

A photograph of a modern interior space featuring a large, bright yellow sofa in the foreground. In the background, floor-to-ceiling glass doors and windows offer a view of a lush tropical garden. The garden is filled with various green plants, including palm trees and red flowers. A small stone table and a white patio chair are visible outside. The text "Tropical Punch" is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Tropical Punch

In South Florida, interior designer Robert Kaner devises a modernist environment that bursts with color

By Beth Dunlop



Photography by
Michael Stavaridis



The house itself is a small, plain 1930s art deco bungalow.

Over the years it had been shorn of most of its ornamental detail, so much so that when interior designer Robert Kaner took on the work of rehabilitating the place, he had, he says, "really a clean slate." It was an opportunity to express some ideas about color and design, to create a low-key ode to tropical modernism.

The New York-based Kaner, an attorney in a prior career, opened his interior design practice in 2004 and has quickly gained a reputation for well-planned and intelligent, but nonetheless joyful decors. Being an attorney-



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turned-designer had its advantages in the case of this project: the client was a former law firm colleague, Joe Tringali, who had just bought the house as a winter getaway on one of the islands that punctuate the Venetian Causeway connecting Miami Beach to Miami.

The low-slung house stood amid tropical greenery, and for Kaner the setting was inspirational. Miami's piercing bright sunlight and always deep blue skies seemed to provoke ideas. "The first time I met with Joe, he had a little piece of yellow or, really, chartrreuse glass," Kaner says. "I liked that sunny

bright citrus color. I felt it led me in a nice direction. The color related to the views outside the window, and I thought that a clean white house with chartreuse-citrusy accents would be right for the place and provide an interesting way to set a mood."

That piece of glass was more than a bauble, rather a starting point for a more serious foray into modern design that would celebrate the house's lush tropical setting. The discovery, at the Chicago auction house Wright, of a vivid yellow 1974 painting by Ludwig Sander helped propel the color palette, but it was the purchase at Phillips de Pury in New York of a fairly rare and important "Scissor" chair by Pierre Jeanneret that defined the aesthetic of a spare and minimal house infused with brilliant color.

The house had been renovated and modernized already, but it nonetheless seemed to be chopped up into too many disparate pieces. A sunroom had been grafted on. To achieve a relaxing feel and a more seamless flow, Kaner took out some clunky "really unattractive" sliding doors that walled off the den and he re-oriented the dining room, "all in the spirit of opening up the house much more." He created a full-height opening between the living room and the den and designed sliding lacquered doors in chartreuse and white.

A second structural move was to build a banquette on one side of the dining room, thus shifting the furniture all to one side of the space, which further enhanced the flow of the house. Kaner designed the wood, chrome, and leather banquette himself, and chose an Indian laurel for the frame "be-



Opening spread: The sun room—which has its original terrazzo floors—features a William Plunkett sofa in Robert Kaner-designed upholstery and a Marc Newson "Felt" chair in wicker.

Facing page: By the time designer Robert Kaner and his client Joe Tringali saw the house, it had already been "repurposed" from its original 1930s art deco look into a more minimalist mid-century style. Some deco elements do remain, such as the decorative panel on the cabana wall.

Above: The 1974 Ludwig Sander painting over the living room fireplace had a great influence on the decor of the house. Another key element in the room is the Pierre Jeanneret "Scissor" chair with its purple upholstery. The biomorphic coffee table is a c. 1950 design by T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings; the side table is a refurbished 1960 piece by Peter Pepper.



The mosaic is an almost perfect expression of the philosophy behind the interiors: minimalist exuberance

cause of the strong tropical grain." He also designed the large white sofa that dominates the living room, as well as the textile that covers it. The purchase of the Ludwig Sander painting propelled another architectural intervention. There was an ideal spot for it—above the fireplace—but placing the artwork involved replacing a faux-deco mantelpiece that had supplanted the original somewhere along the way.

One key decision was to keep and enhance the original white terrazzo floor (replacing one mismatched section) and allowing it to have an important role in the design. "Terrazzo is the most beautiful material," Kaner says, "and for this house it provided a really nice jumping-off point." Though the house predates the "official" mid-century period, the modernist references were there. "I then broadened the range," he says, "with layered tones." The rooms are bright and sunny, for the most part. A slight deviation from this is the den, where the tones are slightly darker and more subdued, a respite from the eye-popping luster of the rest of the house. Kaner says that a goal was to connect the rooms one-to-another without having them feel identical. "So you feel like you are going someplace else, when you go into the den," he says.

To fill the house, Kaner sought out choice pieces of furniture coast to

Facing page: Kaner designed the living room sofa. Behind it is a 1950s Arredoluce "Triennale" lamp.

This page: Kaner also designed the leather-upholstered laurel wood banquette to embrace the dining table. Above it hangs a mosaic by Evelyn Ackerman.



coast. A Greta Magnusson Grossman coffee table came from Reform Gallery in Los Angeles, as did a mosaic, which now hangs over the banquette in the dining room, designed by the great and long-lived Evelyn Ackerman. She and her husband, Jerome, were the subjects of a recent retrospective at the Los Angeles Craft and Folk Art Museum, and the mosaic is an almost perfect expression of the philosophy behind the house; one might call it minimalist exuberance.

There are other gems: a T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings biomorphic coffee table, an Arredoluce "Triennale" standing lamp, and a side table by Paul McCobb. Rare and welcome in a client, Tringali has what Kaner describes as "an in-



Above: The den, with its warm, quiet air, is furnished with custom-made pieces such as the sofa and console, as well as vintage designs such as a Greta Magnusson Grossman coffee table.

Facing page: The cabana-cum-guesthouse sports a second sprightly color scheme of red, white, and various blues. The “Legnoletto” bed was designed by Alfredo Häberli for Alias. A Milo Baughman “Cube” chair sits outside the shower.

credibly refined and sophisticated sensibility” and was interested not so much in finishing the house fast but in getting it right, allowing the designer to act as curator.

“There’s so much great design in Miami,” Kaner says, “and such a focus on design. I wanted to bring that to this house.”

Contemporary pieces from Marc Newson, Jasper Morrison, and Alfredo Häberli enter into the mix. Though the furnishings skew more toward the mid-century, they are treated to a more up-to-date interpretation. For example, Kaner took a sofa, now back in production,

designed by William Plunkett in 1966 and used on the ocean-liner *Queen Elizabeth II*, and brought it to a new time and place with a tropical yellow upholstery fabric of his own design.

A winter and weekend house in Miami is often a house for entertaining, and this house came complete with a pool cabana that could double as a guest suite. Originally a garage, the little outbuilding had multiple purposes—sleeping, storage, laundry, utilities—that still had to be accommodated. Kaner designed cabinetry with a crisp mid-century look (almost as if it had been in a



The subdued colors in the den offer a respite from the eye-popping luster of the rest of the house

Case Study House) to hide the appliances and create storage space for poolside accoutrements, and other necessities. The cabinets are red, white, and several shades of blue. There's a small undercounter refrigerator and freezer to hold drinks and snacks. A bed-and-bathroom suite allows day guests to shower off after swimming and accommodates overnight visitors, who get to sleep in an Alfredo Häberli bed and sit in a Milo Baughman "Cube" chair for Thayer Coggin.

"An interior can create almost a physical sensation," Kaner says. "The goal here was to retain the mid-century feel but to make the house feel cosmopolitan and eclectic, just like much of Miami." **M**

