

SEEING THE LIGHT

An architect's affinity for natural light creates a bright and well-loved vacation home

By M.S. Lawrence | Photography by Holger Obenaus

Kathy and George were nervous. They were living in Houston, and yet somehow had to trust that their dream house would be built to perfection a thousand miles away on their favorite vacation spot, Kiawah Island.

Enter architect Marc Camens. Though the homeowners had begun working with another architect, once they talked to Marc, their dream house took shape beyond what they could've imagined. "He just really knew what we wanted," says Kathy. "He asked questions about our taste, what we'd be using the house for, how big our family was...and we connected immediately," she says.

The couple laughs when they recall a meeting they had over the phone. "At the end of it, I wanted to make sure Marc had enough information, and I emphasized that I had a whole page

of notes," says George. "Then Marc said, 'Well, I've got 10 pages!'"

The sketches alone blew the owners away. "It was so much better than what we'd imagined and knew we wanted," says George. "Even at that point, on paper, it was very cool."

Integral in going from paper to reality were the far-reaching talents and capabilities of R.M. Buck Builders, Inc.

"Somebody wants a beautiful design, somebody dreams it up, but then somebody has to build it," points out Camens. Father-and-son team Bob and Ryan Buck, he says, always welcome a challenge. With them, he says—raising his palms face-forward to make the point—there's no "pushback."

"Their ability as craftspeople is amazing, nearly unlimited," he says of the builders, whose attention to detail is no doubt a result of their cabinetmaker origins."

In his signature pursuit to capture the natural light







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throughout a house, Camens consistently throws new challenges the Bucks’ way—in fact, he’s worked with them on 35 projects, each one a practice in stretching design boundaries.

“It’s about the surprise of architecture,” says Camens. “[It’s about] details like ceiling space and unexpected shafts of light. These are things that, when you walk up to a house, you don’t expect to see inside. The owners wanted their home to be memorable, but not over-the-top. They wanted it to be completely functional.”

The first surprise at the home is evident in the lighthouse-like tower that rises up from its seaside shingle-style silhouette. The towering

octagonal foyer lifts upward and reaches for the light, almost church-like, gratis the Bucks’ handsomely carved supports.

This cathedralesque drama continues in the living room, crowned by an exposed, curvilinear ceiling accented with a series of gorgeously formed arches that tops off two layers of windows. “The dormers allow even more light into the space,” says Camens.

“When I showed Bob and Ryan the plan and sketches for the arches, it was an integral moment,” he says. “There was no hesitation, they knew they could do it—and those arches are not typical,” he notes. “It was a challenge,”

nods Bob, “but we enjoy seeing this kind of unique result.”

Ceilings are a Camens trademark. “The ceiling plane is the most important plane in a house,” he explains. “The eye gravitates to it immediately when you enter. An interesting ceiling gives a room a three-dimensional quality. It defines the space, especially in an open house.

“And if detail is there,” he continues, “it gives you more definition, more interest.”

This room also tells a story that aptly symbolizes the owners’ relationship with, and intent for, their new home. High above the fireplace, the arches frame a bookcase-lined



room, a loft-like, secret place carved out especially with little ones in mind. Originally closed in as designated mechanical storage, the area seemed wasted space to George. He imagined a cozy niche perfectly sized for his grandchildren, with a daybed for napping.

Putting their heads together, owner, architect and builder came up with a plan that opened up the area to the room below and made it accessible via a short climb on an authentic, custom-made ship's ladder in the hallway. "Getting rid of those walls added even more depth to the room," says George. Most importantly: "It's the first place the grandkids want to go," he notes.

In the adjoining kitchen/dining area, dressed

up in coffered ceilings, handsome cabinetry and detailed woodwork, Camens again displays his abilities with natural light. Large windows surround the dining area and overlook the porch, yet each space seems separate and private. Camens stands at the far end of the dining room, explaining that he has a clear view of more than 40 feet.

The zoning of private and public space is an important goal in his designs. He uses ceilings, arches, even the depth of doorway entries to distinguish one area from the next. "They're subtle signals you're going somewhere else," says Camens. Like brief pauses in a flowing conversation, they "allow you to feel like you're in another space even though you're not." This

is key in an open house, he says.

Also important: the house must shrink or expand depending on the number of inhabitants. When only Kathy and George are here in their five-bedroom, 4,950-square-foot home, they live comfortably and cozily in the main areas of the house. But when family members join them, there's private space to accommodate them all, with three bedrooms and two full baths upstairs, plus a multi-functional guestroom.

"This is an open house, but when all the family is here, they're not on top of each other," says Camens.

In true Camens style, there are no boring ceilings in this home. The master bedroom whispers "beach!" with its airy white, batten





The master bedroom whispers “beach!” with its airy white, batten board vaulted ceiling.



board vaulted ceiling. In the white marble master bath, a tub is privately tucked away under an arched niche. A home office in the master half of the house puts the owners in work mode (if only for a while), with its dark wood and coffered ceiling accents.

Accessed by a hall lined with windows and infused with light, the whimsical and spacious guestroom above the two-car garage is a combination of bedroom, playroom and den. As the room came together, architect and builder realized the ceiling, if left unlevelled, would offer an effect similar to that of other rooms in the

house. Angular and dramatic, it gives the room added presence, and is one of the owner's favorite places to hang out with their grandchildren.

It's clear this is more than a showplace or

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venue for entertaining. Smitten with their young granddaughters, the owners have stretched the purpose of each room to include a use for the little girls.

"We've been coming to Kiawah for almost 30 years, and are delighted to have our family and especially our two granddaughters vacation at the beach with us," says George.

He adds, "There's a line from a movie: 'If you build it, they will come.' That's what we had in mind; so far, it's exactly as we planned!"

M.S. Lawrence is a Charleston-based writer.