

How designer Scott Sanders refashioned an authentic '70s Palm Beach home

By Steven Stolman / Special to The Palm Beach Post

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It's a familiar South Florida story: Vacationing northerners can't resist the urge to do a little real estate tire-kicking — and wind end up purchasing a Palm Beach pad.

For a certain age group, especially those in the throes of their careers, this momentary madness often takes the form of a condo purchased from an estate, often sold “as is,” complete with the previous owner's detritus.

Sometimes Realtors step in and assist in the sifting and distribution of mementos to family members. But then they often call in the charity-aligned thrift shops or many consignment stores that dot the area, in the hopes of delivering an empty unit upon closing.

Such was not the case for interior designer Scott Sanders and his husband Peter Wilson, a retired attorney, who recently purchased a rare “original condition” apartment at The Reef, one of Palm Beach's architectural treasures.

“It was as if time had stopped,” says Sanders, who has expanded his New York design practice to include Palm Beach, and is currently completing the restoration of a South Lake Trail estate for a young family. “The owners clearly had a fabulous decorator or great taste, or both,” he says.

Indeed, the 1970s interior was, at first glance, pristine and breathtakingly stylish — so much so that it appeared on the cover of Palm Beach Life magazine.

All the hallmarks of the moment were there — the expansive sectional sofa covered in white Haitian cotton, the wrapped rattan chairs, glass-topped tables and brass light fixtures.

“It looked like the set of the Merv Griffin Show,” jokes Sanders, who headed up the interior design department of Ralph Lauren before going out on his own in 2000. “But I immediately recognized so many wonderful design classics, it would have been unthinkable, let alone wasteful, to discard them. I felt that I could incorporate the original soul of the apartment in a fresh way.”

That incorporation turned into a yeoman's task. While many pieces looked good initially, time had taken its toll. Cushions disintegrated upon touching, tarnish and pitting marred much of the brass, and rattan had dried out to the point of snapping like twigs.

So began a painstaking restoration of each and every piece that Sanders felt had merit. The sectional sofa, built by American furniture maker Century, was rebuilt with new cushions covered in a contemporary version of the original slubby cotton, this time in an all-weather woven fabric by Perennials.

All brass was sent out for replating, bringing new allure to the Tomasso Barbi floor lamp and a glamorous tubular chandelier. A loveseat with a Lucite base, attributed to mid-century master Vladimir Kagan, was reupholstered in a seaside-appropriate aquamarine and white boucle.

Limed pecky cypress paneling received tons of tender loving care, as did all millwork. To this Sanders added jute area rugs, colorful glass accessories and dramatic art, including a complete series of Sol LeWitt's “Tondo Stars.”

The resulting residence is the definition of timeless appropriateness.

“I love that we were able to keep so much of what was there while adding elements to support the original aesthetic, but repurposed for the way we live today,” says Sanders. “I sometimes think that ‘authentic’ is an overused word in interior design. But when I sit in this beautiful, peaceful place, so much of what makes it feel so good is that it's really *real*.

“Peter and I are truly honored to occupy a home that was obviously originally created for people with a real zest for life.”