

[DESIGN]
HOME



ECO EXCELLENCE

AT THE TAYLOR & TAYLOR-DESIGNED
IBIS HOUSE IN PINECREST,
UM PRESIDENT DONNA SHALALA
LIVES A GREEN LIFE LESS ORDINARY.

By Drew Linsky
Photography by Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

In June 2001, after completing her tenure under President Bill Clinton as the longest serving United States Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala headed to warmer climes—specifically to become president of the University of Miami. Prior to her cabinet position, Shalala had been in academia for years, holding top posts at Hunter College in New York and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. But for her latest and current university stint, Shalala would enjoy a marked change of scene, eventually coming to reside in a Coral Gables home that interior designer Phyllis Taylor says is “like a tree house.”

When Shalala assumed her role, she moved into the mansion designated for the president, but soon she cast her eye on Smathers Four Fillies Farm, a lush, undeveloped lot that the school had acquired in 1993. “We owned the land, and it was being developed for faculty housing, in accordance with the gift from Frank Smathers,” recalls Shalala. “It was a perfect setting—an academic community for the home of future presidents.” Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, dean of the university’s School of Architecture and a partner in the firm Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, signed on to build the new presidential mansion, to be called Ibis House (named for the university mascot).

Phyllis and William Taylor, of the respected Miami Beach firm Taylor & Taylor (established in 1983), were tasked with creating an environmentally sensitive structure that needed to function both as an institutional venue for entertaining and a personal haven for Shalala. (The story of Ibis House is detailed in the forthcoming volume *Classic Florida Style: The Homes of Taylor & Taylor*, to be published by The Monacelli Press in April.) Charged with raising the university’s endowment to \$1 billion, Shalala would need a place where she would feel comfortable hosting Friday fundraising dinners as well as unwinding with a good book. (By the way, that \$1 billion goal was reached in 2012.) “We wanted large and small venues for events,” says Shalala. “We also wanted it to feel like a home.”

And so, the 11,000-square-foot LEEDcertified Ibis House, which has been occupied by Shalala for nearly a year, became one. “Natural light and natural ventilation were very important to her,” says Taylor. “She doesn’t use her air-conditioning very much at all, so it was crucial that the house be able to breathe. And something that President Shalala told me is that she had to be able to read everywhere. It had to have great lighting, natural during the day and good light at night. Two places she likes to read are the kitchen banquette and the brown leather chair in the master bedroom. In the previous house, she had an office, but with Wi-Fi and laptops, she finds that she now works everywhere.” The designers complied with cozy nooks throughout, including a living room window seat that overlooks the gardens and which has become Shalala’s favorite spot for quiet contemplation.

Ibis House also stands out as a true exemplar of eco-design. “It’s located right next to Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden,” Taylor explains. “So everything we did was sensitive to the environment. I don’t think the university at the time had a LEED building, on campus or off , so this was very important to the president.” The eco-initiative involved installing a floor made of Florida sand, seashells, recycled glass and abalone set into polished concrete tiles, a kitchen backsplash made from aluminum cans and wallcoverings of grass cloth.

The list of sustainable and repurposed materials runs long. One of the powder rooms even contains wallpaper fashioned from old newspapers. And when it came time to build the fireplace, Taylor didn’t look far for texture—she chose the Florida keystone recovered from the excavation of the swimming pool. “I knew that would make for a great story,” she says. “It’s very soft stone, so it was difficult to accomplish, but we did it.”

Another such notable piece is the dining room chandelier—made from repurposed aluminum cans and standing out against a coral-colored wallcovering of recycled paper. “It’s a canopy of lighting that, at night, looks like twinkly branches,” adds Taylor, noting that trees in general provided considerable inspiration for Ibis House. “The residence has a splayed floor plan, and someone asked the architect how she came up with the design, and she talked about the gorgeous tree in the backyard that the home opens up to. She said, ‘The tree designed the house for me.’ That was very telling.”