

Ocean Home | Q&A With Four Luxury Interior Designers

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Four esteemed interior designers—one from each geographic corner of the country—share their tips, tricks, and personal tastes for creating a coastal design scheme that eschews staid themes in favor of looks that are ultra-chic and updated.



The Southeast

Location: Palm Beach, FL

Designer: Chad Renfro

Principal, [Chad Renfro Design](#)

Your region's decorating style: Diverse. A popular style is a transitional mix of casual, sophisticated yet comfortable decor with splashes of tropical nature. These tropical touches can appear in texture, color, or style of construction.

Important consideration in a coastal decorating project: Light and the way it affects the colors one chooses. Most colors read differently in light, which reflects off of water, or in locations where the sun is closer to the earth.

A paint color you love: Benjamin Moore Bird's Egg (2051-60). It is a perfect mix of blue, green, and grey, and regardless of its name, always reminds me of the water right at the edge of the surf.

One of my favorite uses for this color [is as a ceiling paint].

An unexpected element you've used: The use of white paint and dark stain on hardwood floors. I love the contrast, the edge it has, and its nod to tradition.

A common myth about coastal decorating you've proven wrong: A common myth is that everything has to be "beachy." To dispel this myth, I work with elements that reflect a contemporary, clean yet warm aesthetic and leave out the cottage or rustic look. I blend in items, such as restored mid-century pieces; dark, rich colors, which may reflect the landscape instead of the water or sea; and heavier, unusual fabrics, like rich cut velvet or printed linen not typically considered for beach areas.

A favorite piece: A birdcage I found in a Miami antique shop that had never been used. I turned it into a bar for an outdoor seating area. I like the idea of taking something old that is cast out and making it a conversation piece.

Fabric choice that was a room changer: This blue-and-white Duralee fabric definitely made the difference in this room. I used it on the drapery and pillows to pull together a room full of contrasts in navy and white.

A style trend evolving in your market: The use of Asian pieces. From statues, table legs, and bamboo-style furniture pieces to the use of colors such as red, coral, and saffron, this style has fully come about in South Florida.

An overused element or no-no in coastal decorating: Monkeys and palm trees.

An accessory that represents your designing style: Madeline Weinrib cotton rugs (available at ABC Carpet & Home; abchome.com) are really one of my favorite accents and represent my style perfectly. They are so comfortable, easy to live on, versatile, and stylish. They are full of color and linear and ethnic design and can ground or accent a design instantly.

An idea that still has a client talking: Changing the design of a traditional three-story house into an upside-down house with a wide-open living and dining space on the second floor and large wraparound porches for tons of outdoor living. The clients loved looking at the ocean and living and entertaining outdoors. This concept maximized those aspects for them.

Black and White Instead of the traditional “beachy” look that’s often overdone, Palm Beach-based designer Chad Renfro often creates a scheme that he says is clean and contemporary yet warm rather than rustic or cottage-like. Renfro also frequently forgoes the predictable sea-inspired palette and reaches instead for materials and accessories that are dark and bold, which he says can reflect the land rather than the sea.



Mabley uses beachy, white-washed poplar wood paneling to accent this living room.

Location: The Hamptons, NY
Designer: Jennifer Mabley & Austin Handler
Principals, [Mabley Handler Interior Design](#)



Your region’s decorating style: A lot of our clients are coming out from Manhattan and spending time here in the summer and on the weekends. Because of the fashion and design they’re exposed to in the city, there’s a level of sophistication they like to see. Even though the predominant house is a classic Shingle-style house, furnishings tend to push the boundary of moving from traditional into more transitional.



A paint color you love: We use a lot of grayish blues and greens and cool beige tones—colors that are evocative of mineral colors, soft ocean colors, and soft sand colors. Some of our favorites are Benjamin Moore’s Beach Glass (1564), Hazy Skies (OC-48), and Seapearl (OC-19).

An unexpected element you’ve used: A lot of times, we do a fun geometric wallpaper in a powder room. It’s a great way to bring an unexpected reaction. Not all geometrics are modern; Kelly Wearstler has a trellis geometric print that’s evocative of an old-fashioned feel, but done in a current way.

A favorite piece: Karen Robertson does these incredible framed sea fans, seashells, and sand dollars that are arranged in interesting patterns. They’re encased in glass, so the color of the wall still comes through. It’s a great transitional piece. You’re taking a familiar element, but presenting it in a different way that makes it a little bit more fresh, interesting, and sophisticated.

Fabric choice that was a room changer: We upholstered the walls of a home theater in a Kravet Barbara Barry geometric fabric. When you think of home theater, everyone pictures a dark room, red velvet, and black leather chairs. We did a grayish-blue carpet, white leather home theater chairs, and this blue-and-grey Barbara Barry fabric. It’s the perfect example of how you can do a room like a home theater and still have it feel cozy, fresh, and beachy.

A style trend evolving in your market: Moving toward more natural and cerused wood. Ten years ago, the Hamptons were known for ebony floors in formal houses. You still have that, but I think people are moving away from ostentatious and trying to create more comfortable, relaxed, accessible houses. In one living room, we did the fireplace surround and faux beams in a bluish whitewash poplar to add a nice beachy element with sophistication to it.

An overused element or no-no in coastal decorating: Over-decorating with seashells. It's nice to have a piece here and there, but I've seen people fill an entire bookshelf with coral. You can definitely use them, but I'd much rather see an interesting-colored coral placed by itself in a color that works in the room rather than just a glass bowl of shells.

An accessory that represents your designing style: [Michelle Hatch](#) makes linen pillows with nailhead patterns. She uses geometric patterns, which work well with the fabrics we use, but also does seashell, seahorse, and crab patterns. It's a seaside element done in a totally fresh way. We often describe our design style as "sophisticated beach" or "beach chic." Her pillows totally go along with our style.



The Pacific Southwest

Location: Honolulu, HI
Designer: Jamie Smith Jackson
Design Director, [Pacific Home Studio](#)

Your region's decorating style: Casual, 'ohana-oriented, even in very high-end homes. 'Ohana is the Hawaiian word for "family." Hawaii is so far away from the mainland that family is important. If you live here full time, you keep your parents and family close. Or, if you visit, you tend to bring your whole family with you. It's not just people jetting down from New York for the weekend.

A paint color you love: My favorite right now is Borrowed Light (No. 235) by Farrow & Ball. We have so many vibrant colors outside our houses like the ocean and mountains and tropical vegetation. This shade is like looking at the sky without a lot of color or pigment in it, but just enough that it tends to reflect off everything around it.

An unexpected element you've used: I'm not a big fan of bamboo flooring in the tropics, but using bamboo structurally is interesting because of its strength. In a house on Kauai, we used bamboo columns in the interior and bamboo lighting in the entry hall. I designed these light fixtures that are 12- to 15-foot-long bamboo strips hanging down with louvers.

A favorite piece: I bring in individual pieces from Bali a lot. In one beach house, we designed the whole kitchen around this large antique apothecary. It was originally in a drug store in Indonesia. We used it in this brightly colored kitchen as cabinetry.

Fabric choice that was a room changer: A client came to me with a painting of an old Woody with a surfboard on top and said, "I want my house to be like this." So we used poured concrete floors in turquoise and a giant sofa, which is by Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams. Every piece was in a different fabric, but they're all from [Perennials' Hana Road](#) collection. In pretty much all my houses now, I use indoor/outdoor fabric for both indoor and outdoors. My client has seven grandchildren and wanted this to be the place they can totally dive into and live in.

A style trend evolving in your market: Slip covers. You may think they're fuddy-duddy and old fashioned, but here we're using more simple, clean lines. People love it because you can even have a white sofa with kids. It's washable and fun.

An overused element or no-no in coastal decorating: If I never saw another picture of a

coconut or palm tree on a piece of fabric, I'd be happy.

An accessory that represents your designing style: We make all of our own pillows. One that I really like is a Raoul fabric with a phalaenopsis orchid on a dark chocolate background. It's a little unexpected. Pillows are fun because you can change them up.

An idea that still has a client talking: Some clients lived in a very high-end home but wanted it to be livable. We had a table made out of termite-destroyed wood. It's been resined and resined like a surfboard, so it looks like honeycomb. It's extraordinarily elegant. I originally saw the process when I was in the Philippines and realized we had so many surfboard people here that we could go for it.

The Pacific Northwest



Location: Seattle, WA
Designer: Robin Chell
Principal, [Robin Chell Design](#)



Your region's decorating style: Warm modernism. Think Paul Bunyan meets George Jetson. It's modernism in the sense that it's very pared down, but there's also the use of warm color and a lot of wood. Our weather is very gray, and wood is a way to make modern not feel cold. There's also a mixing of styles, like Asian and mid-century modern from Scandinavia. Casual, comfortable, and natural done in a simple, clean, and honest way.



Important consideration in a coastal decorating project: Bringing the outside in whenever possible through materials (wood, concrete, stone, metal, glass, branches, beach glass, foliage, color, etc.) to make the indoors and outdoors harmonious.



A paint color you love: Devine Glass. It's a soothing shade of green that is a true chameleon. It changes with the reflection of water and light from green to blue and looks great with pops of accent colors like Pratt & Lambert's Poppy (6-15). The whole paint palette was developed by a Northwest artist, who took away all the gray undertones to work with light-challenged days.



An unexpected element you've used: Pulling together a client's inherited collage of vintage furniture and mixing it with modern pieces to make a cohesive and interesting interior. We had the vintage pieces reupholstered [and] reframed and got new shades for the lamps. Then, through the use of color and textiles, we made the whole palette work together.

A common myth about coastal decorating you've proven wrong: A myth is that coastal decorating should feel historical with washed-out hues. I believe that a warm, modern design with natural materials and some elements of bright color can work very successfully in a coastal region, especially in the Pacific Northwest, where we are light challenged much of the year.

A favorite piece: I love the resin panel encasing dark green foliage that we incorporated into a sliding door to the master bedroom. I was looking for something different for this house set within a forested area.

Fabric choice that was a room changer: This bright lime green textile on a chair. The vintage lamp would look pretty awful on its own—like something from your parents' '60s den. The textile made it work.

A style trend evolving in your market: Going green! Anything that tells a sustainable story, be it finishes, furnishings, or repurposing.

An overused element or no-no in coastal decorating: Anything classic “Nantucket” in nature. It feels overdone, expected, and what I call “forced nostalgia.” For example, a shell motif, blue-and-white with weathered, ticking stripe, etc. Coastal can also be very rugged and mountainous.

An accessory that represents your designing style: Meyer Wells accent tables made from reclaimed wood. The company reclaims trees that would normally go into landfills and then slices and kiln-dries the wood. You can choose your slab from all the different wood species they have in their shop, and then design whatever you want to have made. I’ve done everything from fireplace mantels to dining tables.

An idea that still has a client talking: The use of Milestone, a layered, troweled-on concrete finish on the walls and floors of an open bath/shower area. The clients love how natural it feels and how easy it is to maintain (no grout!). I’m actually having my shower redone with this.

