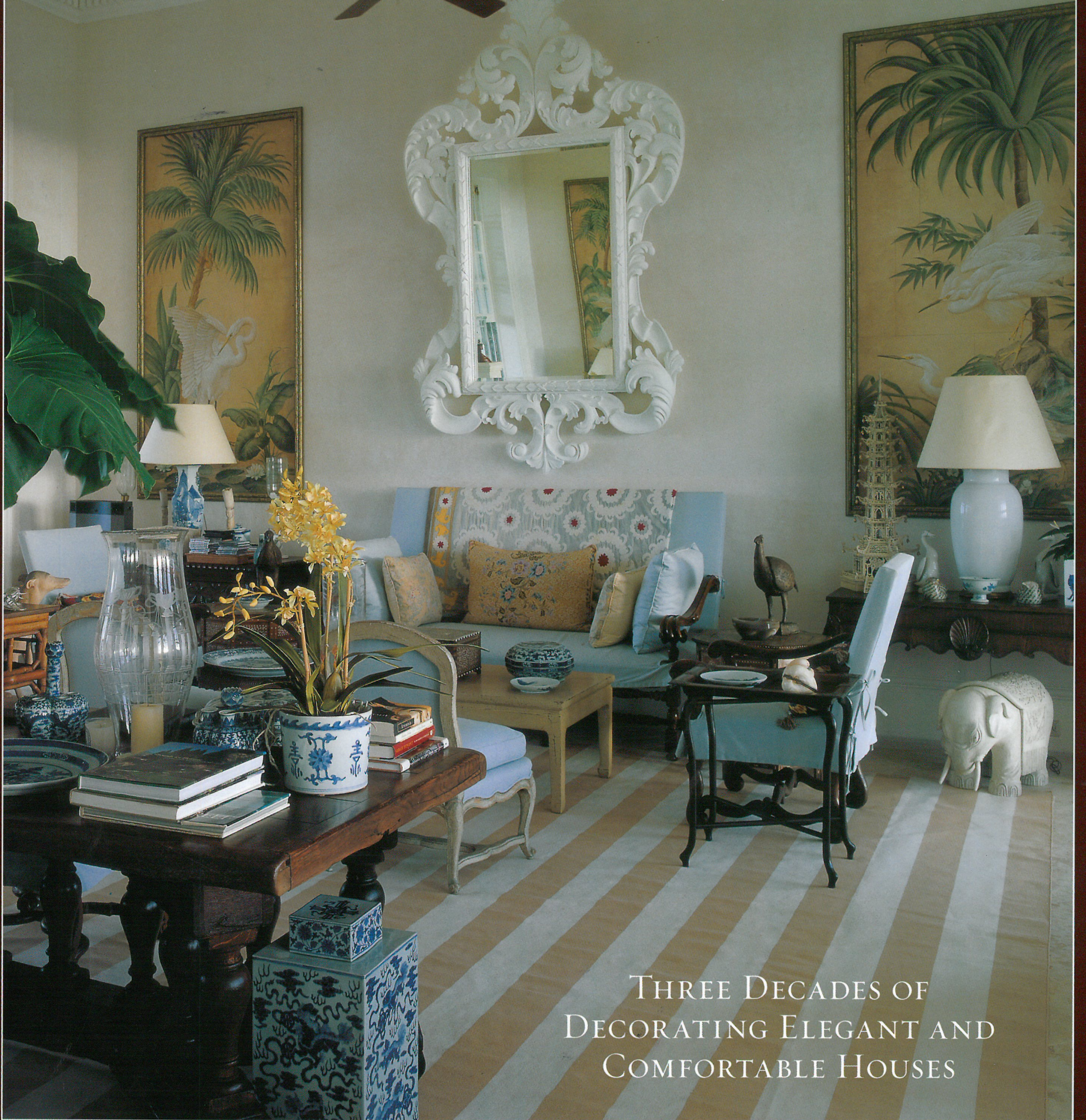


BUNNY WILLIAMS' POINT OF VIEW



THREE DECADES OF
DECORATING ELEGANT AND
COMFORTABLE HOUSES

to accentuate the height of a room. This can also be accomplished with a tall mirror or painting. I like to use tables of different heights, too. A table 30 inches high works well next to a sofa, as it puts an average-sized lamp at the correct height when you are seated. I like the bottom of the lampshade to be at eye level when you are seated. If you have a lower side table that's 24 or 26 inches, then you have to find a much taller lamp. I like very low tables next to a chair as a place to rest a glass of wine or cup of tea; without them, entertaining becomes very awkward.

When using matching pairs in a room, I try to vary the arrangement a bit. For example, if I have a pair of chairs next to a sofa, I would probably not use a pair of tables and put a pair of lamps on them. You can have symmetry without relying on pairs which can get boring.

When it comes to bedrooms, size really dictates what you can do. A comfortable mattress is more important than anything, and that is a very personal decision. The best size to my mind is a California King, which is narrower (72 inches) and longer (84 inches) than a traditional king-size bed. I think king-size beds are terribly proportioned—they're too boxy. And now, finally, it is easy to get wonderful sheets for California Kings. A queen-size bed is a lovely shape, but it is not large enough for some couples, especially if there are frequent visits from children or dogs.

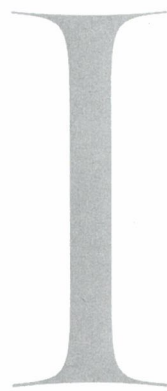
If your room is large enough, you may want your bedroom to double as a sitting room. I live in my bedroom in the city, which has bookcases, a television, a dressing table, a chair, and ottoman. I have a canopy bed, which I consider cozy. Some people find them claustrophobic. They are wonderful in rooms with high ceilings, and, ironically, they are even better in rooms with low ceilings because they make the ceilings look taller. Nothing's more dramatic than a tall bed in the middle of a room.

If you take the time to plan your rooms, you are apt to make the right choices. Resist the urge to be impulsive. Keep in mind the carpenter's adage: "Measure twice, cut once."

Both furniture groups in this living room have painted Continental furniture. A large painted Italian panel hangs over a Swedish sofa. A pair of nineteenth-century French chairs pulls up to a large modern ottoman covered in antique fabric.







DECORATE ROOMS FROM THE BOTTOM UP, SO I

always begin with the floors. It's a mistake to think you must live with the floors that come with your house or apartment. Floors have a profound effect on the ambience of a home. If they are not beautiful, there are many ways to make them special.

The floor in the entrance hall is especially important, and it should relate to the material of the house. As entrance halls are usually sparsely furnished, the floor becomes the focal point. I believe stone, brick, or stucco houses should have hard surface floors of marble, terrazzo, or terra-cotta tiles. Wood houses should have wood floors. The luster and finish of a floor gives character to a space. The smell and patina of freshly waxed wood floors, whether they are simple wide boards or an elaborate parquet pattern, set a definite mood. Hand-scraped wood floors (especially if they creak underfoot) give a feeling of warmth and age. Highly polished floors feel more formal and can look wonderful in modern houses as well as traditional residences.

There are so many ways to approach wood floors. A parquet floor made of different species of wood such as oak, walnut, and ebony can be an elegant, graphic treatment for a foyer. With simple, existing board floors, I often overlay a stenciled pattern that adds visual excitement. I am also particularly fond of painted wood floors. For one formal Georgian house in Connecticut, I painted the wood floors to simulate squares of marble. The sound and feel of walking on the wood is softer than walking on stone, but the faux marble gives a hall a dignified elegance

In a stucco house, an antique stone floor imported from Portugal sets the tone for the entrance hall and echoes the stone door trim.



you can have the fabric “paper-backed” so it can be hung like wallpaper, though elegant fabrics must be treated like upholstery or draperies when hung on walls. An English printed cotton can cozy up a bedroom, and an elegant silk Damask or exquisite hand-blocked Fortuny fabric with flecks of gold can add glamour to the walls of a dining room. For an elegant and masculine bedroom, I once upholstered the walls in dark green wool coaching cloth and used a handblocked, printed cotton print for the curtains.

If you have a large house, it’s fun to have a paneled room. Men seem to have an affinity for wood rooms. They are beautiful filled with books. And stained wooden bookshelves are more practical than painted shelves, which get beaten up every time you remove a volume and put it back. Woods that I find make beautiful paneled rooms are walnut, butternut, oak, and blended mahogany.

Almost any style house can have a paneled library. The carving and moldings can be French- or English-inspired depending on what is appropriate. For a modern house, I’ll put leather inserts in the paneling. But it’s not necessary to have raised panel molding. You can use veneers on a solid panel in a diamond pattern for a contemporary look, which can make the entire room feel like a single, well-crafted piece of furniture. And though I tend to imagine libraries as dark, introverted rooms—I’m a big fan of mossy green or red lacquered libraries for New York apartments—they can be light, bright spaces as well. For a client in Florida, I designed a library of polished cyprus, an indigenous wood that is the color of sand. Cyprus is used all the time in Florida and it is normally rough and pecky. I had the wood sanded and polished to a sheen, which brought out its greens and yellows, making it more elegant.

CEILINGS

It’s a shame that it’s not very common to have painted ceilings in American houses. When I started visiting Europe, I began to really appreciate painted ceilings. But I had my epiphany when I visited the Medieval Royal Palace of Sintra in Portugal. One coffered ceiling was painted with magpies, which was the king’s way of mocking his wife and her courtiers, whom he considered annoying chatterboxes. I was very amused. I realized that I could have fun with ceilings and that they need not be a big white void. I tend to embellish higher ceilings, and find that the coffered ceilings in the grand old Meisner houses in Florida demand decorative treatment.

You can have decorative ceilings in a more casual country house, too. You can do the ceiling in wood. I like using unsawed rough boards in a herringbone or diamond pattern and then painting them white. It’s an especially effective way to give texture to a new house.

Every floor, wall, and ceiling is an opportunity to play with light, color, and texture. They may be the basics, but the bones of your house deserve special treatment.

An intricately patterned dining room ceiling of white washed oak is unexpected and breathtaking. The walls are a melon-tinted, waxed Venetian plaster. Painted wheelback chairs sit on a patterned straw rug.







ABOVE: Oak beams enhance a tray-ceilinged library. The custom bookcases were inspired by ones in the house of the great French decorator Madeleine Castaing.

RIGHT: Gold tea paper on the ceiling warms the high-ceilinged dining room and gives the room a cozy glow. Russian chairs surround an English oak Arts and Crafts table lit by Japanese porcelain lamps plugged into floor outlets. The lamps' cords run between the leaves of the table.

A

S I WRITE THIS, I AM SITTING

by the fireplace in the living room of my nineteenth-century Federal farmhouse in northwestern Connecticut. The room has four French doors that open onto a terrace and a screened-in porch. The windows are cased with period nineteenth-century reed trim with corner blocks. I have never had curtains or blinds on them. During the day, the sun pours in, and in the evening the watery antique glass panes reflect the flames from the fire. I don't need curtains for privacy because I'm in the country and nobody can look in. Nevertheless, most windows do require curtains, and making up one's mind about them can be bewildering, for there are so many variables and styles to consider. (Opting out as I did in Connecticut is only rarely the solution.)

You should take time to study the windows. Analyze each opening and then step back and see the windows in elevation. You need to understand their form and function. Do they dominate the walls? Are they handsome or do they need to be masked? Is there a view to be framed? Do you want to be able to modulate the natural light? Are the windows large simple openings? Are they balanced in the room or off center? Should the windows and doors be improved? If your house has ugly, aluminum sliders, think seriously about replacing them with wooden French doors. A traditional house always looks better with windows that have

Handsome arched French doors require a simple window treatment—panels of sheer linen that hang from hand-hammered metal poles.







ABOVE: A pool house is furnished with a pair of Deco armchairs and modern metal benches around an Anglo Indian coffee table. A large painted mirror hangs over the sofa. RIGHT: An eighteenth-century painting of birds hangs over a special French shaped-back sofa with a pair of unusually shaped French wing chairs on each side. Painted carved plaques of fruit and birds from England hang on the wall along with Delft plates.

in a room coordinates, the feeling is artificial. It's better to have tonal variations of the same color, which is more relaxing than the stiffness of a perfectly calculated palette. The worst thing you can do is pick out colors from your paintings and choose fabrics to match. It belittles the artwork. You want the colors on your furniture to be neutral or a softer version of the colors in your pictures.

You have to be practical with fabrics. There is a suitability factor. If you are doing a sofa where you will be lounging and watching movies, you need something soft, strong, and easy to clean. If you have a chair that is rarely used, then you can use a more fragile material. With three dogs who have the run of the roost, I would never use silk taffeta in my home, though I love it. I use cottons and linens because they are more dog friendly. I often put faux leopard throws on the furniture for my dogs and then never take them off. It's a good look and much nicer than covering a chair with a sheet (or, God forbid, plastic!).

It may sound like I shy away from bold patterns, but that is not accurate. When I use patterned fabrics, I go all out. I might do a bedroom's walls and curtains in one fabric the way the French used toile in the nineteenth century. I love using pattern that way—it makes me think of those amazing paintings of interiors by Bonnard, Vuillard, and Matisse. When you mix several patterns, you must change the scale of them, so if you have a large-scale pattern, you put a thin stripe or tiny check with it. It is very hard to put four very strong patterns in a room. What's more, you need to have a really good upholsterer when you are working with patterned fabrics. She has to know how to match up all the seams and the back and the arms. A bad upholsterer won't even notice, but you will and the results will be disheartening.

For the ultimate in cozy luxury, I will use cashmere for curtains and walls. For elegance, nothing compares to hand-blocked Fortuny. It's hard to print, it takes forever to get, but the results are incomparable. I did the living room of an Italian-style house in Florida with the most incredible green and antique gold Fortuny fabric on the walls. The room had a stone fireplace and a wooden ceiling, and at night with candlelight, the effect was enchanting.

There's nothing better than covering walls with fabric—as long as it's properly done. You can have the fabric upholstered on the walls, which will make the room quiet, or paper-backed and pasted on like wallpaper. If you are working with a nice thin silk, you can have the walls upholstered in knife pleats, which is extremely complicated but breathtaking. Fabrics are one of the many reasons I never tire of my work. They provide an unlimited source of possibilities and pleasures.

A bright pink stripe all-weather canvas was used for the cushions on dark metal furniture on a tropical loggia. The throw pillows were made from Indonesian batik fabric.







ABOVE LEFT: For a long hall, parchment and wrought iron fixtures add interest to the ceiling as well as soft light. ABOVE RIGHT: The illusion of skylights was created for this lower-level hall by putting incandescent light behind mullioned frosted glass windows. RIGHT: A row of simple glass bell jars hangs from a vaulted ceiling.



A pair of ivory four-poster beds that Francis Elkins designed for a house in Chicago have resided in my memory for a very long time. I designed a similar bed in wood and had it painted in faux ivory. The valance and headboard were embroidered in India. An antique cotton Indian dhurrie covers the floor.



