

# INDULGE

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**BUILDING DREAMS:**  
Coral Gables husband-wife  
architecture team  
**Carlos Gonzalez-Abreu**  
and **Ana Alas**

SPRING  
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ISSUE



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# CARLOS GONZALEZ-ABREU AND ANA ALAS

For three decades, the husband-wife principals of Gonzalez-Abreu / Alas Architects have been shaping extraordinary homes from Miami to the Bahamas.



Growing up in El Salvador, Ana Alas would tag along with her father, an engineer and developer, to construction sites of buildings he had designed. Along the way, she developed a passion for architecture and design.

Later, when enrolled at University of Miami's School of Architecture, Alas found a fellow student who shared her zest for creating compelling structures. She met Carlos Gonzalez-Abreu in an extra-credit competition to design and build a life-size, free-standing doorway.

They were on different teams at the time, but they soon joined forces in life and in business. For the past nearly 30 years, the husband-wife team of Gonzalez-Abreu / Alas Architects has been shaping some of the most extraordinary homes from South Florida to the Bahamas.

Gonzalez-Abreu and Alas pride themselves on giving each client their full attention and personalized service. That means turning down projects while others are in full swing and going to such lengths as shipping hundreds of thousands of dollars of construction equipment and materials from Miami to a private island in the Caribbean to jump-start a client's build.

"We really sink our teeth into every project," Gonzalez-Abreu said.

## BEFORE AND AFTER BAHAMAS

Their boutique firm offers a broad scope of services, including architecture, interior design, design-build and — most recently — garden design.

But it wasn't always like that.

There is a definitive distinction in the firm's history. The duo playfully refers to it as Before Bahamas and After Bahamas.

Before Bahamas, the couple launched Gonzalez-Abreu / Alas Architects in 1990 and built their architecture business on rewarding word-of-mouth referrals. They eventually turned their hobby of antiquing into an interior-design service.

Their first major joint venture of architecture and interior design: the 20,000-square-foot, Italian-style Villa Delphi in the exclusive Ponce-Davis neighborhood. Unlike any project the firm had undertaken, Villa Delphi led them to Jordan, Morocco and other parts of the globe in search of design objects.

Italian influence is present in many of the couple's designs, including their magnificent personal residence in Coral Gables. A college study-abroad program took Alas to Rome, where she fell in love with the city's style and culture, bringing her architecture textbooks to life. "Romans perfected the joie de vivre," she said. Gonzalez-Abreu and Alas gave each of their children Italian names: Dante, 20; Allegra, 18; and Luca, 16.

Carlos Gonzalez-Abreu and Ana Alas relax at the Coral Gables residence they've been perfecting for the past 20 years. Alas' necklace is a large geode pendant with wood links and bone and white-coral carved charms from Mcharms by Monica Granados.



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The kitchen at the Coral Gables home of Gonzalez-Abreu and Alas combines traditional, warm wood tones with the look of a modern Italian trattoria. Quartzite countertops, Moroccan floor tiles and a La Cornue gas range round out the global-contemporary look.



‘We thought about Villa Marbella every single day for 10 years.’ — Ana Alas

**REFERRAL OF A LIFETIME**

GAA Architects first dipped its toes in Bahamian waters in 1994. The firm took on a small but intense project on the tiny, members-only island of Cat Cay, about 12 miles from Bimini. They learned to leap over logistical hurdles like working on an island with no businesses from which to source materials or equipment, and having to navigate different customs regulations and building codes.

“Building on an island is very different,” Gonzalez-Abreu said with a smirk. “It has its own set of rules, but we embraced it.”

Their studio attracts a certain kind of client, typically very savvy and relentless in their pursuit of design perfection. They lovingly refer to the Cat Cay project as the 50 Shades of White Journey, due to the client’s desire to find just the right tone of white, from bathroom tiles to kitchen

cabinets to ceiling trims. “After that, she became one of our best friends,” Alas said.

Five years later, with that referral from the satisfied Cat Cay client, the couple returned to the Bahamas to begin what would become — over the course of more than a decade — their most ambitious and arguably most spectacular project to date. The master structural storytellers of GAA Architects made Villa Marbella rise from Cat Cay’s white sands.

Located on one of the island’s highest points, the \$20-million, 16,500-square-foot enclave includes a three-story main residence with seven bedrooms and seven and a half bathrooms, plus an additional three-bed, three-bath guesthouse.

After a yearlong design process and unable to find a general contractor, the couple approached their client with their own

CARMEL BRANTLEY (KITCHEN)





construction proposal. The estate was built in two phases: first the guesthouse, followed by the main home.

"It was an incredible opportunity," Gonzalez-Abreu said. "We had never done a project of this scale. The owner put a lot of trust in us, and it was a huge responsibility."

Added Alas: "It gave us permission to think outside the box and be playful."

## BLANK CANVAS

The couple describes Villa Marbella in unison: "It's a folly!"

They don't mean the word in the foolish sense. In architecture, a folly is a building made primarily for decoration. That's exactly what their client, a savvy American businessman, wanted — a vacation home he could enjoy once he retired.

Outside the main home, a light sea breeze sweeps through a secret courtyard with a pool and an al fresco dining area that looks out at sea. A wall envelops the space, giving it a sense of seclusion from the rest of the world.

The Italian villa stays true to its traditional architectural elements while seamlessly interweaving rich materials and a subdued glamour with Caribbean and nautical undertones.

Rare "pecky" cypress and coral-motif banisters highlight Villa Marbella's grand entry hall. GAA Architects designed the marble floors that were custom-made in Jordan. It's a simple nautical chain design, but with contrast in color and texture that gives it a mosaic look. Two vintage, framed life preservers add a sense of place and a touch of humor.

"The house isn't a museum," Alas said. "It's not about having classical paintings and artwork displayed. It's more fun and relaxed décor."

Above: The octagonal living room in Villa Marbella's guesthouse is a standout.

Each of the eight 9-by-7-foot seashell-encrusted panels that surround the room are breathtaking in their ornamentation. Designed using a vast selection of seashells and local Cat Cay sand, the artwork is complemented by bamboo wall paneling throughout. Below: The pool at Villa Marbella is veiled in glass tiles with a mosaic design in the middle that tells a Lithuanian tale of a mermaid goddess who falls in love with a fisherman. Venetian artists were flown in to create the courtyard's ornate mosaic floors. It took them three months, laying each river stone by hand.



PROPERTY PHOTOS COURTESY MCK HALES (VILLA MARBELLA LIVING ROOM AND GUESTHOUSE EXTERIOR/POOL), DANA JEFFREY (GUESTHOUSE LIVING ROOM); TAHITI BEACH RENDERING COURTESY GAA ARCHITECTS

'We really get to know our clients. We become lifestyle curators and tell their story with our designs.' — Carlos Gonzalez-Abreu



## CLOSER TO HOME

Villa Marbella was a project that may have seemed insurmountable, but to Gonzalez-Abreu and Alas, it was an opportunity to create something exceptional.

"We thought about this property every single day for 10 years," she said.

The couple is used to lengthy projects. In 2014 they put the finishing touches — as if a home is really ever finished — on the Coral Gables residence they moved into 19 years ago. The decades-long project tells a story of their lives, with objects recovered from their travels and spaces that match their professional and personal preferences.

GAA Architects' latest project is on Tahiti Beach inside the Cocoplum neighborhood, a design for retired NFL star, former University of Miami defensive standout and Coral Gables native Jonathan Vilma. The 9,000-square-foot, two-story, contemporary waterfront mansion appears to float over a lagoon-style pool, with sweeping views of the bay and downtown Miami.

When asked to pick a favorite room from their projects, Gonzalez-Abreu can't decide.

"No room stands alone," he said. "It doesn't exist in a vacuum. It has a relationship with the room that came before it. For me, it's all about the sequence — the approach into each room that makes it special."

Alas said that answer reflects one of the things she admires about her husband. "He explains everything in a logical way," she said, "but it's always so poetic."

Their chemistry is apparent when Gonzalez-Abreu begins to ponder how their designs will be viewed 2,000 years from now — and Alas tells a joke that makes him stop and laugh.

"We complement each other," Gonzalez-Abreu said. "I'm the hammer, and she's the soft cloth."

Both are invaluable tools to build an empire. □

Villa Marbella's grand living room is a completely open space to enhance the feeling of free, relaxed living. The ceiling groin vaults treated with a hand-trowel plaster finish resemble pristine white sails ready to capture the wind. The room is punctuated at the far way by a 10-by-7-foot framed map that evokes marine trading routes.



This contemporary, 9,000-square-foot Venetian home on Tahiti Beach in Cocoplum was designed for retired NFL star Jonathan Vilma. It appears to float atop a striking lagoon-style pool and features sweeping views of the the bay and downtown Miami.