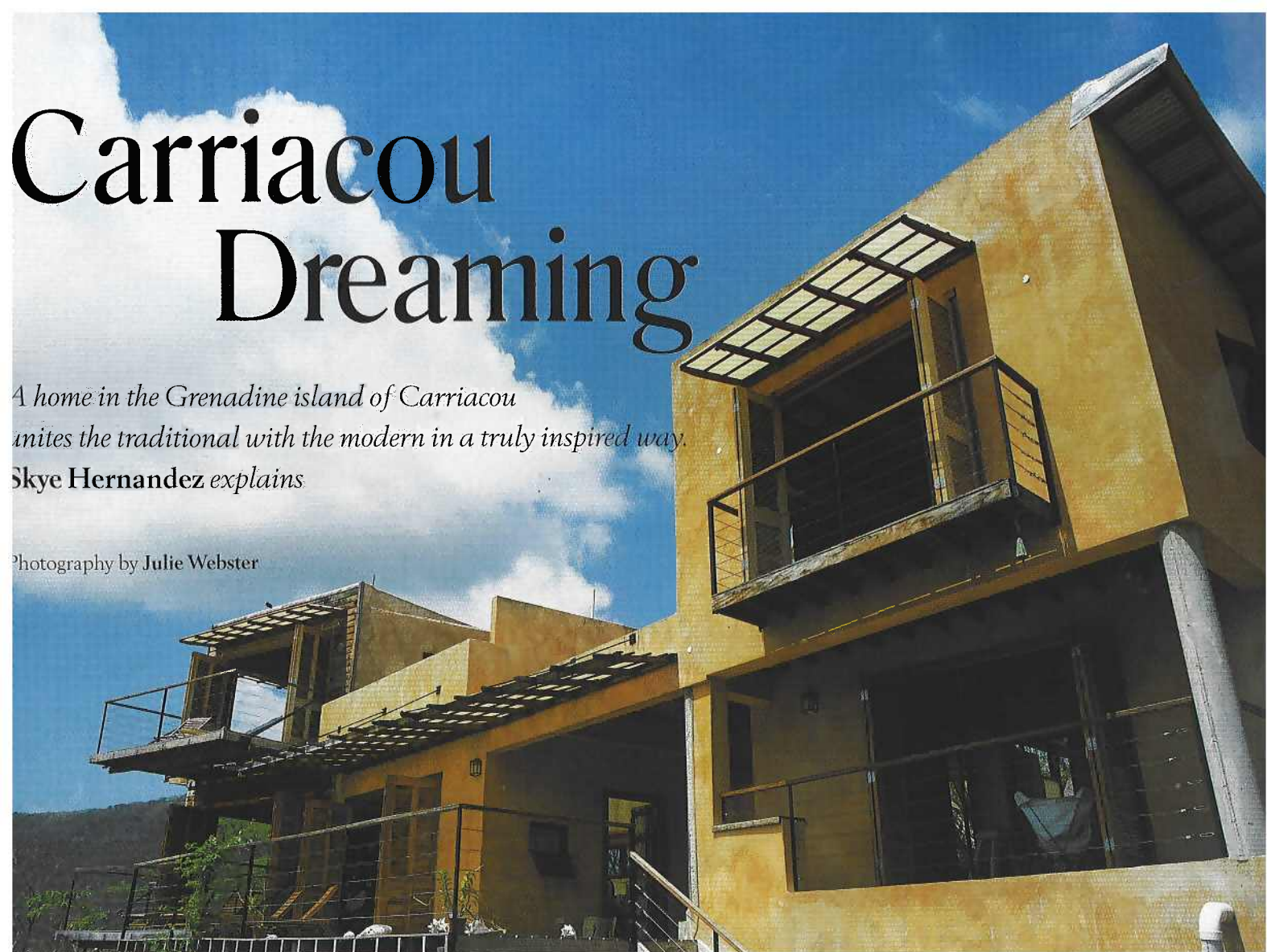


Carriacou Dreaming

A home in the Grenadine island of Carriacou unites the traditional with the modern in a truly inspired way.

Skye Hernandez explains

Photography by Julie Webster



SANKOFA IS an Akan (Ashanti) word meaning "we should look to the past while moving forward into the future", and is symbolised by a bird in flight with its head turned backwards. It's the name given to a home in Carriacou, owned by African-American businessman Cecil Hollingsworth, and designed by young Grenada architect Bryan Bullen.

The cantilevered balconies create the effect of a house built right over the water and just under the sky

One can see immediately that Sankofa fulfills the promise of its name, a house so purposefully modern and yet grounded in age-old traditions of conviviality and ease of living, and firmly rooted in the place where it stands. Carriacou, just north of Grenada in the Grenadines chain, is a tiny island of just 6,000 inhabitants, but its proud heritage, with a population descended mainly from African slaves

and a handful of Scottish sailors, has given it a rich tradition. Here, where land and sky meld perfectly with the blue of the Caribbean sea, Sankofa stands as testimony to the richness of the past and the hope of the future.

The house is situated on a gentle slope in the district of Craigston, overlooking the ocean as it stretches

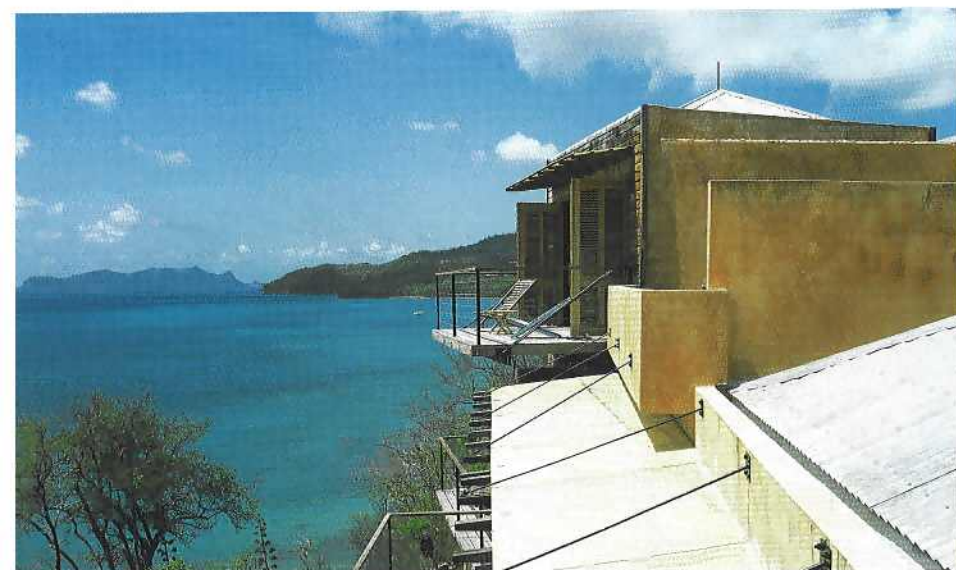
northward to Petit Martinique and the other Grenadine islands. From a narrow road, the driveway, bordered by lily pools, dips down towards the concrete-and-wood building. Sankofa was built entirely by local artisans, and the theme of continuity is reflected in the mix of modern and traditional techniques used in its construction, as well as the generous use of local materials, especially hardwoods and Carriacou stone.

Above: Sankofa is designed as a series of pavillions joined by walkways.

Right: Rooms with a view: the living and dining areas, below, and the bedroom above them, open wide to face the ocean.



elow: The sea and sky of the renadines seem to meet at Sankofa.



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Architect Bryan Bullen says he has always been fascinated by the Caribbean habit of building homes with verandahs that face the road, rather than a more private part of the house, or a spectacular view. "You always see houses that face the sea, but the verandah looks out to the street instead." This, he says, is because of the closeness of Caribbean community life; people call out as they pass by, sometimes dropping in to hang out for a while or share a meal. For the inhabitants of a house, the verandah also offers a vantage point on the street, a place to sit and look out to see who's passing and what's going on. (In some parts of the Caribbean the word "gallery" is used to mean balcony, and in Trinidad has the added meaning of "to how off".)

Bullen had this concept of community in mind when he designed Sankofa. The building was conceived as

a series of pavilions, linked by a continuous wooden balcony. The pavilions house the kitchen, living and sleeping areas and guest room/study. Each pavilion has its own function and relationship to the site, but is intimately connected to the other areas. The owner of the house likens it to an African village – perhaps a collection of small huts, whose residents are linked by kinship relationships, with the whole compound enclosed by a wall.

The house itself is reached through a small bridge connecting the entrance driveway and truss-roofed carport with the verandah. The verandah has a public side which faces the road but wraps around the house to afford privacy on the sea side. From the street the building seems fairly enclosed, in contrast to the opposite side of the house, which opens wide to take in the expanse of the sea and sky (by means of louvered wooden doors). The cantilevered balconies create the effect of a house built right over the water and just under the sky. This may sound a bit alarming, but it's not: the person who experiences this exhilarating view breathes it all in and catches a moment of freedom and bliss.



ow: A skylight gives the kitchen a
m glow. Like all the other rooms, the
hen looks out to the sea side of the
ise.



Below: The entrance to Sankofa, looking in from the driveway.



Bullen says he's also thought a lot over the years about the relationship between the Great House and the Chattel House in Caribbean history, and he sees the design of Sankofa as bringing the two together. There are no grand rooms in the house, but instead a series of intimate living spaces – several chattel houses, if you will, made into one plantation house.

The unique character of each space in the house is achieved through the careful use of materials, colour and light. Pigmented concrete is used over much of the building, giving it a rich ochre colour. Wood rafters, louvres, doors and walls complement the concrete's earthy tones. Translucent white awnings shade the balconies and offer a gentle glow in the afternoon sun.

The kitchen is a stunning example of the manipulation of colour and light. Its

lemon-green walls contrast with the dark wood of the heavy carved door from India (a tribute to the ancestry of the owner's Grenada-born wife) and its translucent corrugated roof brings the blue sky down into the heart of the building. (Don't think sunstroke or skin cancer here: the "skylight" roof has a strong UV coating.) Galvanised corrugated metal roofing, limestone, metal railings (made by the architect himself) and hardware complete the "collage of materials".

For Bullen, the use of largely indigenous materials was intended to create a house that "appears to emerge from its site rather than 'sitting' on it." Also of great importance in rain-starved Carriacou, where there's no pipe-borne water, are the two huge underground tanks. These collect sufficient water in the rainy season to serve the family



Below: African furniture and a wooden kitchen door from India reflect the ethnic background of the owners of Sankofa.



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during the summer months when they return from their North American home.

The home is furnished with African and Indian furniture, art objects and fabrics, as well as some quirky antique pieces of sentimental value. There are many personal touches: shells collected from the beach, a playful mural in the living room, even a piece of brick from Mrs Hollingworth's late grandmother's house, embedded in the wall at the entrance. As modern and artistically conceived as Sankofa is, one gets the

feeling that it's a well-loved, comfortable home, well thought-out by owner and architect alike – for that reason, it never ceases to have the cosy feeling of an old-time wooden house. Indeed, Sankofa is a concept brought to life under Carriacou skies. **M**

Right: Sunlight streams in to the bathroom from above, and the windows give the feeling of an outdoor bath.

Below: A sense of openness and welcome at the entrance of Sankofa.



COCOA IN THE SUN

For the architect Bryan Bullen, the Sankofa project also represented a coming-together of the strands of his life. Born in Grenada into a well-known Carriacou family, Bullen enjoyed a carefree small-island childhood. The family moved to Toronto when he was eight and he grew up there, an artistic child, who, though his father, Oliver, was an architect, never thought he'd go in that direction. He completed his first degree, in fine art and industrial design, at the Ontario College of Art. After graduating, Bullen set up a studio in Toronto, Design Build, doing industrial design and making furniture. Only then did he begin to see a future in architecture: "After I had my studio for a year and I started to work with some young architects who were doing creative work in Toronto, I saw what I could potentially do as an architect. It also helped fill in some of the conceptual gaps within my education."

Bullen did his graduate studies at the Southern California Institute of Architecture in Los Angeles, a small, highly competitive campus with "really great architects as teachers" and "a lot of creative energy". But after graduating in 1995, the Caribbean called him back. He designed his sister Judy's house in Carriacou, and then had a short stint in Trinidad working with the (late) architect Roger Turton, after which he returned to Grenada.

Bryan and his cousin Trevor Bullen, whom he says has a more formal architectural background from Harvard University, recently opened the design firm COCOA (Carribbean Office of Co-operative Architecture) in St George's. Bryan Bullen says Sankofa demonstrates COCOA's design philosophy: "to create buildings that are at once modern yet firmly grounded in local vernacular."

MACO

C A R I B B E A N L I V I N G

