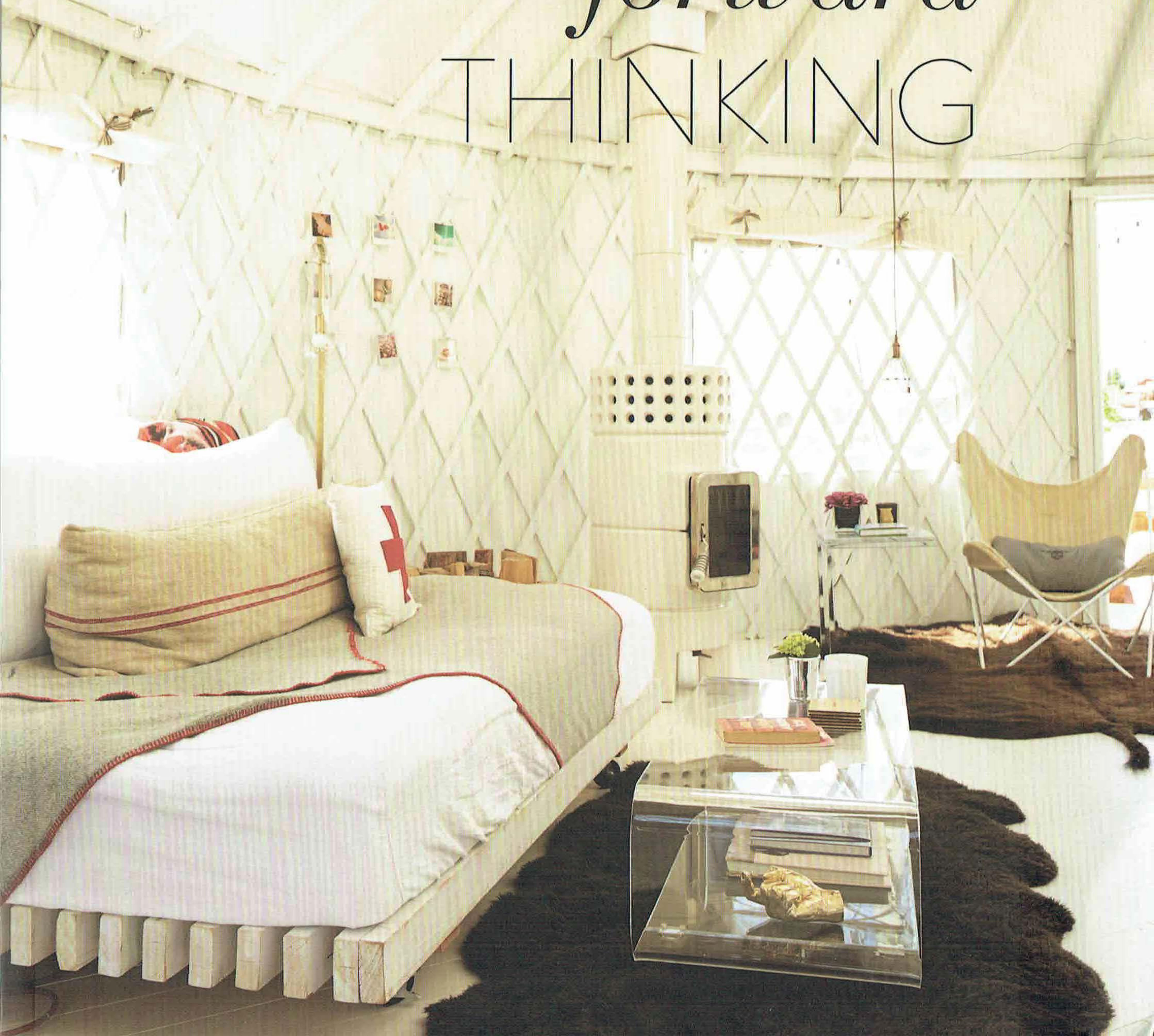


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*forward*  
THINKING



# A TROPICAL OUTLOOK



In Miami, pared-down interiors allow the house itself, as well as its lush surroundings, to take center stage

*Text by ANH-MINH LE* *Photographs by CLAUDIA URIBE*



Architects Jake and Melissa Brillhart designed and built their Miami home, which boasts a tropical setting. The furnishings in the open-plan dining/living area represent a mix of styles and provenances.



Creating and innovating for the future often requires researching and understanding the past. Case in point: Melissa and Jake Brillhart's downtown Miami abode.

Inspired by the Tropical Modernism movement of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, in which the landscape is an essential consideration in the architecture, the husband and wife, both architects who run a namesake

practice ([brillhartarchitecture.com](http://brillhartarchitecture.com)), designed and built the steel, glass, and wood structure that they've called home for the past couple of years. It also draws on the dogtrot residential style, common in the Southeast U.S. in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and characterized by two small buildings with a central breezeway adjoining them, all under one roof. Porches spanning the houses were fairly typical, too. Along with channeling ideas from the past, the house takes advantage of modern-day advances in the thermal qualities of glass and insulation.

According to Melissa, "the design decisions were centered around three central questions that challenge the culture for building big: What is necessary, how can we minimize our impact on the earth, and how do we respect

*This page:* The kitchen features cherry wood cabinetry and Himalayan marble. The island is painted in Soot by Benjamin Moore.

*Opposite:* Jake and Melissa, with Birdie, on one of their two porches.

the context of the neighborhood?" The layout of the Brillharts' home is a modern variation on the dogtrot, with the sleeping quarters on the left, the public areas on the right, and the kitchen between them acting as a central corridor. And with the Tropical Modernism principles in mind, "the selection of flora became as important to the architectural experience as the structure itself," says Melissa. "We surrounded the house with more than 30 newly planted native trees and palms."

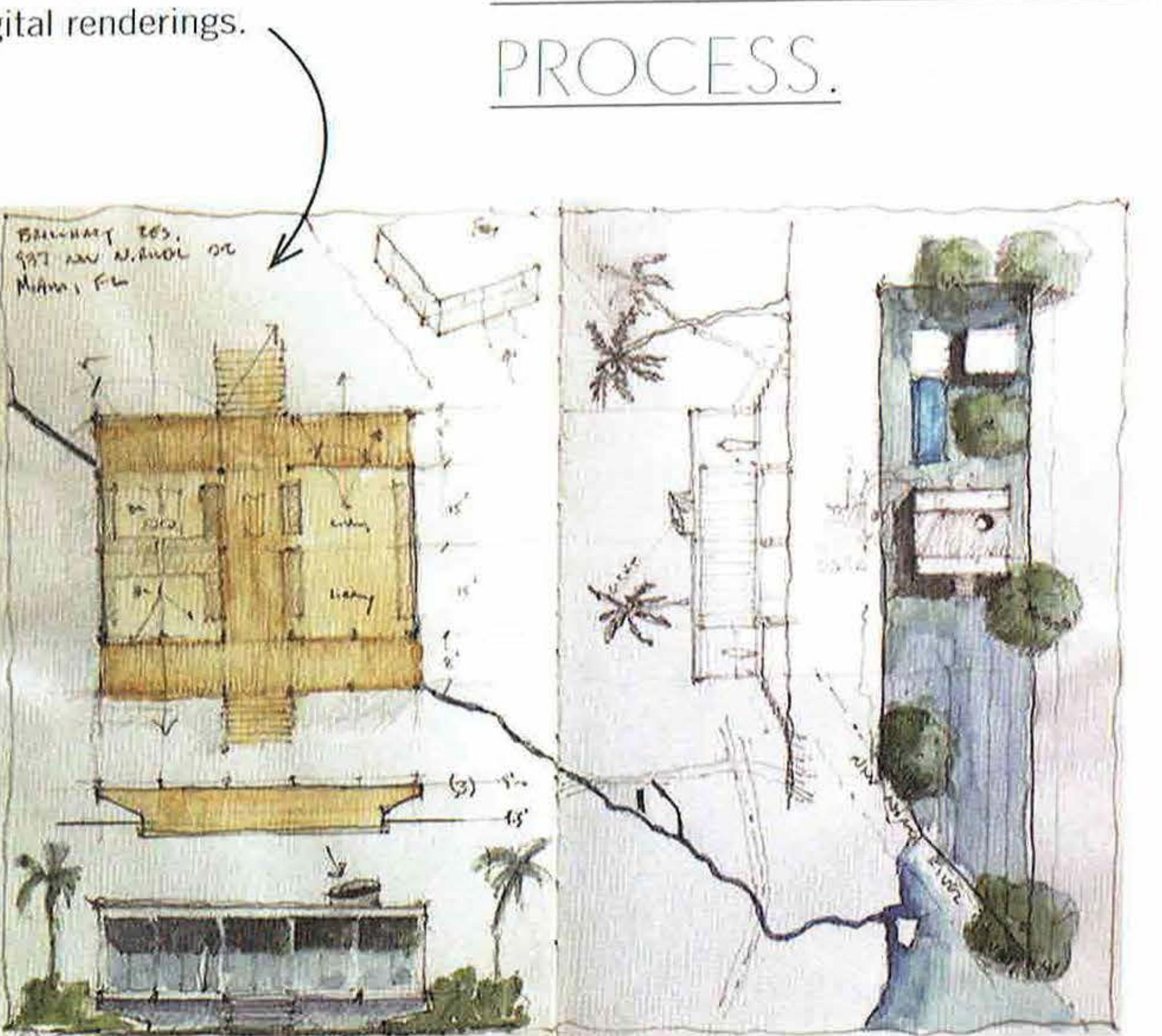
During the daytime, its design nuances and lush backdrop can be fully appreciated, while at night, with its 100-foot expanses of glass that run the length of the front and back sides, the house glows like a rectangular lantern.

In July 2011, four months after getting married, Jake and Melissa purchased an empty half-acre lot in the Spring Garden Historic District, an area they had admired for years. Construction on the 1,500-square foot house got underway the following summer. Maintaining a relatively modest size and purchasing off-the-shelf materials were among the priorities. For example, they tweaked the width of the house to accommodate standard commercial storefront sliding glass doors. "We didn't need more, so why make it bigger?" says Jake. But in case they do need more space in the future, the master plan for the house includes an additional suite that would connect to the existing dwelling via a bridge.

The home's porches offer another 800 square feet of living space, and



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serve an important practical purpose: With all of that glass, they provide a buffer from the sun and heat, which "makes a heck of a lot of sense in a tropical climate," explains Jake. "Without it, our air-conditioning bill would be much larger." The entire building is elevated five feet off the ground to address flood concerns and promote better cross-ventilation.

Jake and Melissa were extremely hands-on in the construction process; they even did all of the millwork themselves. "We knew enough to know what to ask," he says of the undertaking. The exterior is clad in ipe, a dense and durable hardwood. The front façade is lined with shutters comprised of Western red cedar, which is less expensive than ipe yet compatible color-wise. Inside, they made the cabinetry in the bathrooms and kitchen, the vertically slatted doors, and the door frames with cherry wood that Jake's father had accumulated over the past two decades from auctions in New Hampshire, where Jake grew up. "We loaded up a truck and road-tripped the wood here," says Melissa.

In Jake and Melissa's bedroom, the cherry wood bed is their own handiwork. (They both point out it's something that they built quickly and is temporary.) A family heirloom—a chair that once resided in Melissa's grand-

*This page and opposite:*  
Artwork by Jake's sister, Jenny Brillhart, presides over a console table made by Melissa's dad; the stool was a wedding gift from Argentina. The porch is appointed with a homemade table whose base is a slab of wood that Jake's father cut down in New Hampshire.



mother's 120-year-old farmhouse in South Carolina—stands in for a traditional bedside table. The watercolor above the bed is one of Jake's and depicts the Eden Roc hotel in Miami Beach. (In addition to design and architectural theory, he teaches freehand drawing at the University of Miami and, he estimates, has a trove of 600 drawings and paintings.) Jake also made the multicolored floating shelves mounted above a desk built by his father; it was the dining table Jake grew up with.

The photograph above the living room mantel showcases

the talents of another family member: Jake's aunt, Sally Flause, photographed the cluster of trees in Maine. The rest of the space is furnished with a leather sofa from West Elm, a pair of Barcelona chairs upholstered in gray cloth, a glass-topped coffee table with a metal base, and an Eames rocker. A wall of bookcases—interrupted only by the fireplace—holds books, objects, art, and some of the couple's architectural models.

In the adjacent dining area, a vintage Saarinen pedestal table is encircled by old wooden chairs from Miami's Saxony Hotel,

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*Top to bottom:* The bedroom includes a bed that the couple made, art and wall-mounted shelving by Jake, and family heirlooms. Just outside the bedroom, a hammock from Anthropologie beckons.

which is in the midst of an extensive renovation. The chairs, which are still covered in their original reddish-orange vinyl, were part of a lot of hundreds that the hotel was getting rid of when it changed ownership eight or nine years ago, says Jake. "I can't believe I didn't take a hundred of them!" he adds. He ended up nabbing just four, for \$5 a piece.

While the house has received accolades—it was an AIA Miami Honor Award in 2014 and an AIA Florida Honor Award in 2015—the Brillharts "hadn't done anything like this for clients before we did our own house," says Jake. "Partly because most people in Miami don't want 1,500 square feet. We had people telling us we were crazy not to build at least a three-bedroom, two bath. And that we would never be able to sell it later. But now that it's been done, and people can see it, we've had a number of clients call us for something similar."

A photograph of a chef's table set. On the table, there are several bowls filled with fruit, including apples and plums. There are also some vases with flowers. In the background, there is a large window with a view of a lush, green garden. The title "chef's table" is written in large, teal letters across the bottom of the image.

*Text by JENNIE NUNN* *Photographs by AMY DICKERSON* *Recipes by MINH PHAN* *Styling by DANAE HORST*

A LOS ANGELES CHEF AND HER BOYFRIEND SET THE TABLE FOR A FEAST FIT FOR CULINARY-MINDED FRIENDS