



TREASURE TROVE

With the help of estate sale finds, exotic souvenirs and a seriously talented designer, one Neptune Beach family creates a home that radiates aesthetic harmony.

words by **Juliet Johnson** images by **Wally Sears**

Vou see them at the beach—hunched over, scavenging over swathes of tumbled shells. You wonder what they do with them all, suspecting a glue gun and grim, shell-encrusted ephemera ahead. Not so with the oyster shells collected by the Hillis family. On a friend's recommendation, Bob and Allison Hillis, with their young boys Cuatro and Finn, ventured forth to collect as many oyster shells as they could stuff into Finn's baby stroller from the oyster beds in Fernandina Beach. The haul was then bleached, sun-dried and pasted onto select walls in their home, within and without, to create a whimsical, private world like no other.

From the street, Casa Hillis looks like a nicely kept-up split. It was renovated for the couple by close friend, architect and set designer, Julia Starr Sanford. The front of the house was replaced with windows and a new patio lined with rosemary and a shell-covered retaining wall. Extensive renovation plans included removing walls, adding windows and doors, and renovating both the kitchen and all three bathrooms. Sanford then curated Allison's extensive collections so that the home now acts as a treasure trove of striking finds from all over the world, including local estate sales. Allison Hall Hillis is a former art student, interior designer and now "creative director and traveling muse" for Natural Life, a colorful girls' clothing, accessories and gifts lifestyle brand. It was Allison's art teacher mother who ignited her passion for pattern and texture. What might be generously described as attic treasures are, in the Hillis's household, exciting and alluring. But all artists (and renovating homeowners) need a true North, someone who will not only hold the line on design but also speak the truth wearying and impatient owners don't want to hear. Sanford was just that on this project, producing her trademark aesthetic and a logic most yearn to mimic.

This page from top: The living room shelves hold a mix of Allison's coffee table books, a curation of hand-turned wooden bowls and an old dough bowl from Eastern Europe; the house is filled with animal-inspired elements, such as a zebra portrait in the dining room; many of the accessories came from far-flung locales. "When we travel, I pack a suitcase in a suitcase and our goal is to fill it up. If we have to ship back, then we do."





Left: A collection of button hooks takes residence above the TV in the kitchen. **Below, from left:** "Estate sales are kind of an obsession," concedes Allison. "The find is the fun. I'm never on the hunt for anything particular. I like to get inspired by what's in front of me;" the bathrooms are unusual with their marble troughs and cypress cabinets.

A stag's head looms over the foyer, layered above masks, tribal drums and a solid Guatemalan chest. Opposite is an estate sale find—a bench with a glass lid that displays sharks teeth set on sand. This last was bought as a birthday present for Cuatro.

The living room is all about texture and loft. Where the ceilings were once flat, now they soar, clad in locally sourced bleached cypress planks. The rough oystered hearth provides a strong contrast, as does the skin rug, purchased at The Grand Bazaar in Istanbul. A pair of rattan chairs offers an inviting scoop design, opposite a simple, solid wood bench from Indonesia. Two upholstered gray armchairs from the old Chase Manhattan Building in New York complete the fireside grouping. The mantel holds an original Jamali painting on cork (a spiritual artist Allison knew in Orlando) and hand-carved wooden birds are mementos of frequent trips to

Guatemala. Stubby candleholders in the all-season fireplace are also Guatemalan. Each piece has a reason and a story.

"I don't feel like I have a particular style; it's all by feel," says Allison. "There's definitely a wildlife theme throughout. And, I love abstract art."

The dining room is an "open concept" space between the living room, kitchen and family room addition. Casual dinners and homework take place on a table bought on a design trip to Chicago, lit by a George Nelson pendant light. The chairs were collected over time.

The chic, contemporary kitchen is a surprise. Though the appliances are all American stainless and the tile backsplash Cuban tile, the overall effect recalls modern design in South Africa. Maybe it's the custom walnut cabinets with contemporary pulls or the rare pottery from Costa Rica—somehow, this space fits the home's global vibe.



The adjoining family room is, as Allison says, the everything room. "This is our watch-the-kids-in-the-pool room, the painting and drawing room. We'll even pull the dining room table in and have dinner with all the doors open."

Against the family room's only wall is a bamboo sofa. It's an estate sale find, refreshed with a dramatic teal suede and high gloss white paint. Cuban cement tile

makes up the flooring, and each piece is a little bit different. A balcony leads down to the pool deck, one and half floors below.

Despite the unique interior, it is the yard that first led the Hillis family to purchase the property. It's the highest point in Atlantic Beach—Harvey Hill. The Harvey family used to own all property from 5th Street to Ocean Blvd. (Lavinia

Harvey Kubiak actually still lives on the street). It is even rumored that a train ran on the hill. "I loved the topography and the old oak trees," says Allison. There are still paths running between the houses, including a set of steps with the year "1966" carved into them. Being that it was the year Allison was born, it felt like a good omen.

In addition to a pair of symmetrical steps, the saltwater pool (artfully terraced into the previously sloping back yard by Sanford) can be accessed through a bathroom off of the man cave. The former fourth bedroom has since been transformed into a masculine enclave, in which a stag's head (Allison's father was a big game hunter) frames an overstuffed, worn leather sofa by Percival Lafer.

Upstairs are the two boys' rooms, connected by a Jack-and-jill bathroom, and the Master suite, which is dominated by a colossal screen of peacocks, flamingoes and a Japanese red bridge. Naturally, it's from an estate sale.

The boys' bedrooms also display collections. Finn has an impressive line-up of snow globes, initially handed down by a cousin. It grows every time anyone in the family travels. Cuatro's room, on the other hand, has bugs. "We were trying to help him find something to collect," says Allison. "We think all boys should have a collection so that it gives them something to hunt for. Boys are natural hunters, and this gives them something interesting to do when we travel. It's fun watching the collections evolve." The tarantula came from Peru, the butterflies were found in Brazil; it is remarkable that these boys, aged 8 and 4, are so well-travelled already. Cuatro's closet doubles as a reading nook, thanks to Turkish rug and small pillows. "All the shop keepers in Istanbul had these little private spaces; we wanted Cuatro to have one too."

But perhaps the best find of all was at Allison's own yard sale a decade ago, when commercial real estate broker Bob Hillis drifted up the driveway. "If you take that table and armoire, I'll give you \$20!" shouted Allison. Bob remembers being wonder-struck. He might think it was the curious negotiation that bowled him over; history suggests otherwise. A beautiful wife, two sons and a magical life exploring the world is one heck of a find. *



This page from above: The floor-to-ceiling windows offer plenty of natural light; the multi-level yard offers lots of fun places to hide more treasure—like a four-inch iron syrup boiler resting at the foot of some live oaks. It's from Statesboro, Georgia where Allison's cousin is a medical doctor who still barbers for care. "He's always sending us various objects." Mostly used as a birdbath, the giant bowl can also be a fire pit, though it takes four strong men to move the thing.

