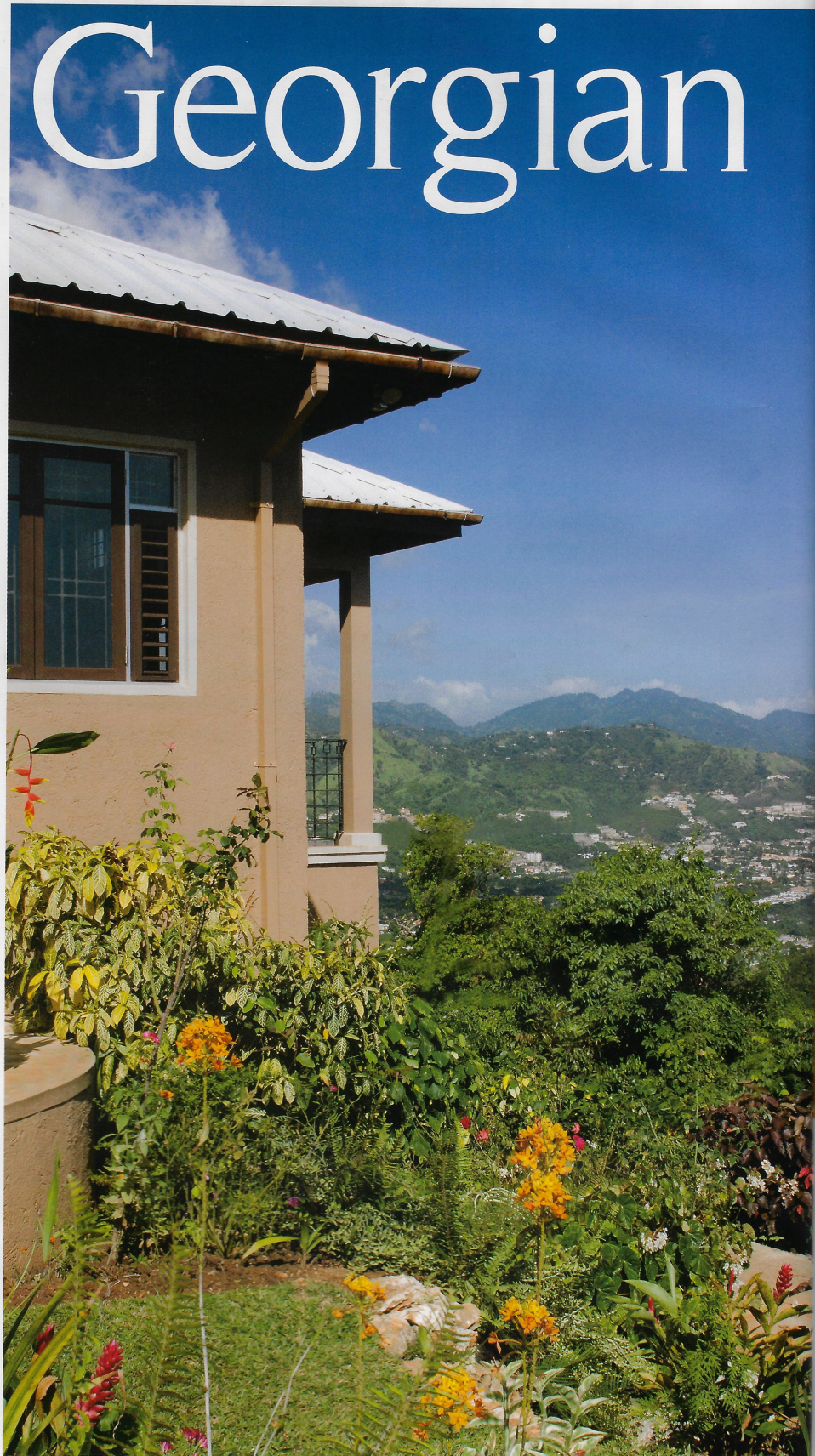


# From

# Georgian



Text: Michele Geister  
Photography: Denis Valentine





**E**lizabeth Newman was working on her associate degree in Oceanography when she realized that even though she loved nature, the practice was “too cut and dry science and math” for her. She needed a vocation that would also engage her artistic spirit, so she shifted to architecture, which combined perfectly and nurtured her love of the natural sciences and artistic abilities as a sculptor of spaces.

# to Green and Gorgeous

*Left – Cozy breakfast nook at Elizabeth's home*  
*Right – Master Bedroom*



A native Bostonian, she married a Jamaican and came to the island around twenty years ago. Here she got her first job working with a local property developer. This introduced her to a remarkable site with an extensive pedigree. At 1600 feet over Kingston on a Smokey Vale hillside, a former pimento plantation known as Bellevue was aptly christened. A sweeping 180 degree view encompasses the majesty of the Blue Mountains and neighbouring ranges. It takes in Kingston's urban sprawl right to the Palisades, Port Royal, and the sea beyond, continuing to Portmore where it encompasses the cane fields and Hellshire Hills of St. Catherine. It is a superlative vista that its Great House occupants would likely have enjoyed since its reported building in 1763. Over the years, the property hosted a diverse group: British Admirals, convalescing city folk, famous authors, socialites, Jesuit priests and seminarians all lived or visited. Bellevue transitioned from plantation and private home to guest house then became the home of St Michael's Roman Catholic Seminary before returning to personal residences again.

Hurricane Gilbert (1988) devastated what had been loyally maintained for over 200 years. As an architect on the proposed development of apartments and villas, Newman first visited in the early 1990s, and was determined to retain some elements of the property's history and ruins.

She describes her reaction on that first visit: "Entering the property and arriving at the cobbled courtyard, was parallel to

crossing a threshold of time. Passing through this wrought iron gate, we followed the curving walkway along the ruin, past an ancient Poinciana tree to the lawn of the great house." Silence denotes the wonder and speechlessness she felt that day. "I just stood right there, and fell in love with this corner of the property—it was my favourite." Deep in her subconscious, was there a premonition that she didn't even realize? An allure existed.

The economy plummeted and the project was placed on indefinite hold. "For years Doris Gross, my business partner, and I had been searching for a property to develop into a prototype for an ideal way of living in Jamaica, marrying the advantages of city townhouse living with the joy of having a home and gardens in the country. We immediately knew, when the property came up for sale, that this was a perfect opportunity for Portico, our new company, to achieve our vision. Portico's vision was to balance architecture with the natural environment of the landscape, integrating sustainable systems and blurring the line between inside and out and enhancing the tropical lifestyle experience. We knew we couldn't implement such a development by ourselves. FSC Consultants was the first of a small core group to join Portico."

Like-minded and spirited friends and friends of friends followed without word even touching the street. "You can see in people's reactions the minute they walk on to the property,



*Living area with stained concrete floors and high ceilings*



*Top – Relaxed patio with old stone wall*

*Right – Outdoor lighting flanked by river stones*



whether they are meant to be here. We assembled three initial investors, bought the property, and put the legal structure together to make it this design/build community.” The homeowners’ contract included clauses to use Newman’s Portico, architecture/design firm “to preserve the beauty of the property and have some continuity of design”.

The focus was to be about the gardens, indoor, outdoor living—very important. If you had to remove a tree, you needed to plant back two more. The size of homes was limited to 3,500 square feet to preserve the property. This clause fit Newman’s belief that if a home is designed with an ease of flow, simplicity and openness, it does not need to become unnecessarily large. The new development, baptized St Michael’s Garden, is a showpiece of tropical living that embraces the natural environment—physically by design.

Delrose Campbell was the attorney on the project to guide “the legal aspect of how to come together as a group to bring about such a development project.” She, too, had such an illuminating moment upon first seeing the property. “I got goose bumps. The overwhelming impression came from the feel and ambiance of the property and its stunning view. The view was remarkable.” So remarkable she bought in even though she was happy in her current residence and not even looking to build or move. Campbell couldn’t resist the site’s charm, “I thought it was just one of the best spots on Earth.”

There’s also special significance for Campbell as a Roman Catholic to live on the grounds of the former seminary that trained young Jamaican men to be priests.

“I could relate to some of the spiritual relics that are still there, like pieces of the station of the cross that are still in my garden,” Campbell says.

The walk to her front entrance flourishes with bushes and blossoms but nothing severely manicured for this country girl at heart. “A lot of the plants that are in my garden I grew up knowing from my grandmother’s garden, so I can relate to them. They were not grown in a designed or structured way, but they were planted randomly and just came together in a lush green way. So, for me, that is what this environment inspires.”

The gardens don’t stop at the front door, however. The main floor of the home has trellised and secured interior gardens, right across, from the entry courtyard to the master bath and bedroom suite. Each area opens to its own landscaped oasis. The home was placed carefully along the contours of the hillside, preserving and spilling out onto the existing garden terraces. Campbell recounts, while stifling a chuckle, “when I contemplated my own house, I had no real idea of what I would want. Elizabeth had me look through a series of magazines and books to highlight things that appealed to me.

*Pathway leading to Delrose's home*



*The entry courtyard*



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At the end of it, she said that what I had liked practically told her that I could live OUTDOORS based on what I selected. It was a revelation to me how much I liked a lot of light and air.”

The view facade of the home has balconies off the living room and bedrooms, offering premium vantage points for admiring the city lights. These outside spaces are particularly delightful in the times the mist, aka that “smokey veil”, cocoons everything and one truly experiences living in the clouds.

There is the balance of grounding in other elements: earth and wood. The floors in the home are concrete, recalling Delrose’s grandma’s time. Economical yet handsome, the flooring’s acid-etched ruddy hue is a practical, arty continuation of the Red Hill’s celebrated soil. In the kitchen with dramatically dark cabinets, a portion of a tree from the property, carefully selected for its graceful profile, is preserved as a signature feature reincarnated as a rustic table. Of course, there is the ‘brawta’ of ethereal bouquets throughout the interior, all cut from Campbell’s gardens.

Newman’s own kitchen features a slab of mahogany she found on the property. She had it finished as a countertop, the edge of bark still intact. Branches from the tree were milled

into floating shelves that grace the wall in her stair alcove, flooded with light from the stepped roof windows. Her design preference for lightness and simplicity keeps cabinetry below with efficient drawers allowing large pendant lamps with slate embellishments to shine. A number of walls don’t even make their way to the roof; rather, they are kept low to allow the breezes and light to flow freely.

Her curving staircase is a showcase for the concrete floors; and its contour references the seashells that Newman has mounted in shadow boxes on the adjacent wall. Her homemade art fondly celebrates mollusks as “master architects” as she calls them: “Little creatures that craft the most beautiful homes.”

The peaceful cohesion between homes is sublimely harmonious, as is the integration of old with new. The timber-hewn posts at Newman’s entry are repurposed from Bellevue’s time while another home’s custom, limestone columns blend seamlessly with the original masonry.

All the homes at St. Michael’s will share the centre of the ruins and their adjacent gardens as common area with, perhaps, a water labyrinth and fountain for a centerpiece, as a refinement to come.



*The open kitchen with rustic, tree table*

*Master bedroom and bathroom with indoor gardens*



Certainly, another HHG photo shoot will be necessary, if her transcendent patio is any indication. It dramatically incorporates an original stone wall of the ruins, which will also be shared with a future master bedroom suite. The patio is warmed from above by a glass covered trellis, and cozy with an aubergine accent wall and custom furniture from Exquisite Wicker and Bellindo Limited. Elizabeth collaborated with the craftsmen to create a modernized weave pattern with a trio of multi-coloured strands. Elizabeth's collections of driftwood, shells and sea-glass, and antique finds all have their niches here, offering additional life forces to the environment.

There are other energies residing here. The novelist, Ian Fleming, reportedly chose his hero's name from ornithologist James Bond's *Birds of the West Indies* while visiting Bellevue. And, then there is legend and lore of the female spirit said to be the wife of an Edwardian admiral, murdered by her husband's hand in the dining room. Newman's efficient management of the community had included the prerequisite ablutions of pre-construction rum. "We all had our ritual blessings to ask permission to dwell with the spirits that were here before."

As yet, none of the new generation of residents has encountered the unfortunate lady. Could it be Newman's care for integrity that has revitalized this exclusive scheme, with such organic panache, soothes occupants both present and past?

"To have this opportunity as an architect—to actually preserve a piece of Jamaica's history is an honour," says Newman, "I'm just blessed to be able to participate in this and to live here with deep gratitude as protector and patron of this truly unique place". **HHG**

*City view through the ruins*

