

from

# FUNK to FAB

Hard work, and a big budget, turn a strange little Key West house into a designer's dream home.

By STACY RITZ  
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In the beginning, there was a faceless little house with weeds and chain-link fence for a yard, and a dark tunnel lined with stuffy rooms for a floor plan. In the end, it became a luscious green garden ribboned with sunshine and color and wood decks, and a floor plan full of light and air and space.

What happened in between is the story of interior designer Lisa Cowen's creative vision and dogged persistence.

When Cowen first saw the 1961 concrete-block house four years ago in Key West's New Town neighborhood, all she could think was, "how ugly and so far out." The New Jersey native had been shopping for a fixer-upper near Old Town in the heart of Key West's historic district, not a house on the island's fringe.

"But something about the place drew me in," Cowen, 55, said. "I thought how things could look, and I liked the idea of a challenge."

That challenge meant moving rooms and walls and doors, adding a new kitchen, bringing in a whole new yard, creating outdoor dining and sitting areas and remaking a pool house. It meant tracking down more than half a dozen craftsmen, from landscape architects to carpenters — not an easy job in the Keys, where some people prefer fishing to working. And it meant tripling her original renovation budget from \$70,000 to \$210,000.

As soon as she bought the house in early 1991 for \$184,000, she took down the chain-link fence that ran along the front of the property and perused nurseries in Homestead. In one morning, she spent \$5,000 on landscaping, which took her and her gardener several days to plant. As soon as they finished, Cowen knew they had barely begun.

"It wasn't near enough. I wanted everything perfect, and for that I had a long way to go," she said.

While fretting over the yard, she developed itchy skin problems and went to a dermatologist. Instead of prescribing medicine, he handed her the name and phone number of Mervyn Aronoff, a Key West artist and landscape architect.

"He told me, 'If [Aronoff] likes you, he may do your garden. And then you let me know if your skin still itches,'" Cowen said.

Aronoff and Cowen hit it off so well he not only became the mastermind behind her gar-

den, but he also sold her the focal point for her living room: a dazzling, three-panel Oriental painting that nearly covers one wall. Soon, Cowen's nerves calmed down and her skin stopped itching.

Today, Aronoff's stylized flora overflows from Cowen's garden. More than 100 palm trees create borders and hedges and stunning centerpieces across the property, which, at 65 feet wide and 125 feet deep, is generous by Key West standards. Every tree is distinctive — from the nine-headed ponytail palm gushing from a clay pot to the silver-blue triangle palm sculpted into a geometric motif.

In the front yard, Aronoff designed meandering exotic flower beds with clusters of color. Red ginger with a backdrop of minty liriopse. Garnet and pink caladiums popping above evergreen mango grass. And borders of bromeliads in every size and color, from spider-sized reds to basketball-sized striped purples.

Where the chain-link fence stood is a bleached, tongue-and-groove fence embellished with Japanese latticework. The effect from the street is a soft, lacy wall crowned with soaring palms.

Just inside the front gate, a path of Mexican adobe tile winds to a front porch and glass double doors. Before the renovation, a funky painted black door led into a dim, shallow living room. Down a lean hall was a little kitchen. Off the hall were three bedrooms and two tiny baths. The rooms were small and the hall was narrow.

Cowen's new design gives the feeling of space. The foyer is high-ceilinged and decorated with long mirrors, and opens onto a great room that includes kitchen, dining and family room. The master bedroom's double doors open off this main area and provide the open feeling of a loft even though it's on the same floor.

"Living in New York for 27 years, I grew accustomed to lofts. I like the openness they give," Cowen said.

The bedroom is not the only evidence of Cowen's tenure as a Manhattan designer. Her kitchen cabinets and much of her furniture are high-tech mica, although she has successfully merged them with the home's cool tropical themes.

Vestiges of New York also can



White lacquer entertainment center is in keeping with the owner's desire for built-in storage space.

Photo/ALBERT J. WINN

**"Bill [Beach] taught me how to make things disappear, like cabinets and closets and refrigerators, and how to take the littlest corner and make it into something special."**

— Lisa Cowen, designer

be found in her closets, which feature plumber's flanges for racks and supports.

"Everyone in New York has these closets — they are the strongest — but nobody here had heard of them," she said. "I had to order all the fittings from Mr. Steel in New York, have them shipped down, then help the carpenter install them. It took us two days to do one closet, but now he can do it in a snap."

Several of Cowen's furniture and art pieces, including a Victorian claw-foot chair in the master bedroom and a 19th-century African mask in the living room, are from New York antique stores. It was at one of those stores, Frederick Thomas Associates, that Cowen got her break in interior design 31 years ago. The store owners introduced her

to William Fletcher Beach, a well-known interior designer who hired her as an assistant.

And it was Beach who introduced her to Key West in the 1970s. As soon as Cowen saw the island, she was hooked. Beach also helped convince her to buy her New Town fixer-upper, and although he died just days before she began renovations, his design principles live on in the transformed house.

"Bill taught me how to make things disappear, like cabinets and closets and refrigerators, and how to take the littlest corner and make it into something special," Cowen says.

Cowen's walls have built-in stereo speakers (you have to strain to recognize them) and her rooms are filled with closets and drawers that, because of their placement (back to back with a bathroom, for instance) and flush design, fade into the walls. All cabinet and closet doors have pivot hinges that give complete access to whatever is inside. Even the wide wood shutters on her dining room window feature those hinges.

"I became known around town as the pivot-hinge lady. I pestered every contractor, every carpenter to use those hinges."

In her kitchen, she chose appliances that are set into the walls

back yard. The back vista also includes a heated L-shaped swimming pool, an outdoor dining area and a charming pool house.

Crowned with a desert-colored canvas gazebo, the outdoor dining area features a glass-topped table for six that sits on a raised wood deck overlooking the pool. Tie-back canvas drapes can be released for protection from rain.

Nearby, the whitewashed clapboard pool house was redone with white ceramic floors, a white canvas sofa bed and a pickled oak desk. For contrast, Cowen took some pre-existing cabinets, painted the tops forest green and hung turn-of-the-century Key West shutters for doors. She also added a bathroom and papered it with a Woodson La Lume pattern that's an explosion of color. A private outdoor shower is just outside the bathroom door.

Despite all the beauty out back, Cowen spends most of her time outdoors on a side deck just off her bedroom and office. The 27-foot-long deck faces a dense ficus hedge and is comfortably arranged with cushioned wicker chaises, sisal rugs, potted orchids and a big glass-topped pool table. A canvas awning, similar to the one over the poolside dining area, runs the length of the deck.

Out here on this inviting space she works with clients on how to design their houses. And occasionally, thinks of more ways to perfect her own.

"There never really is an end to this designing," she said.

Stacy Ritz is a free-lance writer who lives in Key Largo.

RIGHT: The front of the house after remodeling. Bleached tongue and groove fencing surrounds the property, and a Mexican-tile path leads the way through a colorful garden to the front door. BELOW: The entrance before the remodel. The rehab project's first tasks included removing a chain-link fence and a funky black front door, and adding extensive landscaping.



Photos/ALBERT J. WINN

ABOVE: Owner Lisa Cowen took a scruffy side lawn and turned it into an outdoor room by building a 27-foot deck and covering it with canvas awnings. Glass doors connect the area to the main house.

RIGHT: Before remodeling, there was no poolside place to sit, eat or shower. Cowen added an outdoor dining area, outdoor shower and refurbished the pool house. New bleached wood steps lead from the pool to the main house.

