

## Bill, Phyllis Taylor work to define Florida's architectural, aesthetic style

By Teresa Mears

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Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn / Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

The kitchen in Donna Shalala's Coral Gables home has lots of green, including the grass cloth on the walls and the fabric of the banquette.

The room at first appears rather serious: a brown-and-white striped sofa, brown grass-cloth wall, and white wainscoting below.

And then there is the painted white taxidermy sailfish.

Because this is Florida. And Florida means, among other things, whimsy.

Architect Bill Taylor and his wife, designer Phyllis Taylor, have put their work and their thoughts about Florida design into a new book, *Classic Florida Style: The Houses of Taylor & Taylor* (The Monacelli Press, \$50), written with Beth Dunlop, a Miami architecture writer, with photos by Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn.

"We feel like it's time for Florida to take its place," Bill Taylor said. "There is so much that's special about Florida."

The impetus to write the book came from the Taylors' feeling that Florida design and Florida designers were often overlooked. "The talent in Florida, if I do say so myself, is very underrepresented," he said.

Just what is Florida style?

Whimsy is part of it. The blurred lines between inside and out. Color, from the perfect blue-green combination of a palm frond against a winter sky to other bright hues that don't work elsewhere. And then there is a factor the architect and designer don't bring to the table, but work to enhance: the special quality of Florida light.

Phyllis and Bill Taylor have been working together since 1983. They live in one of their early designs, a Florida vernacular home in Miami Beach.

Among the homes featured in the book are University of Miami President Donna Shalala's

home in Coral Gables, where the Taylors did the interior architecture and design, and an oceanfront home owned by former Miami Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino and his wife, Claire, in Kiawah Island, S.C.

Many of the homes in the book are large and expensive, and many of the Taylors' clients live up north and use their Florida places as second homes. But, as the Taylors tell their clients, you can't just plunk down a traditional Northern-style home in Florida and have it work.

"One of the great challenges is making these styles appropriate for South Florida," Phyllis Taylor said. "It's really difficult to do gracefully when people want a Tudor house."

One of the homes in the book is part of a 140-acre waterfront compound on Lake Thonotosassa, northeast of Tampa, where the Taylors provided interior architecture and design services. The owners wanted a French country style, but with a Florida flair. The couple drew inspiration from some of the world's great estates — The Biltmore in Asheville, N.C.; The Breakers in Newport, R.I.; even the palace of Versailles in France. And then they added Florida elements.

A French Art Deco table sports Murano pink flamingos, and a painted mural in the formal dining room depicts oranges and palms, with a color palette that is both more vivid and lighter than you'd see in a traditional European space.

Florida style isn't just one style, but an approach to many types of styles, the Taylors say. Families don't have to leave their mahogany furniture and antiques behind when they move to Florida. They just have to use those items in ways that fit with the new environment.

"People used to move to Florida and think that everything had to be brand new and bamboo and rattan," Bill Taylor said.

Because of the humidity, the sun, the water and the salt air, Florida design also has to include durable materials. The Taylors particularly like to use Florida keystone, which is local and durable and can be used in many ways.

Bill Taylor has strong Florida roots. He is the fifth generation of his family to live in Florida. His ancestors settled in the Sarasota area just after the Civil War. Family lore has it that his grandmother was the first woman to get a driver's license in Hillsborough County.

Phyllis Taylor came from New York but has adopted Florida as her own. The two met when they were studying at the University of Florida in Gainesville. They have been married more than 30 years and have two adult children.

Asked to define Florida style, Bill draws from Florida's past, from the 10 Houses of Refuge that were built up and down the Florida East Coast from 1876 to 1885 to guide shipwreck victims to shore. Those houses were bungalows with high ceilings, big windows, and broad, shaded verandas. (Only one survives, in Stuart.)

"It's all about the breeze and the views," Bill Taylor said. In his designs, he works to merge the interior and exterior spaces, creating living areas outdoors and opening up the indoors to the out whenever possible. He favors tall windows and clerestory windows, which let in changing light as the sun rises and falls. "I always find a way to work with the light," he said. "Florida light is really special and really different from anywhere else."

One project featured in the book, the remodeling of a Key West-style cottage on a private island in the Keys, called for more light. To do that, the architect moved a staircase and created a Palladian window. This was the house that got the taxidermy sailfish, as well as several other nautical and whimsical elements.

Color is another key element of Florida style, both inspired by and transformed by the unique Florida light. Clients often bring color preferences to the project (the Marinos wanted a lot of blue), and then it's up to Phyllis Taylor to turn their preferences into coherent designs.

"There isn't a color I don't love," she says. But, "I'm not beige."

When she worked with Shalala on her new home, she pleaded with the UM president: "Don't beige out on me."

Her admonition apparently was heeded: The Shalala home features orange walls in the dining room and lots of splashes of green, including a grasshopper-green grass cloth on the walls of the kitchen.

"People have a fear of color," Phyllis Taylor says. "They think that they're marrying the color. It's not that much of a commitment."

Florida design isn't kitsch, even when it's used with a touch of whimsy. "We can take a photograph of a flamingo and not only make it fine art, but use it as the jumping-off point for an entire design palette," she wrote in the introduction to the book.

The Taylors hope their book will increase the appreciation of uniquely Florida design and also raise Florida's profile in the design world.

"Florida design seems to be suffering from an inferiority complex," Phyllis Taylor said. "It's time for someone to speak up."

## Resources

"Classic Florida Style: The Houses of Taylor and Taylor," by William and Phyllis Taylor, with Beth Dunlop. 224 pages, The Monacelli Press, \$50.

Taylor & Taylor is at 1211 Alton Rd., Miami Beach; 305-534-9862; [www.taylorntaylor.com](http://www.taylorntaylor.com)

William and Phyllis Taylor, along with Beth Dunlop, will talk about the book at Books & Books in Coral Gables at 8 p.m. Friday. [www.booksandbooks.com](http://www.booksandbooks.com)