

Preservation Foundation honors 'very Palm Beachy' landscape by Nievera Williams Design



Michael Stavardis, courtesy of Nievera Williams Design

Fat-trunked silver bismarkia palm trees lend the landscape a strong architectural presence. Nievera and Williams say they like the way the trees' silvery fronds echo the look of the house's weathered-copper roof. Note the raised planting bed edged with rusted steel in the foreground. The whirlpool spa can be seen in the distance near the lake.



Michael Stavardis, courtesy of Nievera Williams Design

Nievera and Williams designed 'planks' of cast stone, alternated with strips of grass, to lead the eye to the house's front entrance, defined by slender carpenteria palms. The widest strip of pavement is the main walk up to the house. The area doubles as a motor court.

By **DARRELL HOFHEINZ**
DAILY NEWS REAL ESTATE WRITER

Updated: 9:17 p.m. Saturday, March 17, 2012

Posted: 6:32 p.m. Saturday, March 17, 2012

Don't look for any dazzling bougainvillea or brilliant hibiscus on the property that was honored Thursday with the inaugural Lesly S. Smith Landscape Award from the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach.

You won't find any of the lush flowering plants that are staples in so many of the island's gardens.

Instead, you will see something quite different on the expansive grounds that surround the home of Canadian snowbirds Stephen and Jennifer Dattels. The landscape and hardscape by Nievera Williams Design of Palm Beach feature clean lines, a limited color palette and a spare sensibility designed to complement the contemporary architecture of the Dattels' new lakefront house at 11 Lagomar Road, south of Widner's Curve off South Ocean Boulevard.





Michael Stavaridis, courtesy of Nievera Williams Design

Landscape designers Nievera and Williams planted fountain grass near the swimming pool on the lake side of the contemporary-style house. The plantings soften the look of the house's hard-edged architecture and also provide movement in the landscape when the grasses are rustled by the wind.



Lucien Capehart Photography Inc

On Thursday at the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach, homeowner Jennifer Dattels, second from left, and Keith Williams, right, of Nievera Williams Design accepted the inaugural Lesly S. Smith Landscape Award on behalf of Dattels' garden. With them are, from left, Preservation Foundation Executive Director Alexander C. Ives; Foundation Trustee and former Palm Beach Mayor Lesly Smith, the award's namesake; and Preservation Foundation Chairman John D. Mashek.

It is an out-of-the-box landscape by Palm Beach standards, although it does make use of moderate- to slow-growing plants and palms that are frequently used in area gardens.

But Preservation Foundation Executive Director Alexander C. Ives says the landscape is just the sort of fashion-forward design that the nonprofit group wanted to honor with its new award. The award was presented during the foundation's annual Preservationist Club Dinner at its headquarters on Peruvian Avenue.

"This garden has a control and a grace and an elegance to it," says Ives. "We were looking for a landscape that is in keeping with the character and traditions of Palm Beach but would also serve as an example to others going forward. It was such an elegant solution to the design of the property, and it relates so well to the architecture of the house. It's very 'Palm Beachy' in its own way."

Indeed, the scope of the project and the prominence of the house on the lot demanded that the landscape designers leave nothing to chance, as every element would be noticeable, according to landscape designers and colleagues Mario Nievera and Keith Williams.

"It's a huge property, but every inch is accounted for. The proportions are so carefully planned," says landscape architect Nievera, who gives most of the credit for the design to Williams, his "partner in charge" of the project.

Nievera and Williams also credit their clients for committing themselves to building a contemporary-style "statement" vacation home — designed by Jeffery Smith of Smith Architectural Group in Palm Beach — and then embracing a landscape design that makes a similar, if lower-key, aesthetic statement.

Jennifer Dattels, who says she was "very honored" to accept the award with Williams last week, has always taken an active interest in the design and maintenance of landscapes at the couple's homes.

"This was a difficult job, because the house is so contemporary. It was a total change for us, but we were ready for a change and welcomed it, even though we went into it with a certain amount of trepidation," Dattels says.

But she couldn't be happier with the project, completed more than a year ago. "It all is such total perfection," she says.

She appreciates the fact that there's nothing effusive about the landscape — or the house, for that matter, which features a gallery-white exterior, large expanses of plate-glass windows and a series of set-back bays defined by vertical and horizontal components that form simple squares and rectangles, topped by triangles to support the peaked roofs.



'A different vocabulary'

Nievera estimates that 90 percent of his firm's work involves more traditional garden designs. The team approached this project knowing that they would use the same language of design elements they have used in other projects "but with a different vocabulary," Nievera says.

That meant using familiar elements — retaining walls, terracing, palm trees, focal points, water features and the like — but in a way that would echo the home's strict geometry.



"It's very difficult," Nievera says. "Every view has to be composed from every window in the house."

A key design strategy was to create areas that subtly bridge the transition between the lawn and the house via a technique Nievera calls "wedding-cake layering. Everything is as horizontal as you can get."

Adds Williams: "We wanted to create a hierarchy between the architecture and the landscape."



As part of that process, the designers created a number of low, rectangular raised planting beds immediately adjacent to the building. The beds' vertical sides are banded in a steel specifically designed to rust. That familiar, natural finish contrasts with the bright green of the lawn's finely textured diamond zoysia grass and the white of the home's exterior walls, while also referencing the weathering process taking place on the home's copper roofs, Williams explains.



"It gives you an organic feeling without putting in plant material," he says.

Behind the beds, next to the walls, are strips filled with gray pebbles "that create a subtle transition between the house and the lawn," in Williams' words.

Those borders of stones also serve another, more practical purpose by keeping foliage and debris from brushing against the walls and discoloring them, he confides — just one of several low-maintenance design choices in the project.

Among the front lawn's most striking elements are the multiple "planks" of locally fabricated cast-stone tiles, tinted gray and set into the front lawn on either side of the sidewalk that leads to the front door. The planks are laid in evenly spaced intervals, drawing the eye toward the house while adding geometric interest underfoot. They're also easy to clean, Williams says.



Catching the breeze

On the lake side of the property is an infinity-edge swimming pool that doubles as a reflecting pond — its tile and interior finish were chosen to match the dark color of the water in the Intracoastal Waterway. As a result, when viewed from the house, the pool and lake appear seamless, broken only by a narrow strip of lawn that borders the edge of the sea wall.

On either side of the pool, the designers planted beds of knee-high pennisetum, also known as fountain grass, to recall beach dune vegetation and to add movement to the landscape when the species' plumes catch the breeze.

"We used the grass to provide just a hint of the 'natural,'" Nievera notes. "Otherwise, everything is so hard-edged, horizontal, angular and precise."

The slender, curved trunks and fronds of the coconut palms planted on the lake side serve a similar purpose, acting almost as sculpture. But in other areas, the designers lined up fat-trunked silver bismarkia palms in straight lines for a "very architectural" effect, as Williams describes it. The silver fronds also echo the color of the house's roof.

Former Palm Beach mayor and longtime Preservation Foundation trustee Lesly Smith, the award's namesake, says she was thrilled with the winning landscape. "It has a great beauty and is a wonderful example of combining the contemporary with the traditional," Smith says, adding that it does exactly what a good landscape should do by acknowledging and complementing the house it borders.

"It's totally integral to the whole package," Smith says.



ABOUT THE AWARD WINNER

Where: 11 Lagomar Road, Palm Beach

Landscape designers: Mario Nievera and Keith Williams, Nievera Williams Design, Palm Beach and New York.

Homeowners: Stephen and Jennifer Dattels

Landscape contractor: Armstrong Landscaping, West Palm Beach

Architects and interior designers: Jeffery W. Smith, principal architect, and Leslie Pierce, project architect, Smith Architectural Group, Palm Beach; Bill Kopp, Smith Interior Design Group, Palm Beach

Building contractor: Timothy Benitz, Benitz Building LLC, Palm Beach

Plants in the landscape: Palms (adonidia, alexander, carpentaria, cocconut, medjool date and silver bismarkia varieties), bromeliad, ficus benjamina, green island ficus, fountain grass (pennisetum), minima monstera, shell ginger and diamond zoysia

