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## Helen Mirren & Taylor Hackford in New Orleans



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# A Thailand Treasure

IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE HIMALAYAS,  
AN OASIS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STYLE BLOSSOMS







"We wanted the clients to live in a garden as opposed to a house," Bill Bensley says of the residence he designed for a couple in Thailand's Chiang Mai Province. A series of pavilions set amid a pond and lush vegetation, the compound reflects the architectural vernacular of the region. To move from the living pavilion, left, to the kitchen and dining pavilion, center, "you go into the garden and walk through the rain," he says. At right is a dining gazebo.



Architectural, Interior and Landscape  
Design by Bensley Design Studios  
Text by Penelope Rowlands  
Photography by Robert McLeod



**TOP AND ABOVE:** The front gate. The skin of the door was fashioned out of small copper sheets; a Buddha's hands serve as handles and are positioned symbolically "so you enter the house in peace," explains Bensley. **RIGHT:** The living pavilion is anchored by a teak low table made on-site from Bensley's design. The space is accented by Indian, Thai, Burmese and African artifacts. Sliding glass doors offer easy access to a wraparound veranda.

I'm just a low-key guy from working-class Boston, living in a tropical paradise," the client says, with understandable cheer. It's a lucky scenario, one he attributes to—of all things!—a herd of elephants. When he first visited Thailand, he was drawn to the northern province of Chiang Mai, in the Himalayan foothills, where elephant camps are a prime tourist attraction.

It was the beginning of a great romance—not with pachyderms particularly but with a culture, a climate, a people. Smitten, he soon returned, eventually entering into business locally and, in his words, marrying "a lovely Thai lady."

He also fell for the vernacular architecture. "I wanted a country house, Thai style," he says; after buying 10 acres in Chiang Mai, he set out to build one. Finding the right person to create it was as easy as a visit to what was then the province's sole five-star hotel, the Four Seasons Resort Chiang Mai, designed by Bill Bensley, a Bangkok-based American landscape architect whose firm, Bensley Design Studios, specializes in architectural,









landscape and interior design.

Bensley came through with an inventive, multipart residence consisting of seven main structures—including living, dining, master bedroom, studio and guest spaces—as well as three gazebos (or *salas*, as they are called in Thailand). “It’s part of almost every Southeast Asian tradition to do a series of pavilions of different function,” he says. “All the components of the house are separated yet joined by gardens and by nature.” Since this is Shangri-La country, those surroundings are sublime, with rich tropical horticulture and the Mae

Rim mountains in the distance.

The residence’s steep-pitched roofs are traditionally Thai, and the choice of golden teak—“the only wood that’s naturally insect-repellent,” Bensley explains—is also in keeping with historical local custom. (Because of the teak’s endangered status, they used recycled wood.)

When Bensley introduced the idea of pavilions without covered walkways between them, the couple asked the obvious question: “What happens when it rains?” His reply was simple: “You get wet!”—a fact that, in monsoon season, is in-



**ABOVE:** In the dining and kitchen pavilion, a Burmese teak table, designed by Bensley, complements the custom glazed-acrylic-and-bronze light fixture by designer John Underwood. Jim Thompson chair silk. **RIGHT:** “Creating environments is just a natural extension of landscape architecture,” says Bensley, who trained in the field before adding architectural and interior design to his expertise. A pathway constructed from old railway ties leads to a sitting pavilion nestled in the verdant foliage.









escapably true. But “getting out of the house and into the elements is one of the more magical aspects of the property,” the husband says. “It really makes you live in the garden.”

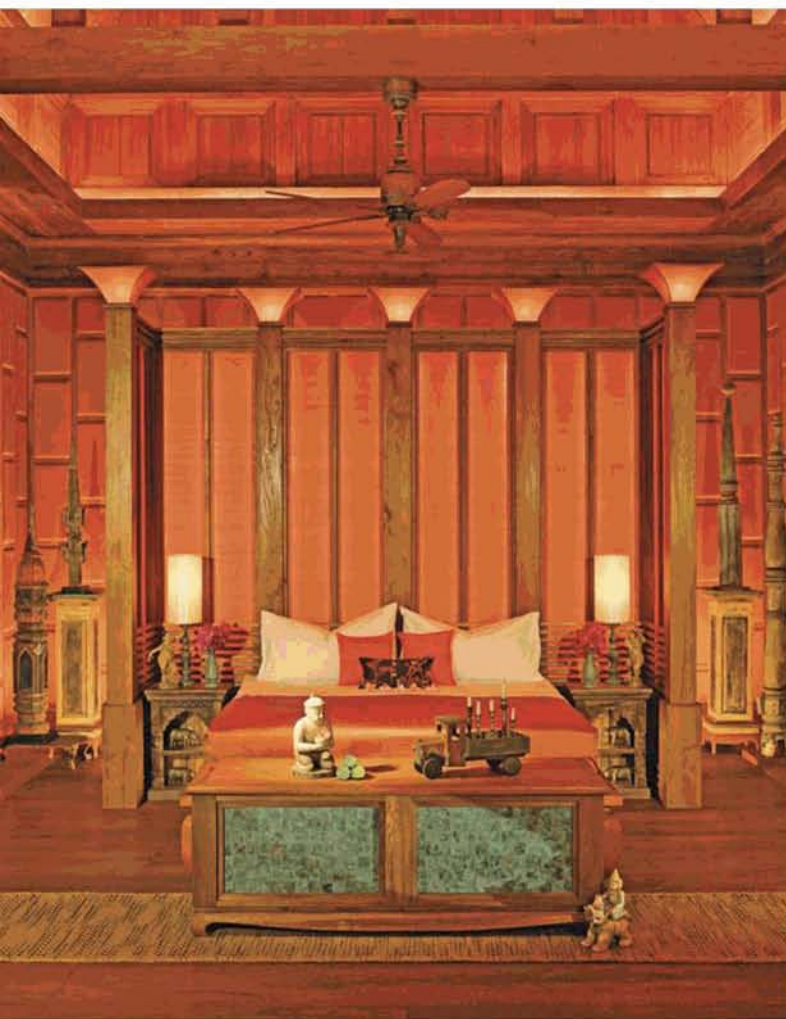
The residence is nearly surrounded by water. “I told Bill that I wanted water, water, everywhere,” he jokes. Bensley sited a swimming pool, clad in green sandstone, at the heart of the compound (where, in a more traditional Thai residence, a courtyard would be found), as well as a small pond at its perimeter. At night, “the entire structure is mirrored in the pond,” the husband says.

For the interior design, Bensley employed a palette of

metallic shades, such as rust and oxidized brass that, in some areas, tends to verdigris. The effect is exceptionally warm, made even more so by artful lighting and the abundance of teak. It’s kinetic, too. The light that floods through the expansive windows seems to reflect every shift in the surrounding sky and water.

With its generously scaled furniture (most of it custom-made, on-site, from Bensley’s designs) and plentiful artifacts, including carved Thai and Burmese figures and dolls, the living room encapsulates both the ease and the intrigue of the interior design. Pieces such as

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ABOVE: The master bedroom pavilion. On the padded walls and headboard Bensley used a silk from Jim Thompson whose color echoes that of a Buddhist monk’s robe, “another symbol of peace,” the designer notes. RIGHT: “You’re either completely in the open or completely within draperies, as in a cocoon,” Bensley says of the guest pavilion, which is exposed on three sides to the gardens. A partition wall separates the room from the bath. On an Indian chest are elephant figures from the clients’ collection.





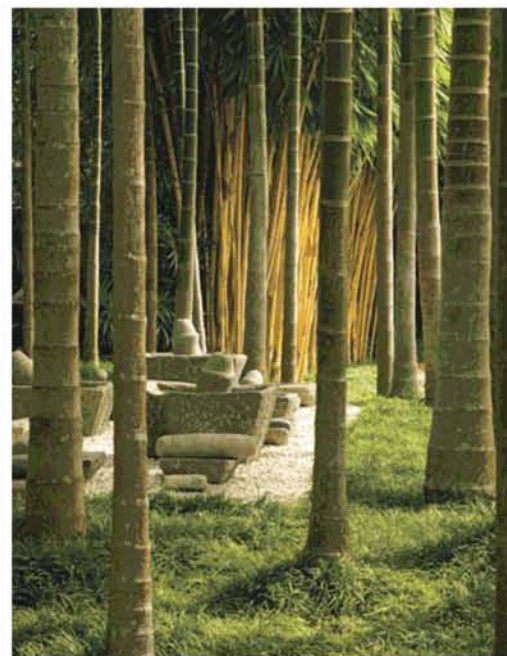






ABOVE: The dining gazebo, center, flanked by the master bedroom pavilion, left, and the dining and kitchen pavilion. Bensley sited the pool “to engage with all of the buildings,” he says, calling it “the unifying link.” RIGHT: The gardens, which he designed with Jirachai Rengthong, include a “room” with stone mortars and pestles among betel nut palms and yellow bamboo.

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northern Thailand is  
the abundance of craftspeople:  
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## JEWEL OF THE NILE

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a brass spiral staircase down the middle, with a series of flickering lanterns floating above.

In the Carter Lounge, the boat's bar, Fahmy added beams to the structural columns to make them look more residential. She tinted a high-density fiberboard floor, essential for its lightness, to look like wood, and laid down antique Persian kilims.

The sobriety of the bar is contrasted with the more vividly colored Sahara Lounge, whose inspiration, Fahmy says, was the hunting tents of Egyptian royalty. "I tried to revive that sense of temporary refuge

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**"We have a rich artisanal tradition in Egypt that is undergoing a reawakening, and I wanted that to be reflected in my design work."**

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after a long day in the desert," she says. The cushions on the sofas and ottomans are covered in textiles inspired by traditional Al-Arish designs. Silver-plated trays top tree trunks, and lanterns and chandeliers are suspended from freestanding poles.

Fahmy was also mindful of the point of view of the traveler. In the dining room, for example, she used a collection of Persian red brass trays to size up, or down, mealtime buffets, so that there is never a sense of a too-large table for a group. In the cabins, slightly overscale canopy beds conceal acoustic tiles, and draperies are made of a gauze that has been in use since the time of the pharaohs.

This respect for place and history, comfort and ambience, sets *Sun Boat III* apart from its siblings. "This is an extremely personal boat," says Jorie Butler Kent, vice chairman of Abercrombie & Kent. "With a wonderfully intimate sense of refinement, Shahira managed to express our precise vision. We wanted travelers to feel far from home yet at home at the same time. There is no more unique way to see the Nile." □

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*For information about arranging cruises on Sun Boat III, e-mail [info@abercrombiekent.com](mailto:info@abercrombiekent.com) or call 800-554-7094.*

## A THAILAND TREASURE

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the teak low table share a simplicity of line that enhances the couple's collections—what Bensley teasingly calls a "cornucopia of shopping." "We buy without theme or without idea," the husband admits. "We just raid every shop."

The couple found the room's antique, intricately carved and painted door, from a palace in the Indian state of Rajasthan, at an antiques shop on the border between Myanmar and Thailand. To increase its heft, Bensley added an outer frame that he had painted and carved by local craftspeople in the same pattern as the original. One of the joys of living in northern Thailand is the abundance of its craftspeople: "Here things are still done by hand and are done creatively by people with skills," the husband points out.

The master bedroom is an overwhelmingly sensual space. Its walls are lined in silk, as is the bed's dramatic, bright orange headboard, which, when the lights between its panels are lit, almost seems to burst into flame. "At night it just glows," the husband says. The Bensley-designed chest at the foot of the bed—executed in rich teak, with panels of patinated copper—seems to as well.

As for the extensive gardens, Bensley and Jirachai Rengthong, his head horticulturist, "figured it out pocket by pocket

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**"What happens when it rains?" His reply was simple: "You get wet!"**

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et," the designer says. One witty garden "room" combines betel nut palms and yellow bamboo with the clients' collection of massive antique mortars and pestles. Others provide lessons in inventive recycling. When the couple purchased an antique Thai boat "as big as a waterfall," in Bensley's words, the designer had it lined with copper sheeting and transformed into one of the compound's 25 water features.

Not surprisingly, the couple live "outside all the time," the husband says. "We live in a shelter from the wind and rain in the midst of a spectacular garden." And what may be most thrilling of all, for this born and bred New Englander, is one simple, amazing fact: "No mosquitoes!" □