

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF INTERIOR DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE



RICHARD BRANSON'S VIRGIN PARADISE

THE BRITISH ENTREPRENEUR BRINGS THE SPIRIT OF BALI TO NECKER ISLAND

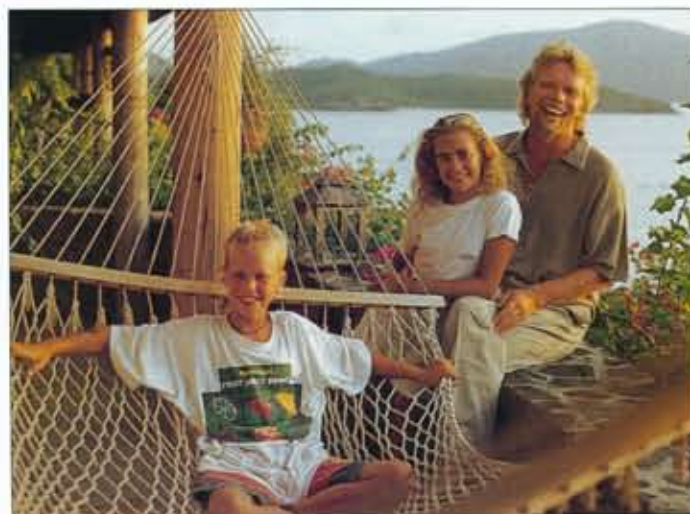
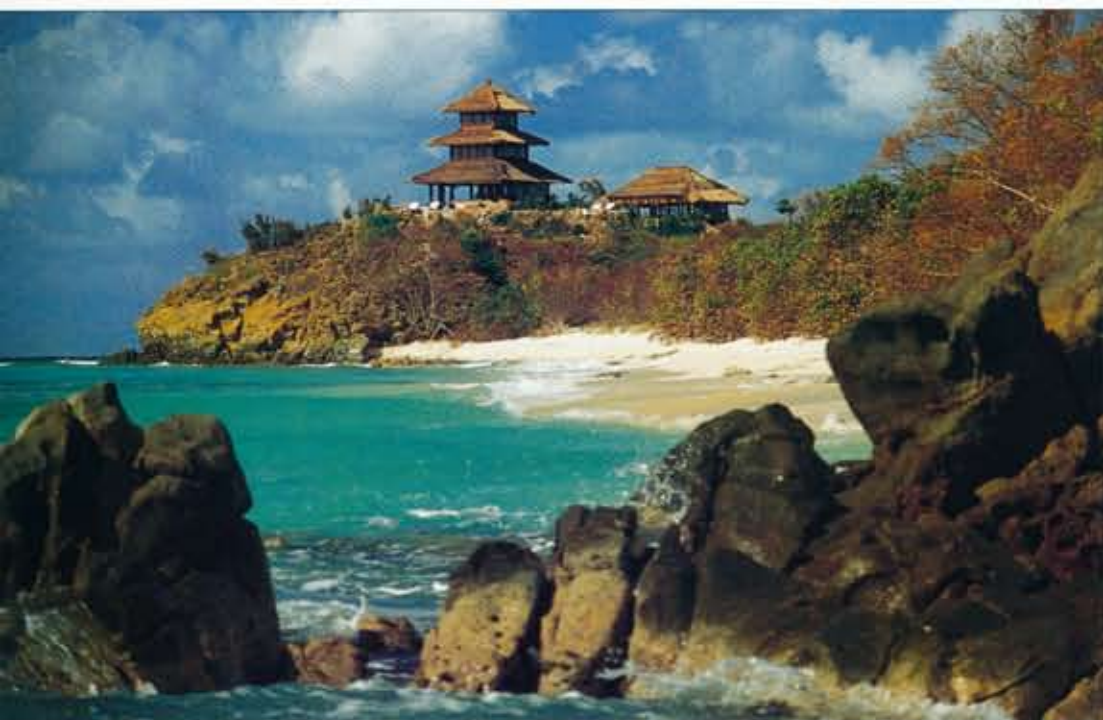
ARCHITECTURE BY JON OSMAN

INTERIOR DESIGN BY LORY JOHANSSON AND JUNE ROBINSON SCOTT, ASID

TEXT BY ELIZABETH LAMBERT PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN FORER

In the Caribbean, Richard Branson, chairman of the Virgin Group, bought the uninhabited 74-acre island of Necker and created a retreat where he and his wife, Joan, stay with friends and family. It is also available to rent. BOTTOM: Branson and his two children.

BELOW: On a rocky outcropping, designer Amir Rabik fashioned a Balinese pavilion where Branson often likes to sleep. RIGHT: Guests can take in the views from a deck on the house's west side. "Leaving is made easier knowing I can come back," Branson observes.



It began as a bit of a good time, really. Someone asked Richard Branson if he had named his music company, Virgin, after the Virgin Islands. He explained that he had set up his first company at sixteen, when he was "inexperienced in this, that and the other," although friends observe that money and virgins were the only things in short supply in his office at the time. The Virgin Islands were something he'd never thought about.

"I was curious," he says. "I wouldn't have bothered if it hadn't been for the name, but several of the smaller British Virgin Islands were for sale, and I was courting a beautiful woman. I could pretend to be a buyer—it would be a great weekend."

They flew over islands that were no more than rocks in the sea, then over Necker Island, green with the Neckerberry bushes that give it its name and circled by a coral reef,

white-sand beaches on the Caribbean side and dramatic headlands on the Atlantic side. The only inhabitants were a few goats. It was the desert island of his dreams. He made an absurdly low offer and was curtly refused. Time passed, he upped it a bit and bought an island.

Years passed. Branson sold the record company, started an airline and established a reputation as an English adventurer with a manic

fondness for fast boats and hot-air balloons; a white knight of environmental concerns; a David slinging at British Airways; the persona behind the irrepressible grin. All the while he pondered what to build on his island. "Not an easy decision," he says. "When you've got a beautiful island, the important thing is to enhance it, not damage it."

Then one day Jon Osman, an English architect based on Tortola, got a





Tortola-based architect Jon Osman chose Brazilian hardwoods for the house. OPPOSITE: The main room is infused with the "airy Balinese style" Branson wanted for the interiors, which have been redesigned by Lory Johansson and June Robinson Scott. Sofa is by Linda Garland.

"We planned the interiors in response to Richard and Joan's dream of bringing Bali to the Caribbean," Johansson says. ABOVE: A 22-foot-long Brazilian table occupies the dining area. The oil lamps are from Bali, as are the chair fabrics, which Johansson and Scott designed.

call. "I've got this island," Branson told him. "I don't know what I want, but come up with something and I'll tell you what I think. If you have any ideas, can you meet me in New York tomorrow?" Osman knew the island, and he did have some ideas. "The message from the very beginning was that he wanted to keep the feeling of being alone on the island," Osman explains. "A Robinson Crusoe camp would have been enough. We went from there.

"The first thing to do was choose a site. So I sailed over, put on army boots, carried pliers to extract the

spines of the barrel cactus that go right through them, and walked every inch of the seventy-four acres. I found one sickly palm tree, a herd of aggressive goats and a marvelous view from Devil's Hill. That was the place. I sat at the top for a long time, listening to what Necker was telling me. Which side of my face was getting the breeze? Where would the sun rise and set? How could I define a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view, frame smaller views to protect the feeling of being a castaway?"

It took six months to blast the top off the hill and make a level site for



a house that would follow the profile of the hill, its roofline replacing the peak. Stones from the blasting face were used for the walls, but otherwise all the materials had to be imported: "all this sand," says Osman. "But for this quantity we would have depleted the beach. And salt was a problem, so even water had to be brought in. There was no fresh water on the island."

Stone from Yorkshire for the floors came ashore in old military craft, in a scene like a Normandy landing. Huge hardwood beams from Brazil were so heavy that the barge went aground on the coral reef. "It took a week to offload them onto smaller barges," Osman recalls. "The wood is so dense that Brazilian fishermen use it to make anchors. If the boat broke up on

the reef, we'd have had a problem. Fortunately it didn't."

The house took shape under tropical dictates, with deep foundations and posts that stand up to hurricanes, a breezeway between the two blocks and wide overhangs for shade.

"The house is rooted in traditional West Indian architecture," Osman explains. "It grows from this island, but an overlay of Indonesian influence came later. Three-quarters of the way through the construction we began to think about furnishing it, and Richard's thoughts turned to Bali, a place he has always loved for its feeling of mystery, its rich tradition of crafts. It seemed appropriate to add the culture of one island to another—the climates are similar, and the sculpture of Bali and Linda Garland's

Each of the house's ten bedrooms has a different view. ABOVE: Woven mat ceilings and dark-stained wood trim highlight adjoining guest bedrooms. "We wanted to bring a contemporary feel to the rooms by combining vividly colored and white fabrics," says Scott.

OPPOSITE: The master bedroom was meant to evoke the mood of a romantic hideaway. The four-poster, designed by Scott and Johansson and assembled by local artisans, was made with Dutch colonial posts, a footboard from a Balinese opium bed and a headboard from an antique bench. The throws are Balinese. Wedding sandals are Indonesian.





“It didn’t seem right to have an island like this and use it only a few months of the year. Personal indulgence doesn’t interest me.”

LEFT: A teak table is set beneath a hand-crafted Balinese pergola on the luncheon terrace. Johansson and Scott used Balinese teak in the redesign. “It can withstand humid, salty air,” Scott explains. The ceramic bell lamps are by Don Schnell, an artisan on St. John.

BELOW: Osman used rock blasted from the site and Yorkshire stone around the pool, which appears to flow into the sea. “After six months the workmen felt as though they’d come to work in a quarry rather than on a house,” he recalls. The timber bamboo furniture is Balinese.



wonderful giant black bamboo furniture looked right.”

Construction continued, with much of the design worked out on-site. “There was a lot that could not be put on drawings,” says Osman. “The terraces aren’t straight—they follow the contours of the hill and had to be marked out on the ground. A waterfall runs down into the swimming pool. You can’t design a waterfall on

paper. We started at the bottom: Huge stones were maneuvered in slings, and I jammed them into place, one above the other.”

Landscaping began with the decision that wind generators would be an intrusion. Generators and a desalination plant would be built into a hill. Foliage-hungry goats were moved to another island, palm trees and almond trees planted to stabilize

sand beaches, a nursery set up to acclimatize plants before they were put in place. Small paths were kept wherever possible, but if paved roads were essential, the concrete was camouflaged with pigment added for color and palm fronds for texture.

Three years later the house was finished. “Richard arrived, gave me a big hug, and we knew we had things right,” says Osman. “During that first

stay, two couples got so caught up in the spirit of the place that there were two impromptu weddings. Then we really knew we had things right.”

Branson was also married on Necker, to Joan, the beautiful woman who had inspired his first visit to the island. The ceremony was held on the beach. The best man delivered the ring on a sailboard, but he mistimed it, and he and the groom both fell into

the water. The party went on for days.

In the Branson tradition, impetuous beginnings have a way of becoming useful enterprise. “It didn’t seem right to have an island like this and use it only a few months of the year,” he says. “Personal indulgence doesn’t interest me. I do feel that wealth brings the responsibility to generate new ventures, employment for more people so the island can be rented.

Weddings, honeymoons, family reunions—Necker has worked its magic for a lot of people.”

Over the years two Balinese pavilions have been added as guesthouses: One, called Bali Hi, is on a rocky outcropping; the other, called Bali Lo, is on an inland slope. For each, the traditional dovetail components were assembled in Indonesia, then shipped to Necker and reassembled by de-