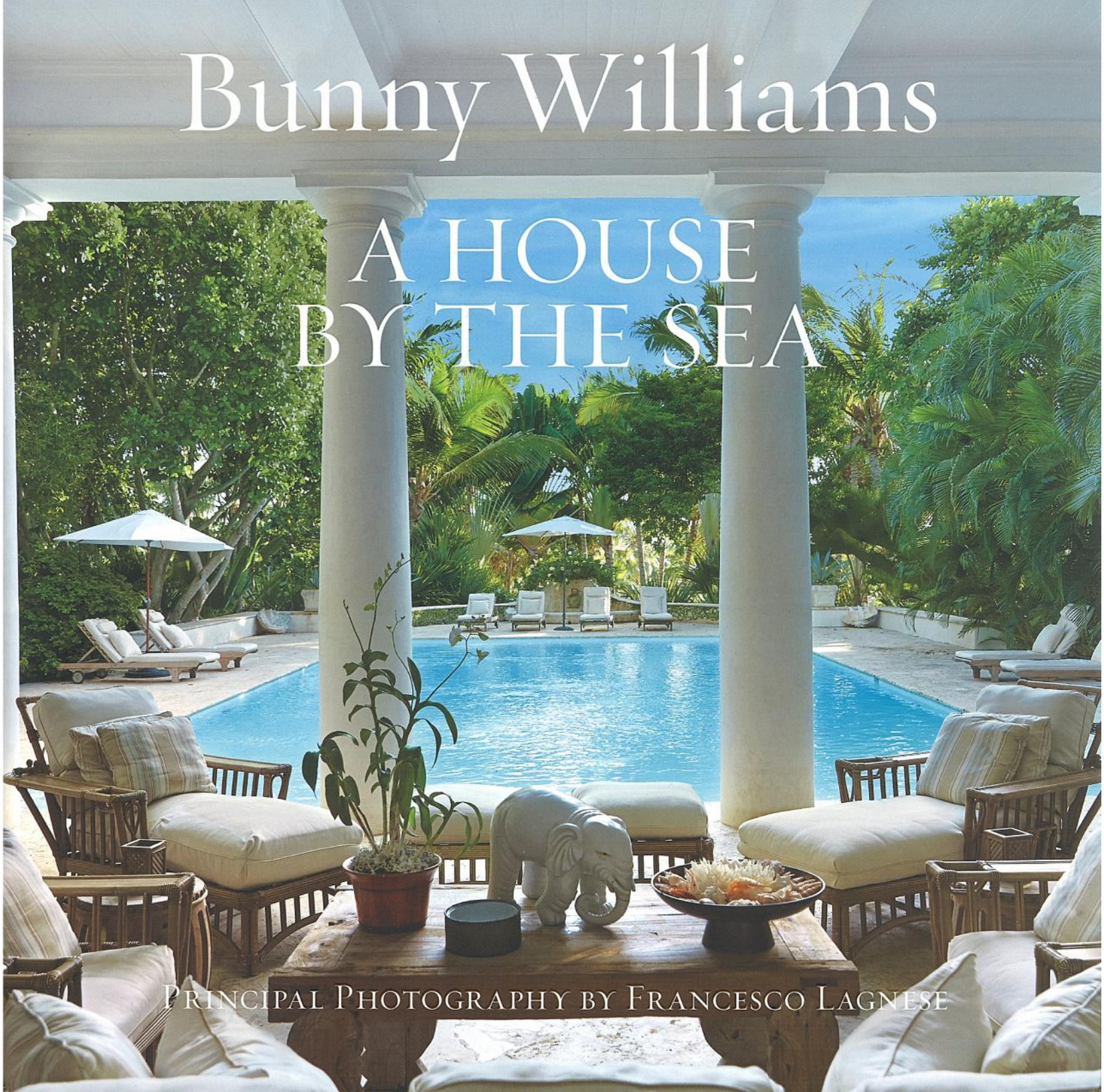
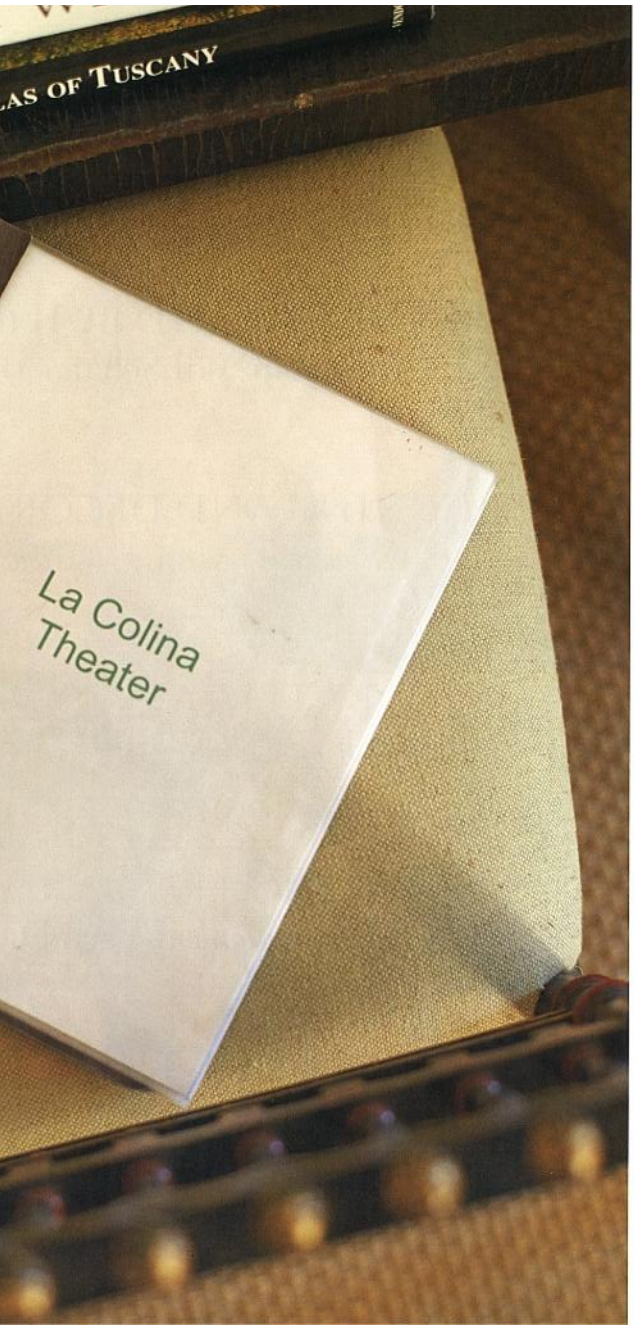
# Bunny Williams

# A HOUSE BY THE SEA



PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCESCO LAGNESE




# HOW IT HAPPENED

Our wonderful friend, the late, great fashion designer Oscar de la Renta, introduced my husband, John Rosselli, and me to the Dominican Republic. Oscar loved his homeland, and we came to love it, too, not only for its beauty, but also for the fabulous, kind Dominican people. After many visits to the country, we decided to build a house in Punta Cana, and we called it La Colina.

Several years later, after we had finished the house, our great friend Gil Schafer III came for a visit, bringing with him a book he had produced of the photographs he had taken over various visits. It was this book of pictures that inspired me to write about our house by the sea.

We invited Francesco Lagnese—the brilliant interior, society, and portrait photographer—to come and stay at La Colina and use his amazing eye and talent to try to capture the soul of the house and its gardens.

My aim was to have the resulting book feel like a visit to our island retreat, and brilliant book designer Doug Turshen and his talented wife, Rochelle Udell, made that possible. Editor Shawna Mullen pored over every word I wrote to accompany the photos, helping to make sense of my story. I cannot thank them all enough. Without their vision, this book would not have come to be.

Likewise, I cannot sufficiently thank our gifted friends who graciously agreed to write about their experiences at La Colina: gardener extraordinaire Page Dickey, author Jane Garmey, novelist and biographer Roxana Robinson, architect Gil Schafer III, antiques dealer Angus Wilkie, and painter Christian Brechneff.

John and I have been blessed to have so many friends and family members enjoy our Punta Cana house over the years. Now we invite you to be our guest—and stay for as long as you'd like!

*—Bunny Williams*

# ARCHITECTURE BY GIL SCHAFER III

You learn a lot about someone's approach to life through a visit to their house. This is particularly true when you stay with Bunny and John at La Colina. But you also learn some wonderful lessons there about how architecture can interact with nature and decoration to create a truly magical experience, especially when the sorcerers-in-charge are those two remarkable hosts.

My first visit to La Colina was in the spring of 2005, when the house was in its adolescence. As the gardens were only just beginning to take shape, you could see clearly all the architectural elements—almost nakedly—and how they were laid out in relationship to one another. Having that experience as a reference point has given me some powerful insights into what the essential elements of a memorable place are and the importance they play in one's whole experience of it. Seeing La Colina in those early days helped me understand that, while architecture is the framework for your experience there, it ultimately takes a backseat to everything else—and that is precisely as it should be.

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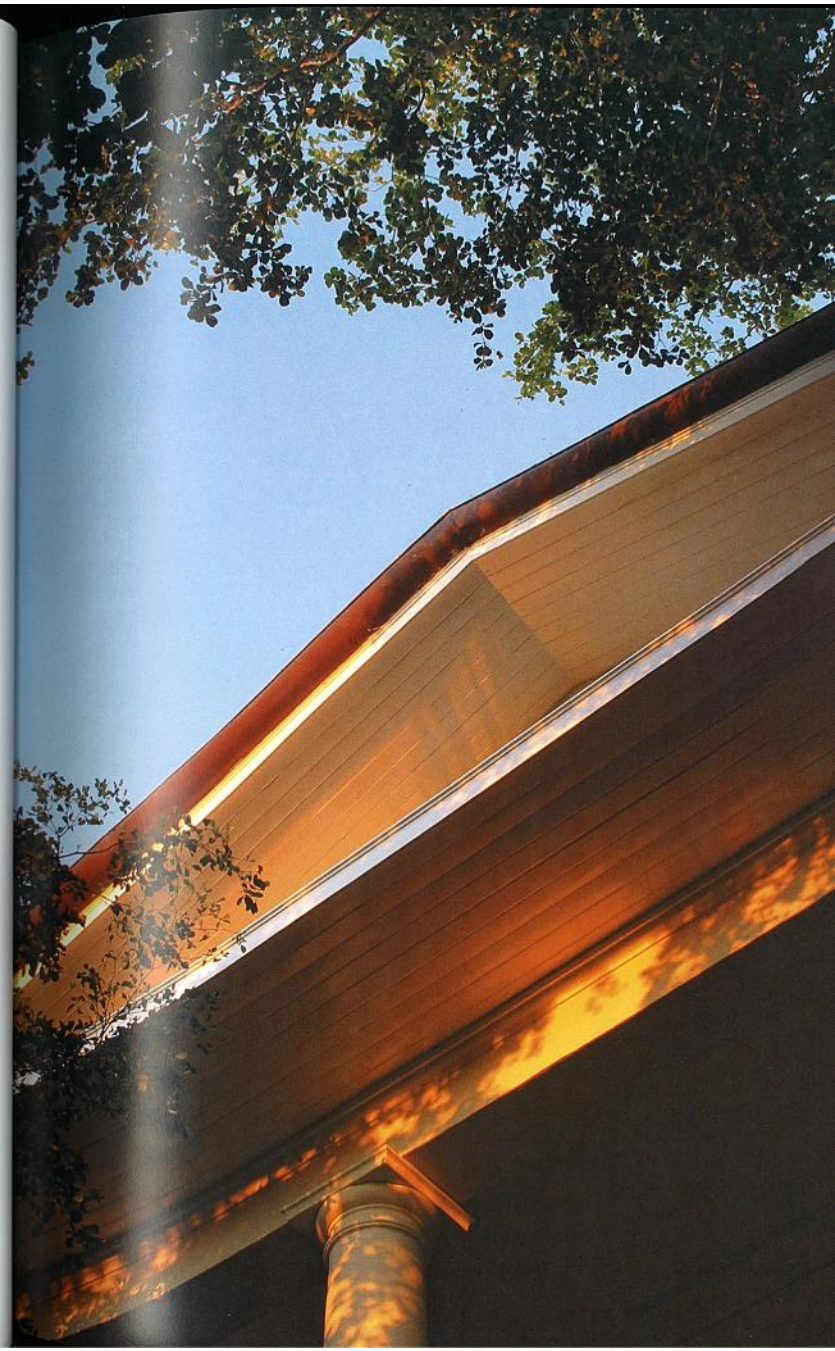
Ernesto Buch designed the buildings. Ernesto is a remarkably talented (and remarkably self-effacing), Cuban-born classicist working between New Haven, Connecticut, and the Dominican Republic. I first met him when I was a student at Yale and he was an architect in the office of Allan Greenberg. At the time, he was designing a spectacular, Lutyens-inspired house, and I was amazed that it was still possible to build something of such grand, confident classicism in 1985. When, ultimately, Ernesto went off on his own, to design houses for Oscar de la Renta, John Richardson, and others, I began to see him as a kind of latter-day Palladio. His work showed that master's elemental strength and simplicity—as well as that of the English Georgian style—and a scale and grandeur that is much more European than American. Needless to say, his Latin and Anglo-Caribbean sensibility made a perfect match for the tropical setting of de la Renta's Punta Cana home. And it's no surprise that Ernesto's sensibilities were an equally successful match for Bunny and John.

What I love about the architecture at La Colina is that it is not at all showy. It doesn't have too many tricks up its sleeve, and those you do discover are subtle and powerful. As a design, it is content to be bold in scale, elegantly proportioned, and detailed without unnecessary



complexity. The eye is constantly rewarded with framed views and the promise of the discovery of something new and wonderful at every turn.

Among Ernesto's architectural "moves" at La Colina, I have a few favorites. There is the strong, quirky shape of the main house roof, a nod to Drayton Hall outside Charleston, South Carolina, and suggested by Bunny to break up the impact of the home's great scale. The exquisitely proportioned garage studio, with its Dutch gambrel hipped roof, greets you upon your arrival. A pair of stately, beautifully detailed gate piers frames the central axis through the entry courtyard. The kink in the axis of the pool and pool house, off the orthogonal of the main house, gives appropriate complexity and visual interest to the relationship between the two structures. And the wonderful way the columns of the pool-house portico, which reminds one of Inigo Jones's church in Covent Garden, come right down to the water's edge allows you to sit beside those great big stucco shafts with your feet in the pool.

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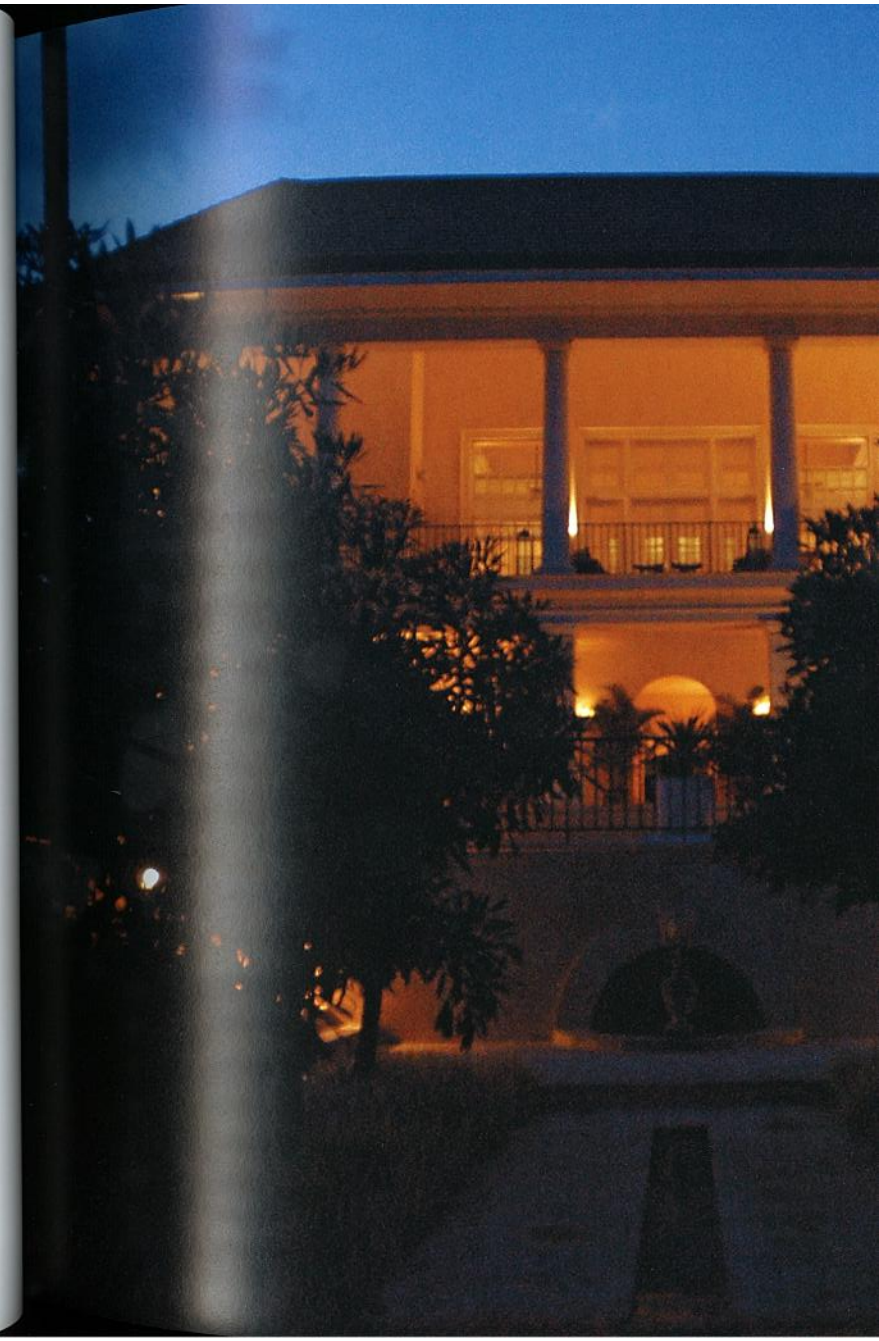
None of this would matter, of course, without what Bunny and John have brought to the mix. Their partnership is all the more poignant because of their common passion for decoration and gardens, as well as for aesthetic points of view that are so clearly in sync. It's great fun to watch them go at it with such gusto there, unfettered by the constraints of a client's wish list or the fear of failure. Best of all, they have made their house a place that celebrates the joy of life and the restorative value of comfort and hospitality. There are numerous places to hide away and read or take a nap at any time of the day; there are delightful and varied places to gather for a drink or a meal; in the guest rooms, you find perfectly appointed bathrooms and dressing rooms, each with ample closet space, mountains of towels, and often a tub *and* a shower; and throughout the house are all those windows and doors with classic jalousie louvers (coupled with raised panel interior shutters) that give you maximum flexibility to control both light and breezes. Bunny, John, and Ernesto created a setting that is geared toward comfort and delight, and there isn't a single disappointing corner in the house.

It's not always easy for an architect to sit back and let someone else do the talking, but Ernesto has done so masterfully at La Colina. Knowing that his collaborators would bring such richly articulated layers of their own to the project, he was content to make a handsome frame for the picture of living well that has been so memorably painted by Bunny and John. You end your visit there inspired by their approach to celebrating all that is beautiful in life and committed to living even just a little bit better when you get back home . . . not to mention hoping for an invitation to return next year!