

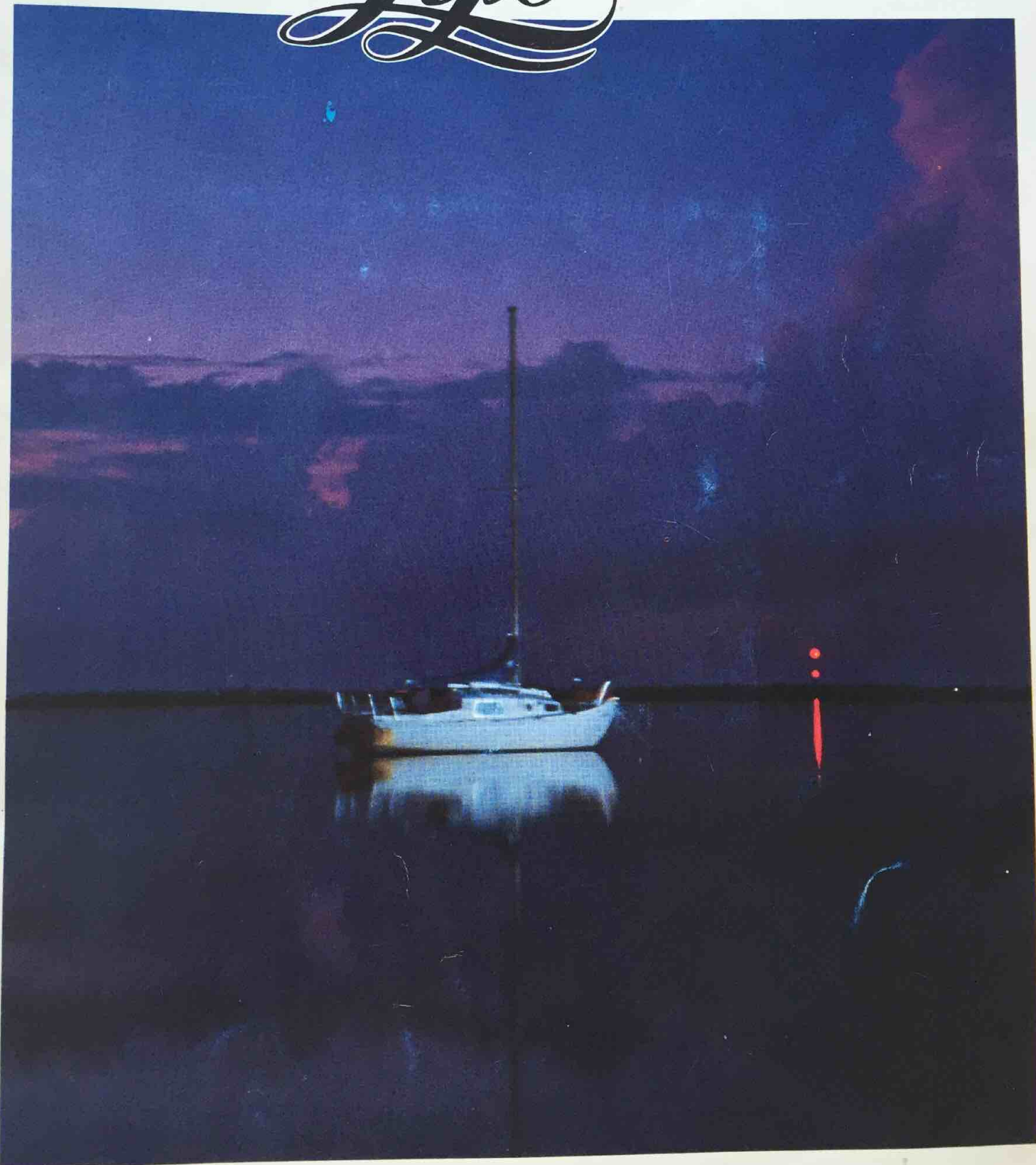
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TOURING POLYNESIA

By Carole Heinlein



PHOTO BY MICHAEL LOWRY

Some locals call it the Pagoda House, or even the Chinese House. Yet the exotic home of Robert Simmons and Stephen Widup is most frequently known as the Polynesian House, or simply . . . Polynesia.

Just two blocks from the Atlantic Ocean, around the corner from Louie's Backyard and Marriott's Casa Marina, stands one of the most unusual homes in Key West.

Built in 1967 by William Johnson, one of the owners of Key West Hand Print Fabrics at the time, the easily-distinguished house on the corner of Alberta and Washington streets brings a South Seas flavor to Key West's

tropical atmosphere.

When Simmons, a California real estate investor, bought the house in 1979, he gave most of the design responsibility to his friend Widup, a real estate salesman with Island Properties. They had just moved to Key West and were ready for peace and quiet, fresh air and sunlight—qualities not always available back in the big cities in California and New York where they had lived for many years.

"This is a house for privacy . . . a retreat from madness," says Widup.

Major changes included replacing a chainlink fence with a wooden one which blends nicely with the existing architecture, installing a swimming

pool, adding a new kitchen to the rear of the house, and opening the downstairs rooms with glass door walls.

The preferred entrance of the home opens to a patio . . . precisely as it should. After all, this is an indoor-outdoor home. Using the side entrance on Washington Street, you are welcomed by a magnificent view of the pool and Jacuzzi, with four large travelers palms lining the wooden fence to your left.

As you turn right towards the house, you have a choice of entrances—kitchen, dining room, sitting room, bedroom. The entire house flows inward and outward. The exotic colors and decor within pull you inward; the

“Under the A-frame roof is a private bedroom. It feels like a tree house up there away from everything . . . No one would ever know you were there. ”

PHOTO BY BRENDA ZAGARINSKY

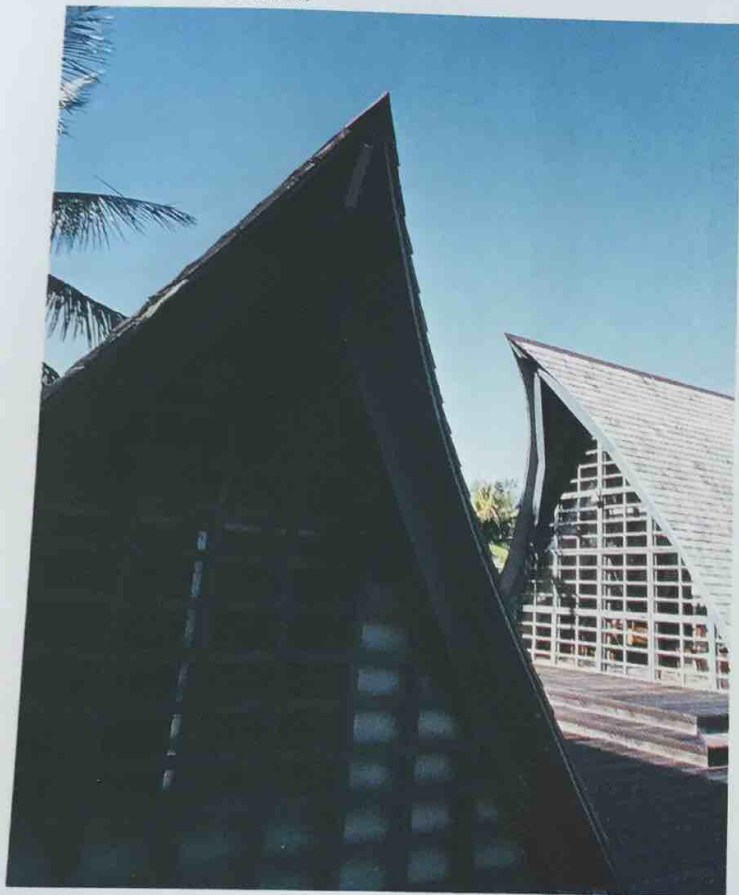


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PHOTO BY MICHAEL LOWRY

sunlit pool area or cool shaded corner patios lure you out.

The interior of the house is a symmetrical, mirror-image design by Key West architect Dan Stirrup. All the rooms blend into one large area, the living room, making the house feel even larger than its 1800 square feet.

Moving from one room to another, you experience a peacefulness, a softness, yet you're teased and entertained by all the curious furnishings.

"Virtually everything you see came from flea markets," says Widup, who spent four years as an antique dealer in New Hope, Pa. "We're both frustrated decorators. We're most interested in creating environments rather than

decorating. Creating an environment is more pleasing to the eye."

Colors play a vital role in the character of the rooms, and they seem to change with the hour. "The darker colors help the house feel cool in the summer," says Widup—who took out the air conditioners in order to have fresh air all the time.

The living room in the center of the house is framed by an archway leading from the pool and mirrored sitting room.

The floors are the original Cuban tile made here in Key West and are partially covered by a huge rag rug found at Fast Buck Freddie's. The theatrical spotlights overhead wash

over an art deco Torchiere lamp, an Oriental hand-painted silk tapestry hanging on one wall, a raku sculpture, and a square brass coffee table topped with glass. A replica of an antique rag doll rests comfortably on a funny little chair found at a flea market.

The entire room is entertaining and relaxing.

If you go to your right, you walk into the downstairs bedroom, painted the same forest green as the dining room. The busy outside world has found its way here in the form of a television set and the essential, a telephone answering machine.

Off the bedroom is a private little patio. The deep-beige-colored bricks

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were selected because they do not retain heat. They blend well with the greenery of the tropical plants, some pruned into an Oriental style, reinforcing the overall theme of the home. Widup, who says he has a "black thumb," deliberately selected plants relatively maintenance-free when doing the landscaping.

The bedroom also looks out on the pool area, an invitation to take a swim first thing in the morning. On the far side of the pool is the bust of a

child who is currently wearing a pair of Widup's glasses. Part of the trunk of a coconut tree was carved into a face sculpture, a South Seas design, Polynesian style.

Two circular beds of tropical plants enhance the patio. The only landscaping not done by Widup, they are the result of the work of local artisans Robert Feck and Michael Beaty, of Dezine, Inc.

Flanking the entrance to the sitting room are two replicas of Japanese

water-carrying jars, also found at Fast Buck Freddie's.

Again you're drawn inside, this time the dining room. A rattan dining room table with a glass top is centered over an Oriental rug. An Italian white porcelain monkey table stands in one corner looking naughty.

Lest we forget, which is easy to do, there's another bedroom upstairs. But you have to go outside and up the wooden stairway to get to it. Under the A-frame roof is a private bedroom. It feels like a tree house up there away from everything, surrounded by trees and overlooking the pool. The abundant deck space makes you want to lie in the sun, or read a book. No one would ever know you were there. The beams of the room are made from the timbers of a old ship.

The newest part of the house is the kitchen. Going out to the kitchen is like going out to a party: you have to go out to get to it, and it's so different from the rest of the house. Its European design by Tom Pope seems tuxedo-like. Very formal.

Simmons and Widup entertain frequently. And, as during most parties, the kitchen becomes the focal point of activity. This kitchen was designed specifically for that purpose.

Parties are usually small groups of six, but Polynesia once entertained a group of 500. The house is versatile. Gala celebrations seem just as natural as intimate dinner parties.

The house is for sale, according to Widup. "It's time for us to do something smaller."

As I left through the preferred entrance on the side of the house, I couldn't remember whether or not I had seen the "main" entrance. And then I realized it didn't seem to matter. The Polynesia had done everything it was supposed to do. It had welcomed me, pleased me, entertained me, relaxed me, nourished me, and left me even more curious. And then the doors shut behind me. ●

Carole Heinlein is a local freelance writer.