

Site-specific:

Architect Allan Shulman designs for a Colee Hammock family.

Text John T. O'Connor **Photos** Robin Hill

Designing and building a new family residence in an established neighborhood can present a lot of challenges — but also offers up great rewards. Thoughtful architects often stew a great deal at the beginning of a project like this. It amounts to a test of their abilities and great designers want their clients to be happy, and want to explore their craft further with each new commission. Architect Allan Shulman, principal of Shulman and Associates in Miami, was asked to design a new residence in one of Fort Lauderdale's oldest neighborhoods, once owned, almost entirely by none other than Mary Brickell. Brickell was a staunch woman who loved the canopied neighborhood so much she would not give Henry Flagler a right-of-way for his railway, forcing it instead to veer west of her property. Named Colee Hammock, the neighborhood just off Las Olas Boulevard wraps around the New River as well as one of Lauderdale's deepwater canals. With its peaceful streets and shady tropical yards is this city's answer to Coconut Grove.

Shulman designed a gorgeous, yet low key residence for his clients. One that responds not only to the desires of the family who now call it home, but also to the incredible site Mary Brickell so loved in the late 19th century. We were so taken with Shulman's design, we met with the architect and asked him to share his thoughts on the project.

Tropic: Is this a primary or vacation residence?

Shulman: It's the primary residence for a young couple who were interested in a modern, yet not austere, home for their growing family. They wanted generous spaces and lots of natural light. The home was designed to provide multiple living zones with a feeling of transparency throughout.

Tropic: The work that comes out of your office seems very sensitive to site. Colee Hammock is truly a special neighborhood. Can you tell me how you responded to this particular site with your design?

Shulman: We love this neighborhood and are very familiar with its rich history, its streets and houses: my office did a master plan and the neighborhood development guidelines for Colee Hammock that were adopted by the Homeowners' Association in 2008. The natural hammock is the defining characteristic of the neighborhood. Our design for the house responds to the fantastic old growth trees that shelter the site, as well as the substantial slope that drops about 10 feet from the street to the canal. The house is essentially terraced in response, creating offsets in level that help organize its plan into a series of indoor and outdoor rooms. I wanted to create clean, modern volumes, warmed by wood and stone on the exterior, to contrast nicely with the organic contours and the vegetation. And of course we designed spaces for outdoor living.

Tropic: How did you arrive at the open courtyard plan?

Shulman: The terracing of the site suggested an alternation of indoor and outdoor rooms. But more generally this alternation is a theme in all of our house designs. I always look to create outdoor analogues for indoor rooms. Here, we were also exploring a range of outdoor space types, so the domesticated space of the court contrasts with the more wild, sloped hammock in the back yard. The living room is balanced between the two. You are always one step away from the outside; this was an important experience I wanted to infuse throughout the home.

Tropic: What were the biggest requests from the client?

Shulman: The clients wanted generous spaces designed for living rather than a show house. They asked for a modern house sheltered by substantial sloped roofs, and warmly finished with natural/local materials. They really wanted spaces for living rather than a show house.

Tropic: Why the particular set of finishes and materials chosen for this house and setting?

Shulman: Transparency is emphasized throughout the main public rooms, and the use of glass is integral. Warmth and texture are conveyed using natural materials such as wood and stone on the exterior. By contrast, white walls

and natural tones were used to create a kind of blank canvas to allow the landscape and accents of color to filter through the mostly transparent walls of the home.

Tropic: Tell us a little about the building's green aspects.

Shulman: Our green sensibility is more pragmatic than technological. This home is sheltered by broad overhanging eaves that protect the walls and glass. Each part is narrow and cross-ventilated. We sourced most of the materials locally.

Tropic: How was the client-architect interaction?

Shulman: It was great. Navigating the process of residential design, especially on the higher end, can be challenging. These clients were a pleasure to work with. They came in very prepared and were able to articulate clearly what they liked and didn't like. During the design process they made decisions quickly and didn't revisit decisions that had already been made. This allowed for a smooth, efficient process. In fact we're currently working together on another project.

Tropic: What part of the finished product are you happiest with?

Shulman: There is a promenade through the home. It starts at the paved entrance court, and penetrates into the courtyard beneath a cantilevered roof extending from the street-front service zone. It cascades down some shallow steps and crosses like a bridge over the flanking pools, entering in the main living area of the house. Crossing the living room, there is a rear terrace and steps that descend to the back yard and the canal. This sort of orchestrated promenade brings all the elements of the home, terrestrial and aquatic, built and unbuilt, formal and informal, into a synthesis. Beyond this, the opportunity to explore the themes of Tropical Architecture and modernism within everyday livable spaces was very fulfilling for me.