



**A**LTHOUGH Washington, D.C.-area transplants Dona Dinkler and Bill Godwin have been official Savannah residents only since March, they fit right in with their adopted hometown. Their lighthearted conversation, genuine smiles and graciousness are the very soul of Southern hospitality.

Two years after purchasing land on the Halfmoon River, they now put friends and family at ease in a home built to be the brick-and-mortar extension of their generous spirits and sense of adventure. Empathy and assimilation are talents they've perfected, having made a life of expatriation in extraordinary locales around the world. Now retired, Dona worked for many years in the U.S. Foreign Service, while Bill served for the U.S. Senate Sergeant at Arms. Looking for waterfront diversion, natural serenity and better quality of life, they agreed that Savannah offered a splendid backdrop.

**THE DINKLER/  
GODWIN STATS**

**Owners:** Dona Dinkler and Bill Godwin  
**Year built:** 2016  
**Square footage:** 3,917  
**Accommodations:** 4 bedrooms, 3 full and 2 half baths  
**Time to complete:** 2 years



# Nature and Nurture

A globetrotting couple settles into a forever home on the banks of the Halfmoon River. *Cléa Hernandez* explores a treasure of uncommon beauty. PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD LEO JOHNSON

**PULL IT TOGETHER.** Interior designer Beth McDonald had the challenge of incorporating Dona and Bill's cherished mementos from years of living and traveling abroad with new furnishings that fit their adopted coastal Georgia lifestyle. Striking a balance with two exotic, carved wooden chairs, a classic linen-covered sofa anchors the open living space. It presents a soft-edged contrast to the more formal dining area beyond. Even as their new residence expresses the adventurous life they have lived up to this point, Dona says the couple anticipates "aging gracefully" in this home. To that end, they had an elevator installed for when the stairs might become too difficult to navigate.





#### BY DESIGN

Elizabeth McDonald (or “Beth,” as the couple call her with fond familiarity) was integral to the planning and design of their new home. They had never built a house before. Once they’d hired architect Gerry Cowart, they immediately realized they needed an interior designer to navigate the

distance between their ideas for how they wanted to live and the fulfillment of them in the construction.

“Beth has so much experience building and designing homes,” Dona says. “She kind of translated for us, letting us know where and how to achieve the tableaux and comforts we wanted for ourselves and our guests.”

*A glut of tall windows overlooks the lush backyard and river views, in which the trees feature prominently. The deep screened-in porch is a world unto itself. “The porch can make you a very lazy person,” Dona concedes.*

**ARREST YOUR DEVELOPMENT.** It was critical to the couple that the construction of their home not disturb the nature around them. This stipulation led them to choose Jerry Cowart as their architect. “We identified an architect who was able to consistently and successfully meld the construction of a house into the spread of live oaks,” Bill says. “Jerry advised us on the purchase of this lot even before we hired him as an architect. He knows how to set the house.” One day soon, Bill will build a dock for a boat. The yard affords breathtaking views of Cabbage Island, Tybee Cut, Little Tybee, Skidaway and Wassaw Sound. “We like to watch birds and fish, so we want to get out on the water,” says Dona.

**STAGE A COMEBACK.** The couple’s butler’s pantry is a lofted curio collection, dazzling with artisan-crafted prisms lit from beneath. Swirly colored glass bottles from Salzberg, Austria, share the stage with Hungarian tiles incorporated into the walls. “Hungary is known for its crystal and porcelain,” explains Dona. “Waterford will sometimes contract local Hungarian artists. We commissioned this whole set of porcelain Christmas cups; we even drove to the factory to meet the artist. This is what we love,” says Dona. “The largest influence on us, from a macro-view, was our experience in Hungary,” Bill adds.







### BAZAAR APPEAL

Expansive, creamy colored rooms with vaulted ceilings are arranged at the back of a two-story “U” shape that hugs a front courtyard lined with permeable pavers—meant to ensure that the seven stately live oaks on the property will continue to flourish.

“Along with 24-hour deep-water access, the trees are why we fell in love with the land,” explains Dona.

A glut of tall windows in each living quarter overlooks the lush backyard and river views, in which the trees feature prominently. The deep screened-in porch is a world unto itself.

“The porch can make you a very lazy person,” Dona concedes.

“I like to think of it as ‘contemplative,’” Bill counters.

The architectural details and design express the West Indies, particularly as you look out at the water and notice carved rafter tails along the eaves. But the unique zing of their home is what Dona and Bill bring to it from their travels.

“They’ve lived a truly fascinating life so far,” says Beth.

Originally from Georgia and Kansas, respectively, it’s easy to see how Bill and Dona’s effortless affability served

**BE A DRAMA QUEEN.** Two grand entrances lead into the stunning kitchen from the open dining room. Lighted surfaces climb all the way up to the ceiling and add depth and intensity. “She’s always wanted a big kitchen,” says Bill. Dona experiments with the recipes she’s amassed from her travels. Two dishwashers, one on each side of the sink and disguised to look like part of the cabinetry, pull out for hassle-free cleanup. The milky, gold-veined countertops are sea pearl quartzite from Italy that they hunted down; these slabs were the last out of a quarry that was closing down. The tiles, soft and warm, are Walker Zanger. “I didn’t want a white kitchen, but Beth guided me to this,” admits Dona. “And she was right, of course—it’s just gorgeous.”

**HUG A TREE.** “I wanted that tree to come down,” says Beth (standing, below right) of the wizened live oak that twists across the backyard up to the roof. “But Dona and Bill wouldn’t do it. It’s this old Great Dane of an oak.” Bartlett’s Tree Service estimates the oak at 250 to 300 years old. The architect’s assistant, Anne Stevens, figured out how to save the trees by moving the house 19 feet in a different direction, then by moving part of the garage to the other side of the house, which created the courtyard.



*The architectural details and design express the West Indies, particularly as you look out at the water and notice carved rafter tails along the eaves.*





them well in cultural diplomacy. Dona once supervised a crew that worked in South Africa, which is where her zebra-skin rug came from. Their linen presses and many other prized belongings are from Hungary, where they lived for almost four years.

“Not long enough,” adds Bill.

From there they took side trips, and Amsterdam was one of their favorite get-aways. Now, the hand-painted Delft tiles they purchased there have been incorporated into the laundry room wall. Hong Kong, the Philippines, Pakistan ... each room triggers a

stream of stories from their lives abroad.

“A challenge for me was taking all of these things they’ve culled from around the world and creating a cohesive design. The furniture can’t really shine, for example, because their collections should be the stars. The three of us are making it happen together, although

we never agree on anything,” Beth laughs.

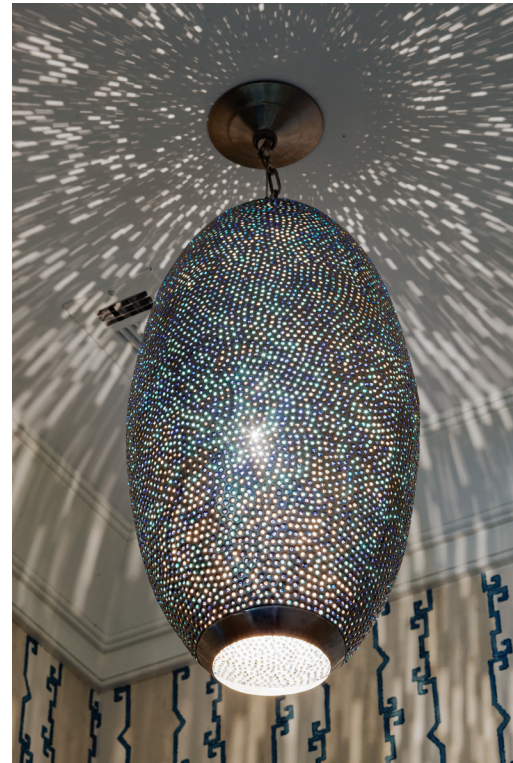
“Dona’s brain craves new and unusual ideas, constantly pulling in different colors and textures. Trying to rein her in is always difficult.”

“It’s sort of like we have an import-export business,” jokes Bill. “Although we never export.” ■

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**BE YOURSELF.** Interior designer Beth notes that the couple is fond of surprising features. She uses a bathroom in the foyer as an example, pointing out an elongated disco-ball lighting fixture (*right*) that Bill jokingly refers to as a “martian egg.” “This is so Dona,” Beth laughs. “Pretty, tailored wallpaper and elegant fixtures, but she needed to add one thing that sings a different tune—something that pulls you out of the ordinary.”

**CHECK OUT.** From the library, it’s just a stretch and a yawn to the master bedroom (*opposite*). A rice-carved four-poster bed made in West Virginia at a small firm called Harris and Hinkle beckons the weary. The rug covering the floor was purchased in Hong Kong and loomed in Pakistan. In the en-suite master bath, a cavernous shower and stand-alone tub are set apart from the water closet, which houses a massive, lighted linen closet.



#### DINKLER/GODWIN REFERRALS

**Architects/planners:** Gerry Cowart and Ann Stephens, Cowart Group Architects

**Interior designer:** Elizabeth McDonald, Elizabeth McDonald Interiors of The Design House

**Builder:** Walter Strong and Cal Rowles, The Strong Group

**Custom cabinetry:** Harley Ashbaugh, AWD of Savannah Inc.

**Plumbing fixtures:** Christy Ellis, Sandpiper Supply

**Electrician:** Chip Willhoit, RS Willhoit Enterprises

**Tile:** Caty Coty, designer, Garden State Tile; Alan Powell, installer

**HVAC:** Adam Bolton, Bolton Air

**Wood flooring:** Larry Cowart, Cowart’s Floor Surfacing

**Paint/painting contractor:** Benjamin Moore, Chapman Painting Contractors

**Windows:** Brent Goodman, Marvin Integrity, Coastal Sash and Door

**Front door:** Ron Horton, Savannah Millworks

**Kitchen and bath design:** Elizabeth McDonald Interiors and owner

**Lighting design:** Pace Lighting and Elizabeth McDonald Interiors

**Lighting fixtures:** Circa Lighting and Elizabeth McDonald Interiors

**Counter surfaces:** Shanna Mauldin, Red Fox Unlimited, and AGM

**Wallpaper:** Terrell and Edwina Scarboro, TNT Wallcovering

**Appliances:** Sandy Clark, Livingood’s Appliances and Bedding

**Landscape design:** Scott Tanner, Tanner Landscaping Architects

**Hardscape design:** Robbie Cowart, Southern Pavers

**Carpenter:** Sean Sanders, Atlantic Coast Construction

**Master closet:** Jeff Klein, The Closet Specialist

**Audio/visual:** Joseph Martin and Robert Culpepper, Electronic Lifestyles

**Furniture:** Elizabeth McDonald Interiors and owner

**Accessories:** Elizabeth McDonald Interiors and owner

**Art:** Owners’ collection

**Elevator:** Ed Cossart, Residential Elevators

**Exterior shutters:** Andrew Albert, Palmetto Shutter Company

**Central vacuum:** Rodys Audio Warehouse

**Tree service:** Bartlett Tree Experts