# Luxury, Texas Style

## IN HOUSTON, A 1930S HOUSE REVELS IN EASY ELEGANCE

For a 1930s Georgian-style residence designed by Houston architect John F. Staub, Mario Buatta created a "cheerful, cozy" interior. THESE PAGES: Lemon-yellow walls and draperies in the living room "bring in sunshine day and night," says the designer. The painting over the mantel is by Gustave Loiseau. Kentshire side table below paintings. Gilt low table from H. M. Luther. Gilt wall brackets, round side table and gilt-wood chair, Hyde Park Antiques. Newel low table. Clarence House ottoman velvet and green silk on armchair. Colefax & Fowler floral chintz.

Interior Design by Mario Buatta/Text by Nancy Collins
Photography by Gordon Beall

You might call it a preview of coming attractions. When a Houston investment counselor and his wife visited friends in their gracious, John F. Staub–designed Georgian home, they found themselves as enamored with the décor as with the whitewashed red brick itself.

"We so loved what we saw," says the husband, recalling the signature touches —creamy yellow walls, gracefully skirted tables, chintz—of the man who'd put it together, designer Mario Buatta, "that when we bought the house, we hired him immediately. Working with Mario was a nice mix of innovation and delegation. That is, he took care of the details but kept us involved on things where we had an opinion. And it's been great fun."

Indeed. But then with Buatta, as famous for his esprit de corps as for his timeless taste, it's always a whistle-while-you-work affair—even with a man seeking perfection. "I called him Mr. Exacto," Buatta says with a laugh, "because he wanted everything exactly right. Happily, he had a great sense of humor, so we had a wonderful rapport."

The house, set on 1.3 acres and boasting four floors and 11-foot ceilings, is, says the husband, classic Staub. "Staub was known for having great proportions, so in terms of size, this house is perfectly scaled. The rooms, though nicely sized, aren't too far from anything else, which makes it very livable—elegant without being overgrand. Mostly we spend time on the first two floors, the third floor being my older daughter's bedroom and the fourth having a bedroom, office and playroom for my younger children."

Their favorite spot, however, is the "warm and comfortable" wood-paneled library. They wanted a "traditional library but not dark," and Buatta solved the problem his usual way—with bright, luscious, rich fabrics like the cream-based Chinese chintz on the upholstered chairs, the bright red and gold of pooling, floor-length draperies. As a result, "guests are always drawn to this room." When it came

LEFT: To accommodate smaller gatherings, Buatta designed several distinct seating areas. Maximilien Luce painted the landscape. ABOVE: In the dining room, the trellis carpet, from Stark, and the green chair fabric, from Travers, take their cues from the extensive gardens. *Lady with a Parasol* is by Frederick Carl Frieseke. Crystal chandelier from Nesle. Newel demi-lune table. Brunschwig & Fils drapery taffeta.

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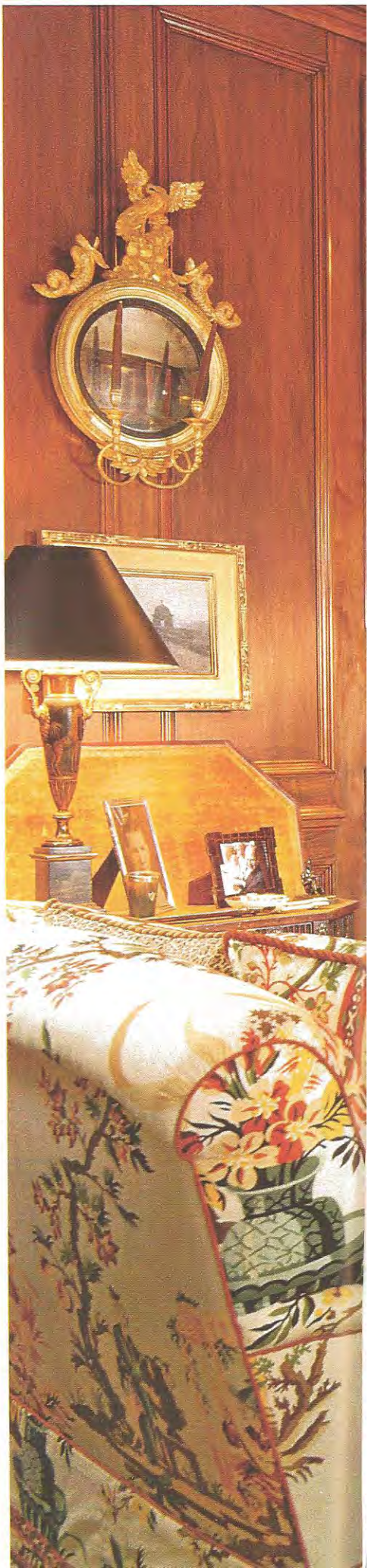
to the master bedroom, meanwhile, the couple took a leap of canopied faith. "Mario tried to persuade the previous owners to put in a canopy bed, and they didn't," says the husband. "We easily bought into it. It's our first, and we love its coziness."

The highlight of the property, however, is clearly the 3,000-square-foot poolhouse, located some 200 feet from the main building. "In France or England they'd call it an orangery," says Buatta, "because it's really like another house. They started out building a porch, and suddenly it turned into a pavilion."

"We had a garden with a pool that we weren't using as much as we wanted because there was nothing near it," continues the husband, "except a garage and driveway with parked cars, which wasn't that appealing. So our architects, Curtis & Windham, said, 'Why not move the parking out front and make an entire living space in back?' And they did a brilliant job."

As did Buatta. "Having seen what I did in the main house, my clients gave me more freedom here, realizing that whatever I did they were, hopefully, going to like"—starting with the chic, graphic black-and-white-marble floors, inspired by the lobby at Claridge's, the couple's hotel of choice in London. As for the floor's pattern, based on one in Robert Adam's Syon House outside London, "we didn't copy it, just took the idea of mixing black-and-white checkerboard with Greek key, —though in the Adam version the Greek key crisscrossed the checkerboard," says the husband. "Since our room is smaller, we decided it would be more elegant to put Greek keys only around the border."



ABOVE: A glass-enclosed sitting area looks out to the formal gardens. Bielecky Brothers wicker chair, with Travers cushion print. Sofas covered in fabric from Clarence House, with Colefax & Fowler fringe. Slipper chair, ottoman and table skirt fabrics from Brunschwig & Fils. RIGHT: Original paneling envelops the library. Cowtan & Tout velvet on wing chair. Mirrors and Regency chair from Hyde Park. Kentshire Galleries tole lamps.

"Men protest canopy beds," says Buatta, who used one in the master bedroom, "but then they get in one, and they love it." Lee Jofa chintz on bed, with blue lining fabric from Cowtan & Tout. Open-arm chair from Hyde Park. Sconces from John Boone. Clarence House settee fabric. Travers drapery plaid and blue floral chair print. Stark carpet.

In terms of the interior, "the poolhouse couldn't be too informal or formal," says Buatta, "because it's a room for entertaining. The dining room seats 12; but the big parties are always held here, using the table in the center, then adding two others. Beyond that, there are four separate seating areas."

Not to mention the chic adjoining bar, which, though separate, opens onto the main room and is "modeled on a mix of English bars with Art Déco influences," according to the husband. "The bar itself is designed after a Ruhlmann from the '20s," while the wall panels–cum-sconces feature Lalique inserts that the couple came upon in the Houston store. "I'm not a collector, but I always liked Art Déco," says the husband, who has an enviable collection of Impressionists. "I didn't realize Lalique still made backlit panels until I found these and wanted to use them," as did Buatta when the idea was suggested.

All in all, this is one swank poolhouse, with, notes Buatta, "the greatest setting. The pool is in front of the pavilion, and then there are those beautiful trees"—the brainchild of architect Russell Windham. Remarkably authentic-looking, the towering interior palm trees are actually "man-made from palm material," admits the husband, "a real tree trunk and leaves artificially put together to custom-fit the 19½-foot ceilings."

In the end, the yearlong project turned out to be a labor of love—and laughter. "You have to like the people you're working with," muses Buatta, "because for a while you end up living with them. You also have to understand what they like—or don't. And we never had an argument about anything. When I'm working, I like having fun, but they should enjoy it, too. And we had a great time." □

**ABOVE: The main room of the new pool pavilion, designed by Russell Windham, has faux palm trees, gilt tables and checkerboard floors inspired by the lobby at Claridge's hotel in London. Vaughan table lamps. Donghia white club chair fabric. Brunschwig & Fils dining chair fabric. RIGHT: A terrace with a fountain looks from the main house to the pool pavilion.**