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Q&A: CRITIC ALICE RAWSTHORN TALKS ABOUT THE
21ST-CENTURY DESIGN REVOLUTION

KITCHEN CLOSE-UP: COOL STYLE, NEW MATERIALS

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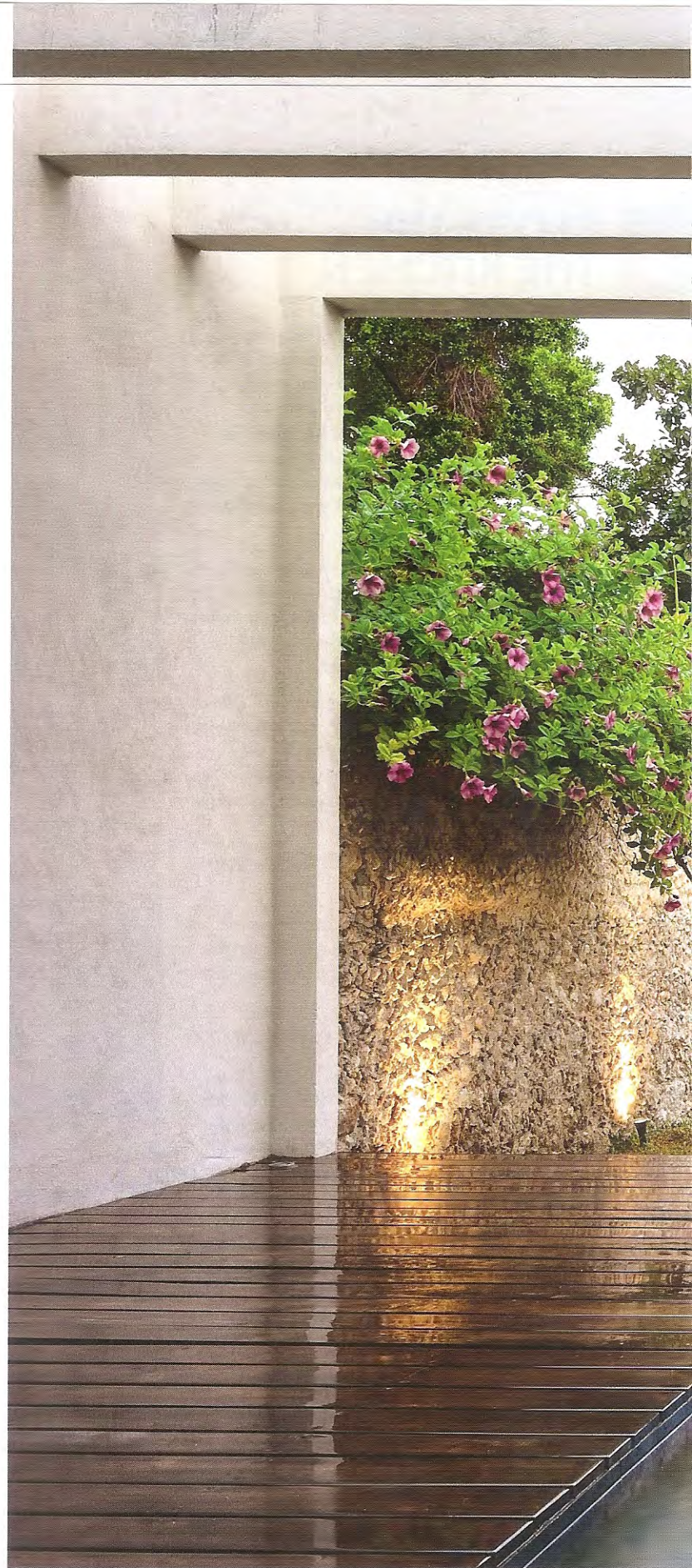
The view from the *casita*, or guest house, toward the back of the house encompasses a fragrant flowering frangipani bush, bougainvillea and lots of cactuses and other succulents. A series of light-reflecting surfaces—white tiles, garden walls and terrace pavers, the cladding on the mechanical rooms flanking the pool, and the surface of the pool itself—continues the sense of transparency that begins inside. “I wanted the house to be a glass box you could see through from beginning to end,” the owner says.

AWAY FROM IT ALL

IN SEARCH OF A HAVEN FREE FROM DISTRACTIONS, WHERE WINTER NEVER VISITS, TWO TRAVEL WRITERS CRAFT A MEXICAN VACATION HOME THAT'S A SURPRISING MIX OF WORK AND PLAY.

BY CAROLYN KENNEDY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRUCE BUCK







● One of the perks of travelling for a living is an acquired knowledge of good spots to settle in when more permanent refuge is desired. For freelance travel writers Adam McCulloch and Emma Soley, transplants from Australia now based in New York City, the choice was Mérida, 35 kilometres from the Gulf of Mexico coast, on the northern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula. A city of about a million people, Mérida was a major hub for Maya culture before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. Its walled *centro histórico* of cobblestone streets and many intact 18th-century mansions is ringed by the evidence of more recent design trends and boom times, such as art deco and mid-century modern, that successively left their mark as the city grew. The couple had

Left: In Mérida the front room of a home is traditionally a place to receive guests and tradespeople. “Even now, most business is done by people coming to your front door,” Adam says. The dresser is part of a 1950s bed set bought off the back of the truck of a furniture seller who had come to deliver a painting. Its elegance—fine cedar, tempered glass top, brass hardware and slim tapered legs—complements the serene entry space. The house is furnished with a casual mix of antiques and new pieces, cast-offs and serendipitous finds like this one.

Opposite, top right: The relatively narrow frontage (the property is 7 metres wide and 65 metres long) inspired the homeowners (*below*) to create a vista indoors. “When you step into the front room,” Adam says, “you can see all the way down to the back fence—through the living room, through the kitchen and dining room and into the yard, then the pool and the *casita*. It feels enormous. I wanted visitors to be overwhelmed when they walked inside.”

Opposite, left: Most of the home’s handmade-tile floors are original to the house and remain in good condition.

initially visited Mérida on assignment but later returned to escape the New York winter and get in some work away from work—Emma had a novel in progress, Adam a screenplay. They knew the city’s charms well enough already, they reasoned, not to get too far swayed from the tasks at hand. And in fact this plan worked so well that after a few years they decided to put down roots.

The two writers found a late-19th-century house with 20-foot ceilings and abundant possibilities. They removed a 1960s addition, keeping the first four rooms of the linear layout and adding a kitchen, a second storey with two master suites, a pergola, pool and garden in the courtyard, and a *casita* (guest house) at the far end of the axis. A former art director for films, Adam was eager to handle the design process himself, with Emma, who once co-owned a 20th-century design store in Melbourne, as his collaborator, and the talent of a quantity of experienced local tradespeople to tap into. For inspiration, they needed to look beyond their small one-bedroom apartment in the West Village, Emma says.

“It’s all white walls, gallery-like, with a wall of bookcases—quite busy, like a lot of New York apartments. But there is a lot of mid-century modern furniture, one of those classic Eames chairs, a rug with a sort of African influence, so I feel like our influences have carried through.” In Mérida, however, it’s different. “I feel like there is a kind of license to use colour in a way that you wouldn’t in another climate.”



'Here, we spring out of bed at 6:30 with the sun. You do a few chores before it's too hot. Then you have a siesta and a swim and do some work. In the evenings you go out and wander the streets; we love riding our bicycles around. It's the rhythm of the city that you slip into.'





So, Mexican exuberance comes together with a New York sense of restraint in the home's vivid colour scheme. Preferring not to use the widely varied palette typical of hot-climate houses, Adam opted for only two colours—peacock blue and bright orange. Everywhere else, the concrete walls are painted a cool grey. “Believe it or not,” he says, “this house is fairly monochromatic compared to others in town.” Peacock blue is used on the walls on the west side of the house, forming an eye-popping thread that runs all the way through. Everywhere except the kitchen, that is. Its accent wall, painted orange, wraps around to become the exterior of the tower formed by the new second storey above it; viewed from the back, the new part of the house is all of a piece. “It’s a south-facing house and you get a lot of light, especially with the internal courtyard, so I wanted the walls to recede and highlight the people who are there.”

For a place that was conceived, in part, for work,

In typical Mexican houses, a bedroom was a place to hang a hammock; without a bed taking up space, the rooms were usually multi-purpose. In that spirit, Adam and Emma use the two bedrooms on the main floor as their offices (*above and opposite*). Visible beyond them is the newly open kitchen, and beyond that, the courtyard. Peacock blue on the west wall (also in the living room, *left*) provides continuity through the older part of the house. The old cedar doors are original.



A bright orange accent wall signals that the kitchen is part of the home's modern incarnation.



CLOSE-UP: THE KITCHEN

Concrete seems to be having a moment right now, but it's a smart choice of material for a vacation home in a humid climate. A prefabricated modern kitchen is the standard for renovators of older homes in Mérida, Adam notes, but he preferred "a concrete kitchen—with concrete shelves, with rebar, with solid material that won't fall apart for 150 years."

A large concrete island and flanking banks of concrete shelving and counters form the highly practical workspace in this kitchen. The polished concrete finish combines looks and function. It has a beautiful sheen, Emma says, and "it's wash and wear."

Adam used mostly open shelving in the kitchen, for ease of access and to ensure airflow, but he mixed in some dark wood doors to provide practical closed storage and visual contrast.

The flow of the kitchen leads seamlessly into the backyard, Emma says. "You can cook, take a drink outside and talk to the person who's still in the kitchen." A hammock hangs enticingly just outside.

An old cedar table, which seats 10, is one of their best Mexican finds, from the refinishing shop of an antiques dealer. A single slab that required five men to wrestle it into the room, the table helps to fulfill the promise of the modern kitchen as an all-encompassing space for cooking and cocktails and entertaining.

Adam brought the white Eames chairs to Mexico from the U.S. on his back—literally. They disassembled the chairs and transported the white shells strung to his backpack. "It's hard to find mid-century furniture in Mexico," he explains.

SMART DETAIL The original handmade black and white tile didn't survive the renovation, but Mérida's 200-year-old tile factory retains its tile forms, so Adam was able to have the damaged floor's bold geometric pattern replicated exactly for the newly modernized kitchen. —C.K.

MATERIALS PALETTE

Concrete (island, counters, shelving, walls)

Black and white tile (flooring)

Cedar (dining table)

White plastic (dining chairs)



Above and below: The 10-metre plunge pool—also an architectural element and a light source—leads to the *casita* at the back of the property. The unusual glass front continues the theme of transparency and lessens the visual impact of the pool; at night, with the lights on, the water glows a beautiful blue. Only the base is blue, though; Adam chose black tile for the sides to attract the winter sun to heat the water. It was one of the few things they disagreed on, Emma says. "I didn't want a black-sided pool. I thought it would look like a swamp." But she's pleased with the end result.



'Mérida is one of the most beautiful cities I've ever seen. It has so much potential — so many houses that can be renovated, so many houses in great condition, art deco houses, mid-century houses.... I could spend a long time doing projects here.'



Opposite, top: The staircase to the new second storey was placed in the existing internal courtyard. The creeper vines will eventually cover the railing and form the impression that the concrete steps are floating upward from a wall of green.

Opposite, bottom: In another nod to hotel design, the master suite is on the second floor, at a remove from the guest rooms in the house, to create a sense of separation that both owners and house guests can appreciate. A small deck, accessible from the shower area, was designed to offer a morning outlook on the weather and the garden.

Below: Rain shower heads were a necessity in the double shower, as was “American plumbing”: “Mexican plumbing tends to have very narrow-gauge pipes,” Adam explains, “but we wanted good water pressure and hot showers.” “Essential,” Emma agrees. A random pattern of black, white and grey mosaic tile, punctuated by a porthole window, makes a focal point at one end of the shower, where a bench is a practical addition.



Above: Adam’s original plan was to separate the bathroom from the master bedroom with double doors, but he reconsidered and instead left the spaces open to each other—a contemporary idea that is gaining favour among designers of master suites. The polished concrete double vanity is both comfortably spacious and sparsely ornamented, partly inspired, Emma says, by the bathroom design in luxury hotels. Deep round vessel sinks and wall-mount chrome faucets leave the counter uncluttered, while a single open shelf underneath provides easily accessible storage. The dado of glass mosaic tile on the recess below the mirror is a visual link to the shower area.



there is little office clutter in evidence, and talk of siestas and bike rides and hammocks (there are hooks for these at intervals around the house) leads inevitably to the question: Does any work actually get done here? “Well, my office is a bit of an illusion,” Adam says. “I’ve never worked there.” Emma interjects quickly: “I work in *my* office.” In any case, last year, they spent about five months in total in Mérida (“We don’t bother much with New York winters now,” says Adam), and that time has indeed proved productive. Adam has finished his screenplay and Emma plans to complete her novel this year.

“Somehow the distractions of our life back in New York melt away,” muses Emma. “Being here gives you the space both literally and metaphorically to get a lot done. It’s an amazing place to live and work.” ●