

ON THE FLY° DESIGN DISTRICT

By Nila Do Simon


STARR POWER

ARCHITECT AND INTERIOR DESIGNER **JULIA STARR SANFORD** CREATES A NEW STANDARD IN RESIDENTIAL DESIGN, BORN OF THE HARSH REALITIES AND WILD BEAUTY OF THE SUNSHINE STATE

When Julia Starr Sanford was tapped to create the first-ever residence in Alys Beach, around 2004, she was met with an overwhelming challenge: design a coastal home that could not only withstand Category 5 hurricanes but also convey an everlasting beauty for generations to come. For the architect and interior designer, it was a challenge she was glad to accept, one that has helped define her career and a new Florida vernacular. As the principal of her eponymous Jacksonville-based firm, Sanford has trotted the globe designing luxury residences and boutique hotels that create meaning not only in her clients' lives but also

in the environment around them.

Sanford says she's always had an appreciation for the well-crafted. She was raised in Atlanta by an artsy mother who dabbled in designing interior spaces and a builder father who created large-scale commercial highway projects. The designer, who speaks in a soft, measured voice, has carried the notion of good building with her as she's created spaces throughout Florida's coastline, in the Bahamas and in Central America. Sanford's impressive career has included early forays as art director of NBC's *Today* show and the broadcast of the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. Now, in a field where women make up just



This page: Sanford infuses a feminine touch with design elements like curved walls and staircases



20 percent of licensed architects, she serves as a global leader in conscious building. Coupled with her strong foundation in industry, Sanford's deft feminine intuition, which includes an innate understanding of how well-crafted homes enhance people's lives, appears in her work.

"There is perhaps a more feminine sensitivity to space and light in the richness of natural materials throughout our interior spaces, native cypress and coral stone, with an occasional curved stairwell or curved wall in the courtyard that has a feminine flair,"



she says. "As women in this industry, we have a unique understanding of home and family. That's probably why I gravitate toward more residential spaces. That even applies to the boutique hotels that we've done, hotels that I've always considered home away from home."

A common denominator among Sanford's designs is that they appeal to clients in search of lasting value. Take, for example,

From top: The back of this Jacksonville home is designed for living along the river, steel and glass doors blending interior to exterior; Julia Sanford's design philosophy is conscious creation

Right: Minimalism marries movement in the custom Sublime Original marble dining table

her work in Alys Beach, the small, planned Panhandle community developed in line with the tenets of New Urbanism, favoring walkability over sprawl. Selected alongside nearly a dozen international designers to create the luxury town's first homes, Sanford was tasked with creating designs with equal parts beauty and brawn, appealing to the discerning, affluent travelers and residents that Alys Beach developers hoped to attract.

The result was a series of memorable structures with stark-white exteriors reminiscent of Santorini and organic interiors expertly appointed with luxury furnishings, fabrics and accents echoing the area's coastal terrain. They've weathered some serious storms, and the community is the first in the United States to require constructions to meet the Institute of Business and Home Safety's Fortified



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This page: The Jacksonville home is classically proportioned in keeping with the historic neighborhood, with a steel and glass front door opening to a river view; Primitive Modern BB chair by Sublime Original

standard of resilient building design. “The quality of these fortified homes and the ideal of this all-white place in Alys Beach reset the meter of quality throughout Florida,” Sanford says.

After conceiving the idea nearly five years ago, Sanford launched a furniture and art line, Sublime Original, in October 2018, a move that sets her apart in an already distinguished class of designers. The line is an extension of Sanford and her design firm’s philosophy of conscious creation, including its use of sustainably sourced woods and materials known for their longevity against harsh outdoor elements, like Florida’s pecky cypress and heavy timber. With clean, straight lines and surprising angles, the pieces complement a modern coastal home. The furniture line won a best in show award at the spring 2019 High Point Market, the home furnishing industry’s largest trade show.

“The recognition was very exciting because it was a validation of a more recent effort,” says Sanford, who has plans to

release cushions and pillows crafted out of hides, as well as a line of hide bags, in the fall. “We started this furniture line because we wanted to express a sensual sustainability for the future. We were tired of buying veneer wood furniture that was mass-produced in China, so this was our chance to make

Opposite: Sanford designed some of the first homes in Alys Beach, the small, planned Panhandle community developed in accordance with the tenets of New Urbanism, favoring walkability over sprawl; furnishings by Sublime Original

something we were proud of.” In addition to her design firm and furniture line, which together employ nearly a dozen individuals, Sanford is also a co-founder

of the nonprofit Sky Institute Foundation for the Future, which serves as an incubator for concepts that enhance building standards. Comprising architects, urban planners, environmental engineers, environmental defense attorneys, scientists, food producers, scholars and more, Sky Institute aspires to build better structures throughout the globe.

At the heart of all her projects, Sanford hopes to show just how beautiful nature can be in everyday life, whether that’s through Sublime Original’s earthy materials, spaces with ample natural light or the incorporation of natural fauna into a home. “I’m naturally drawn to beauty,” she says. “Beauty can enrich someone’s life. Everything natural is beautiful, and to have this effect is wonderful.”



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