



Island ITOPIA

A native of Jamaica lets her centuries-old house express its history — hers and the long prior one. Time, it seems, adds character.

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People often talk about building their dream house. But Sally Henzell found hers after having had a dream about it. Upon awakening, she found that her home already existed.

As she recalls the experience, she and a friend were riding their horses through a lush property near the northern coast of her native Jamaica when she spotted a dwelling amid the growth that became the home she would later share with her husband, beginning in 1973.

“From my horse, I turned to my friend and said, ‘I had a dream about this place. This is my house.’” What was there were actually two centuries-old structures, far from pristine, surrounded by a waterless moat. But when she expressed interest in purchasing the property, she was told that it was destined to become the clubhouse for a new golf course soon to be constructed on the land. “So I forgot about it — for eight years,” Henzell says, “thinking it was a lost cause. But the Jamaican economy crashed and the

Opening page: Sally Henzell, who has lived in her Jamaican home since she and her late husband, Percy, bought it in 1973, prefers to let some walls go au natural. The original paint and plaster dates to around 1650. The Jamaican mahogany furnishings — settee, rocking chair, pedestal tables — are mostly antiques. The Adam sideboard (far left) comes from England. Left: A smaller unattached structure, referred to as the Annex, is reached via a courtyard.

owner moved away and nothing happened to the property. My husband, Perry, and I tracked him down and he sold it to us for what I’m embarrassed to say now is about the cost of a dinner. The best thing that had never happened to the house is that it had never been renovated.”

What she and her husband had purchased were two three-hundred-and-fifty-year-old structures composed of native stone and block, the walls of which were two feet thick — which provide a year-round natural air conditioning. Even if she and her husband had wanted to install real air conditioning, it would have been impossible, since the couple occupied the house without power for many years. “From 1973 to 1990, we didn’t think it was necessary to live with electricity,” she says. While she and her husband were away on holiday, their son had wired the house and given his parents the gift of electricity.

Although her husband died in 2006, Henzell continues to own and run Jake’s, the hotel she established on the island’s southwest shore and that is regarded as a kind of bohemian headquarters of the Caribbean. There, she and her family also occupied a more up-to-date dwelling, which she maintains. But Henzell still makes the two and a half hour drive between the properties every couple of weeks.

She and her husband, who was famous for having directed the 1972 cult film, *The Harder They Come*, have certainly added their own history to the dwelling, though it came with quite a pedigree. One of the signers of the



This page: Jamaican lace drapes a window. The daybed, designed by Sally Henzell, is upholstered with linen and adorned with Sea Island cotton cushions. Right: A guest bedroom in the Annex is painted with Sherwin Williams' Mint Condition. The wall scene, which appears to be stained glass, is painted cement.



Clockwise from left: The shower curtain in the Annex bath was painted by Cuban artist Roberto Fabelo. A bedroom features a mural by singer Joni Mitchell; the iron bed is antique. A director's chair in the office of Henzell's late husband, Percy, references his work as a film director.



decree ordering the execution of King Charles fled to the island around 1650, built this house, and grew allspice, also known as Jamaican pepper. He exported the spice while also raising cattle and horses. The land on which the two small houses sit leads down to the sea, where the owner stored his spice inventory in a warehouse, where boats could dock and sail. Cromwell had bequeathed the man, Daniel Blairgrove, some eight square miles of land. By the time Henzell and her husband purchased the property, it had been whittled down over the centuries to about three acres. "When we moved in, the original doors, windows, and walls were there and they remain original."

When Henzell walks into the main drawing room of the bigger of the two dwellings and looks at the peeling walls, she likens the experience to "living in the middle of an ongoing abstract painting." Rather than scrape and sand and replaster the walls, she prefers the extraordinary patina and layering that has resulted — in essence, a textural record of well more than three centuries of history. "We were so poor when we first moved in," she recalls, "that I would scrape the walls with a machete thinking I might repaint them some day. But then I realized that we were never going to do that. Every now and then, I give the wall another scrape, just to get rid of the peeling, but that's all I do."

So happy were Henzell and her husband there that they christened the house Itopia, their playful first-person take on the word that references an ideal state. "I absolutely feel like this is my utopia, our utopia. It's my castle and the moment I drive down from Jake's and come back inside, I realize that."

The bulletwood floor upstairs is original, too, though

Henzell polishes it and those that she has replaced with the same grade of wood. Bulletwood is especially practical in Jamaica since it is termite-proof. Most of the mahogany wood furnishings — pedestal tables, settees, rocking chairs — are Jamaican antiques, though an eighteenth-century Regency-style Adam sideboard in the drawing room originally comes from England, via Antigua, a family heirloom of her husband's.

While Henzell admires the ever-changing patina of flaking paint and plaster in the drawing room of the house, she is big on fresh color in other rooms. In one of the bedrooms, which she has painted a vibrant green, there is a wall mural painted by Henzell's friend, the singer Joni Mitchell.

"It took her about a week to complete," says Henzell, "and it remains in perfect condition." While painting the scene that incorporates, among other motifs, an Aztec warrior, a hummingbird, and a Chinese symbol, Mitchell wanted to use more yellow, but ran out of the color. "While on her way downtown to buy more yellow, she passed some workers who were painting yellow lines on the road. She stopped and asked them for some of it. She had a jar with her and they just poured some into for her. She came back and finished the mural."

While the larger of the two structures, configured as three rooms on each of two floors, is where Henzell spends most of her time, she uses the annex as a guest house — as well as a place where she retreats in the evenings to read. It is also where her late husband had his office; she has placed there a director's chair similar to the one he used when making his movie.

As an artist and writer herself, Henzell respects color and material, form and texture. "Once I build my houses and furnish the rooms in them, I pretty much leave them. I get them right and then let whatever happens happen." ■

"Big designers from New York look at my distressed walls and try to achieve the same look. It takes time. About three hundred and fifty years."

— Sally Henzell

