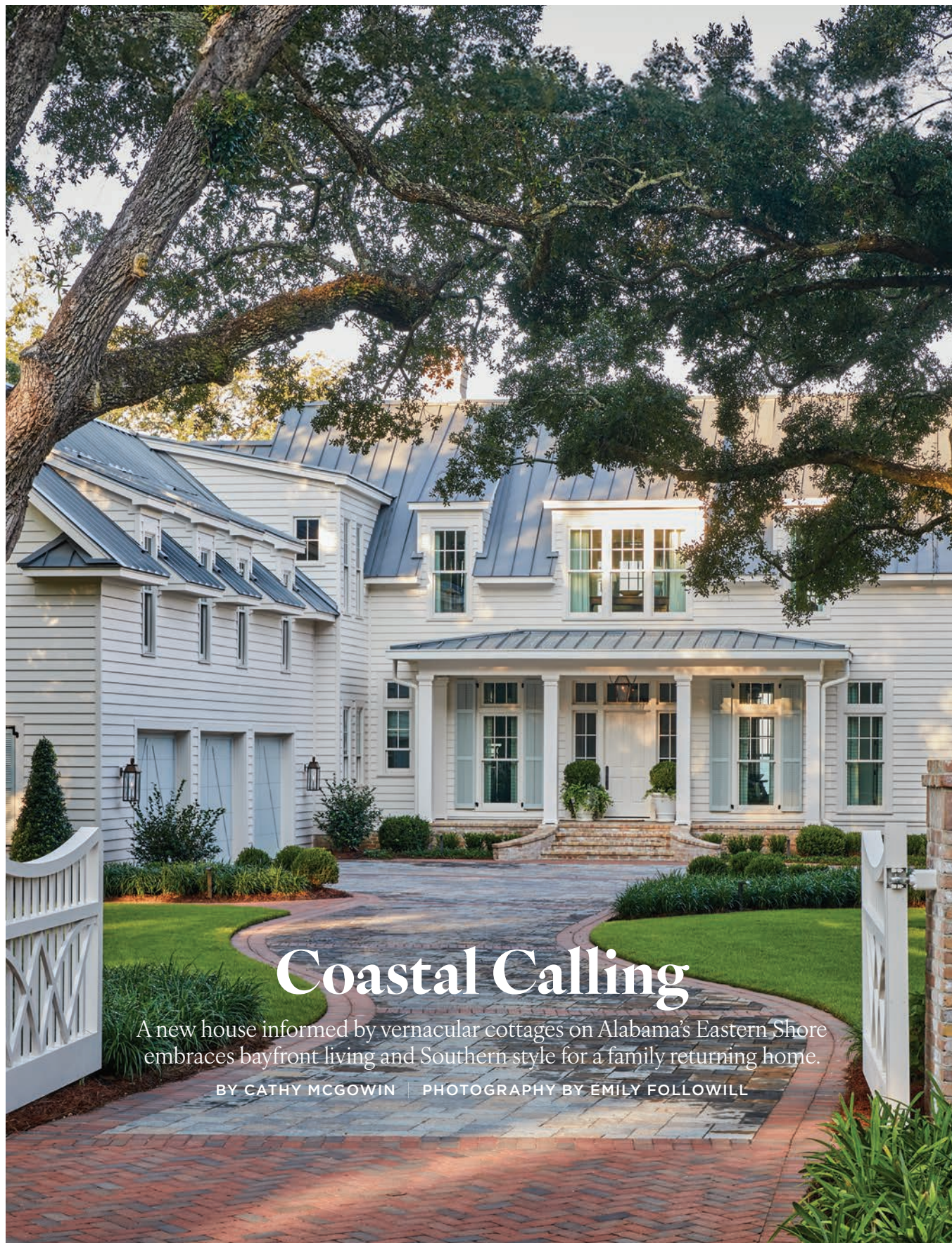




Coastal Calling

A new house informed by vernacular cottages on Alabama's Eastern Shore embraces bayfront living and Southern style for a family returning home.

BY CATHY MCGOWIN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY EMILY FOLLOWILL



SENSE OF PLACE

PREVIOUS PAGE: “When it comes to designing a bay house, the water-facing side is the front and the street side is the back,” says architect Pete J. Vallas. “Of course, I like to make both sides equally pretty.” **THESE PAGES, ABOVE:** The homeowners asked for an all-white kitchen, but to keep it from being staid, designer Ashley Gilbreath added brass accents and filtered in muted blues and sandy hues through the dining room beyond. • **RIGHT:** Playing off the jade finish of the 20th-century Louis Philippe bookcase, Ashley brought in bottle green accents in pillows and lampshades. She added depth to the neutral upholstery with a suzani from B. Viz Design. “The greens and coral/peachy tones play so well together.”

In Fairhope, Alabama, genteel architecture with Southern touches is just as revered as the sprawling, centuries-old live oaks populating the sandy landscape. Originally developed as a haven for Mobile residents to escape the city and the heat, Fairhope and the adjoining enclave of Point Clear were established in the early 1800s. Accessible only by ferry at the time, cottages stretched along the brackish shores of Mobile Bay, connected by sidewalks and boardwalks. The traditional bayfront homes featured deep porches for welcoming guests and capturing the breezes. It was this setting that lured Scarlet and David Roberts, coastal Alabama and Florida natives, to return home and build their own house steeped in historic references.

In Fairhope’s earliest years, there were no roads—only a ferry to transport homeowners and their essentials for casual summer living. Today, the Eastern Shore is much easier to access, but the commitment to preserving the slower pace and colloquial architecture remains unchanged—and that was the goal when the Roberts hired architect Pete J. Vallas and interior designer Ashley Gilbreath to bring their dream house to fruition.

A classicist by training and a Mobile resident himself, Pete looked to



“Starting fresh required strategic down. But you



layering using fabrics, woven textures, and collections to take the formality
have to know when to stop so it doesn't look like you tried too hard.” —ASHLEY GILBREATH

SENSE OF PLACE



ABOVE: "The music room houses my mother-in-law's piano. When she moved, there wasn't a place for it, so this was a nice way to honor her," Scarlet Roberts says. "It's such a peaceful retreat whether anyone is playing or not." **BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT:** In the upstairs sitting room, hand-pressed dried botanicals bring regional flora inside. Ashley chose furnishings and accents in sandy, sun-kissed finishes. An antique trunk provides storage for linens and blankets. To accommodate more guests, the sofa converts to a pullout bed. • An alcove with twin-sized mattress offers draperies for privacy and sleeping in.



SENSE OF PLACE



the area's existing houses, cueing the coastal architecture while positioning the home to embrace the view. "In the past, many design decisions in the area were done out of necessity," Pete says. "Homes were sited for light and ventilation, and there weren't as many options in material choices. We still take those needs into consideration, but we mostly do it because it's beautiful. Rhythm, repetition, balance, and proportion are timeless."

Inside, Ashley played to those same sensibilities. "We worked hard to create a home that looks as if it has always been there," says the designer. "It may appear effortless now, but it took two years and a lot of planning to get it just right."

Starting with a clean slate meant giving careful attention to blending antiques with new pieces, introducing an interesting mix of fabrics and textures, and cultivating new collections. "Because the house is on the bay instead of the beach, we wanted to play up that sense of place," Ashley says. "Unlike a typical beach house, it's not all seashells and sunshine." Plus, she says, it's inherently Southern. "The Roberts are so warm and hospitable. They have an 'our door is always open' mentality. Scarlet stays ready for pop-in guests with a fresh flower or two and something wonderful to eat. We wanted the interiors to reflect that."

The palette was key in creating the storied Southern style. "While Scarlet is a traditionalist at heart, we pushed her a bit with pattern and color," Ashley says. Blues, greens, and browns

reiterate the hues in the plentiful views—abundant on both the bay side and the street side. "When you aren't looking at the water, you are taking in the grand old oaks," says Ashley. "Those trees are something you just can't replicate."

To capture both vistas, the floor plan is open, but not so much that spaces aren't easily defined. For instance, the foyer offers a pause before rounding the corner to the rooms beyond. "You don't see all the way through to the water immediately," Ashley says. "It creates a feeling of expectation. This is the place where we start telling the story of the house."

That story is one of sentimentality, love of family, and homecoming. Architectural details such as wainscoting, beams, French doors, and tall windows topped with transoms create an envelope for the elegantly casual interiors filled with gathering spots for friends and family, including Scarlet and David's three adult children. From the living room to the kitchen to the back porch, each space flows harmoniously yet leaves its own memorable, welcoming impression.

That warm approach is the result of hours of planning and what Scarlet says is pure intuition on Ashley and Pete's part. "They are both great at asking questions, listening, and putting it all together," Scarlet says. "Our house is traditional yet fresh. It looks like it has always been here, and that's just what we wanted."

OPPOSITE: The four-poster barley twist bed in the primary bedroom takes in a bird's-eye view of the pool, bay, and wharf beyond. An armchair upholstered in a botanical chintz and another in a ticking stripe join a blue Chesterfield sofa for soft, feminine appeal. **RIGHT:** A grand live oak provides shade for a seating area poolside—a spot enjoyed year-round thanks to the temperate climate. “The live oaks have been here forever. People want to protect them as much as possible,” Scarlet says.



BRINGING IN THE BAY

Every coastal habitat has its own set of nuances, and Mobile Bay is no exception. Here's how Ashley Gilbreath channeled the casual yet refined attitude of this Southern shore.

LOOK TO THE LANDSCAPE

There's no better way to create a home's color scheme than by looking out the window. For these homeowners, Ashley used a range of blues, grays, and greens plucked from the ever-changing sky, deep blue water, and live oak trees shading the property.

REFLECT THE SCENE

Artwork includes serene landscapes, etchings of fish, vintage dried botanicals, and a map of Mobile Bay. Antique oyster plates hang on a wall in the foyer. Even the TV screen saver is set to reflect a coastal vista.

LEAN INTO TEXTURE AND PATINA

The wind, sun, and salty air create a natural, softly worn finish in coastal climes. Instead of fighting the elements, Ashley embraced them by introducing a variety of antiques and bleached woods. For furnishings, she chose rattan, woven, and bamboo pieces, as well as woven wool and Oushak rugs in muted colors.

SPEAK WITH AN ACCENT

As Southern as it is coastal, the home exhibits traditional interior design elements such as slipcovered linen furniture, along with tried-and-true patterns in stripes, checks, and florals. Pottery and baskets are both decorative and useful for entertaining needs. Interior finishes include paneled walls, antique brick, transom windows, and niches—all hallmarks of vintage cottages in Fairhope.