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SOUTH OF BROAD MASTERPIECE

*Master interior designer Alexandre Fleuren
restores a South of Broad home to its glory*

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This project was extensive and included all three floors of the 200-year-old home.

previous: The Album Room has four sets of original French doors that lead outside to the Winter Garden. Here, Fleuren gave the fireplace a face-lift and wrapped the walls in a turquoise Thibaut grasscloth. An Italian chandelier in amber glass hangs above.

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ODAY WE'RE GOING TO SEE AN EXTRAORDINARY HOME, the sort of dwelling that Charleston dreams are made of. Built in 1820, the 6,500-square-foot house served as the St. Michael's rectory prior to being divided into apartments in the 1920s. The rooms were unified into a single residence again in the 1970s and remodeled yet again in 2005. As well-intentioned as the renovations were through the years, none aligned with the history or architecture of the house.

Alexandre Fleuren, owner and lead designer of DesignAFI, had recently refurbished the carriage house of this combined property, giving the new owner a place to live while the main house was renovated. For this project, Fleuren had a large scope of work that covered all three floors of the home, with challenges ranging from designing a new luggage room to correctly restoring a historic fireplace in a noteworthy drawing room.

Though she had her work cut out redesigning a three-story, 200-year-old home, she was pleased to see that the basic structure and original footprint were intact. "This property is so special, and my client immediately understood that," she says. "Although they asked for a design that suits their needs, they allowed me to respectfully restore the house. It's why the project was a success. In fact, our whole team agreed: This client was the reason we could give everything our very best. Their humble demeanor, positive attitude and deep appreciation for our efforts gave all of us a happy worksite and team spirit that allowed us to thrive. I think I speak for all of us when I say we are truly grateful."

Fleuren made sure her client would reap the reward of investing in a historic home by taking advantage of the incredible views of the gardens and the harbor. "The home has a triple piazza on the front, which is very unusual," she says. "Some views are ideal for entertaining, some for mingling with neighbors and some are perfect for when you just want to read a book. I am glad my client is now enjoying all of what is outside their door, even without leaving their home!"

The result of more than a year of unrelenting hard work is a home that is welcoming in the truest sense of the word. Everything the homeowner and their guests may want or need, on any occasion and in any season, has been anticipated and provided. Every detail, from the bespoke flooring to custom handles on appliances, was

The kitchen island has brass ferrules and round, raw-steel medallions inset on the legs. Along with Sub-Zero and Wolf appliances and custom-designed cabinetry, hardware by Belwith-Keeler and The Iron Studio were added. A leathered Taj Mahal granite surface adds warmth and durability to the design.



In the formal dining room, steel and glass walls give the space a pleasant English conservatory feel.



put in place to delight the homeowner and honor the house. This is next-level design that ensures everything is thoughtful, right down to the drapery linings. Let's take a look.

When Fleuren began the project, the front entry doors were in rough shape. The team removed the doors, reworked them and sent the hardware for professional cleaning. New copper gas lanterns were added to complement the beautifully landscaped gardens.

In the foyer, a jaw-dropping grand staircase winds gracefully through three floors. "I wanted to tie all of these spaces together," Fleuren says. "My concept was that as you ascend the staircase, you feel like you're rising into a canopy of trees." To realize the vision, she worked with fine artist Michael Gilbert to create a three-story mural with a botanical motif. Gilbert worked in shell whites and soft oyster grays to create a muted tropical scene that included some of the plants in the gardens.

From the foyer, we enter the Winter Room, also fondly known as the Album Room, where the client stores an impressive music collection. This room has four sets of original French doors that lead outside to the Winter Garden (traditionally a garden maintained for enjoyment throughout the winter). Fleuren bumped up the door casings to match the height of the original French doors and gave the fireplace a face-lift. She also added a second framed opening to create symmetry and bring light into what was a dark room. Walls are wrapped in a decadent turquoise Thibaut grasscloth, while an Italian chandelier in amber glass adds sparkle.

Leaving the cool vibe of the Winter Room, we enter the kitchen, designed so the client can easily interact with the new herb garden. Fleuren spared no detail when she completely remodeled this space; the kitchen island has brass ferrules and round, raw-steel medallions inset on the legs. Along with Sub-Zero and Wolf appliances and custom-designed cabinetry, she incorporated hardware by Belwith-Keeler and The Iron Studio into the well-planned room. A leathered Taj Mahal granite surface adds warmth and durability to the design.

Because the gardens are just beyond the kitchen, Fleuren added a vintage sculptured coral chandelier to connect the interiors with the outdoors. In order to take advantage of a neglected corner, she designed a generous dry goods pantry with a decorative pediment. Finally, she converted the original fireplace to gas, wrapped it in a creamy beige tile from floor to ceiling, and added round fireballs for a modern version of a kitchen hearth.

In the dining room, steel and glass walls fabricated by a New York steelmaker, Hope's, give the space a pleasant English conservatory feel. Fleuren kept the glass walls and set the stage for formal dining with a screen-printed replica of a mural in Luxembourg.

The powder room that serves this floor has the original arched, frosted glass window with lead mullions. Fleuren chose Thibaut wallpaper that features grasscloth over a foil backing. "I wanted a little bit of a soft glow, and this wallpaper has a reflective quality without being too harsh," she explains.

Ascending the grand staircase, we continue to climb further into the trees. The second floor has 13-foot ceilings and a grand hall that connects a spacious drawing room and the client's bedroom. The hallway has the original window door that leads to the front piazza, with beautiful only-in-Charleston views beckoning just outside. The 28-foot runner is made from a massive antique Afghan rug Fleuren had sliced and bound.

The home is full of incredible antique rugs, each carefully chosen to work with the rooms. "I needed special sizes, so all the rugs had to be flown in from all over the world. Rob Leahy at Fine Rugs of Charleston is a master. He's so knowledgeable, and I knew he would be able to source what I needed," Fleuren says.

Fleuren designed the drawing room to bring her client and houseguests together. There's a game table, an extensive collection of tempting travel books, a curio cocktail table to house treasures and collections, and a Thibaut daybed for reading and enjoying the sea breeze. "The purpose of a drawing room is to draw people together, and that is something my client is excited about as new residents of Charleston," Fleuren says. "Graciousness and hospitality define us as a city, and that's something my client wants to be a part of here. I was happy to set the stage to make that happen."

Down the hall, the original dining room has become the client's bedroom suite, which is also accessed through painstakingly restored, 11-foot-high pocket doors. The bed is oriented so they can open the doors and enjoy the piazza in privacy. "My client said they're so grateful to live here; I wanted them to wake up to Charleston's beauty every morning," Fleuren says. With rubbed Venetian plaster walls, also courtesy of Michael Gilbert, a fireplace, a cane-backed bed, and deep chests that serve as nightstands, the room is infused with elegance and grace.

The project required a significant amount of renovation work, including the original cased openings that lead to the client's bathroom. "Part of what I do involves interior architecture. For example, we had to restore the cased openings properly but incorporate modern function," Fleuren says. She wanted to split the original large door to make two French doors but getting the original casings to work was no small feat. "I brought in Buffington Homes as the general contractor to help me realize the dream. Their craftsmen worked with my artisans to create what I envisioned for my client," she says. "The Buffington team and I have a similar work ethic because we believe in doing what is best for the client, regardless of what it takes."

In the foyer, a jaw-dropping grand staircase winds gracefully through three floors.



Original art from Mary Martin Gallery on Broad Street graces the Venetian plaster walls in the drawing room. Seating is carefully designed for conversation and entertaining.

The original dining room has become the client's bedroom suite, which is also accessed through restored, 11-foot-high pocket doors. The room features rubbed Venetian plaster walls, a fireplace, a cane-backed bed and deep chests that serve as nightstands.



Overlooking two of the home's gardens, the client's bath is serene. It features custom mosaic tile and a zero-entry shower.



The office was the most challenging part of the house from a construction perspective, as Fleuren wanted to case an arched opening that was not original to the house but was part of the original exterior wall.



The luggage room was created by joining three spaces that were once a maze of small rooms. Custom cabinetry was installed to house the client's luggage collection and a built-in gift-wrap station was added.



The Ladies' Retreat (guest suite) is located on the third level of the home. The room is a peaceful, elegant space with green damask wallpaper in the bedroom and the perfect shade of soft pink in the bath.



Perhaps the most dramatic change in the house is the client's bath. The previous renovation rendered the room dark, overly masculine and impractical. Yet the space had so much possibility because it overlooked two of the gardens. Fleuren reconfigured the layout to better relate to the home's architecture and maximize garden views. She discovered a honey onyx and dolomite flooring she loved and rescaled it to make it appropriate for the room. The mosaic tile was then made especially for the client in New Orleans, creating the warm, sophisticated space Fleuren envisioned. The zero-entry shower was a challenge because original floor joists had to be notched to create the proper slope, but the result is modern function that is luxuriously appointed.

Fleuren meticulously laid out the bath's paneled walls, which she inserted with mirrors to reflect light, and she added Belgian linen drapery lined with vintage blush silk that she had been saving for almost 30 years. "I had one yard of the most beautiful blush pink silk I'd ever seen, and I'd been holding it for the perfect client, and this was the one," she says. The perfect final touches are an antique French chandelier and hand-sanded glass stalls she designed for the space.

The home is full of incredible antique rugs, each carefully chosen to work with the rooms.

Off the grand hall is a luggage room Fleuren created by joining three spaces that were once a maze of small rooms. She began by widening an existing opening that was part of the original exterior wall of the house, raising the header and adding a wide casing that elevates the status of the room. She added custom cabinetry she designed to house the client's luggage collection and a built-in gift-wrap station. An antique mirror with an eagle motif and Roman shades with vintage silk banding combine to make the luggage room one of the most memorable spaces in the house.

In the adjoining bathroom, a bold coral Greek-motif wallpaper gives this room strength. "Anytime you do a geometric print in a historic house, you're asking for trouble because there are no straight walls or floors. But it was worth it," she says.

Finally, we ascend the staircase to the third floor and into the canopy of trees. This floor is home to an office and two guest suites, affectionately known as the Gentlemen's Retreat and the Ladies' Retreat. Separated by a set of broad paneled doors, the retreats are designed to suit the client's regular visitors.



The historic home has incredible views of the gardens and the harbor. Here, a cozy spot for some quiet time and reflection.

The Ladies' Retreat is a peaceful, elegant space with green damask wallpaper in the bedroom and the perfect shade of soft pink in the bath. The particular hue is a trade secret; it's a discontinued color that Fleuren requested the paint company blend for her.

Because historic homes often have crooked walls that cause seams to show, Fleuren gave the walls a coat of primer tinted to match before the wallpaper went up. This feminine space has delicate dentil details, fluted pilasters and a fireplace.

The Gentlemen's Retreat features a large bedroom, dressing room and bath. This suite is masculine, with a custom leather chair and a lacquered canvas and rattan bed. "The idea is for a guest to be able to kick up their boots, smoke a cigar and read a book," Fleuren says. Walls are covered in royal blue grasscloth, also by Thibaut, and windows have custom woven shades. In every bedroom, bedding is custom. For example, in this room, throw pillows have an Asian war motif created from silkscreens from private collections.

The Gentlemen's bath has Thibaut wallpaper, rattan and brass sconces, and a dolomite floor, which Fleuren wanted to use in the Ladies' Retreat as well. However, she couldn't remove the original wood floor, so she had Gilbert paint it to look identical. "That's par for the course in historic homes. When we hit a roadblock, we ask, 'How can we make it look intentional without compromising use for the client?'"

The office was the most challenging part of the house from a construction perspective, as Fleuren wanted to case an arched opening that was not original to the house but was part of the original exterior wall. To create a paneled opening that would be appropriate for the historic architecture, she called in the team from Buffington Homes. The problem was, the existing arch was bowed by about 2 inches, wasn't plumb and wasn't even centered on the wall.

"The Buffingtons really showed their capabilities in the office," she says. "The room isn't plumb anywhere. What their crew did to create it was miraculous. They hung in there with me, and we finished it. Little things like this are so effortless in a new home, but they can be a nightmare in a historic home. My job is to listen to the options and make the right decision for the client. Partnering with great contractors allows me to do it." Fleuren also added custom cabinetry to match the existing cabinetry, making it look seamless, and wrapped the walls in a vivid coral damask wallpaper.

In what may be the loveliest home office in Charleston, Fleuren takes a brief moment to reflect on the project. "Every client I work with brings something new to me, and it's such a wonderful adventure," she says. "I get to discover who these people are, and I have the honor of showing that through their homes. Our business thrives on people being happy. And we have incredibly happy clients because they trust us to speak for them and create things they can't begin to imagine. It's a daunting task but one I relish. I'm so grateful." *

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