, though Modola prevailed in the end, giving her a whimsical shower and tub and a bedroom open to the sea. "I feel as though I'm floating up to the heavens," she says of the space.

"Looking back, since Claudio hadn't built many homes before, and neither had I, we were open to our fantasies and not worried about practicalities. In the end, it all works well," Kay Osterweis observes of the project, which took nearly five years to complete. OPPOSITE: A balcony off one of the guest rooms offers a view of Manda, an island across the channel.



over the course of 11 years, a house, now a hotel, on Lamu. As Weaver remembers it, "Suno realized, with her own sense of creativity and interest in the local culture, that the quality I had achieved, with materials and techniques that had largely disappeared from Swahili culture, was what was required for the finishes in her house." Weaver and a team of local artisans labored for two and a half years, producing surfaces of superb sensuality and subtle color.

When it came time to select the furnishings, Kay Osterweis sourced most of the pieces herself, choosing tables and benches made of salvaged driftwood and locally made chairs

and lamps. Other light fixtures were commissioned from the same artisan who supplies the King of Morocco. The elaborately carved wood columns found in the living area and on the beds are from Afghanistan and Pakistan; she designed the dining table in collaboration with a local craftsman.

Eleven years after her first, brief visit, Kay Osterweis has settled into the rhythms of life on Lamu, yet she still expresses a sense of disbelief: "It is almost like a figment of my imagination. It is a surprise every time I walk up the steps. It is the place I go to for restoration, healing, reading, being close to nature. It is my piece of heaven." □

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