

"I think it's important to use real materials," says Vervoordt. "You feel better surrounded by things that are understated but authentic. This is particularly true in big houses." RIGHT: The waterfront terrace, furnished with casual wicker pieces, is off the sunroom.

## PALLADIAN SPIRIT

*continued from page 184*

walnut came alive. I'd never seen anything quite like it."

Antrobus watched as *pastelone*, the original form of terrazzo, went down on the floors in several of the public rooms and *faux-marbre* spread across the dado in the dining room. She watched as old recipes for paint were mixed up by hand, like something out of the Renaissance, and antique parquetries were painstakingly re-assembled in the library and dining room. And she saw the master himself arrive and arrange the furniture and objects he had sleuthed out or (as with most of the unholstered pieces) designed or helped the Cejases to find.

For all his decorative alchemy, Vervoordt definitively believes that a house must express the personality of the owners, not the designer: "The Cejases like sophisticated painted and gilded furniture. I myself might have put in early-Italian furniture, but, you see, this is why collaboration stretches everyone."

While the clients already had a striking collection of modern art, Vervoordt helped expand their interest in antiquities. Trudy Cejas had been a longtime collector of Roman glass, but the Palladian rooms wanted more emphatic objects, hence the Roman torsos and Greek pots, the Roman mosaics adapted into low tables and the Corinthian capitals used beside chairs. "The house,



"Ultimately, this house is Axel's vision," observes Trudy Cejas. "Besides all the remarkable elegance and style, there's a calm to his work." ABOVE: For the master bedroom, Vervoordt combined a giltwood Louis XV console with two of his own upholstered armchairs.

worthy but—perhaps unavoidably—lacking in soul. "How do you bring soul to Florida, how do you find the spirit of a new house?" This became the designer's refrain.

His solution was multifaceted and characteristic of his previous work, while being very carefully calibrated to the taste of the Cejases, who have a formidable collection of paintings and antiquities and strong ideas of their own about design and decoration. Naturally, Vervoordt first re-

solved the interior floor plan (with help, on the practical side of things, from Stephen Siegel, an architect who had worked on the Cejases' Manhattan apartment), and then he set about unleashing—though for the most part, of course, creating—the house's notably absent spirit.

For Axel Vervoordt, the spirit of a house, whether the structure itself is new or old, lives in the touch of the human hand. The craftsman, with his natural materials, his old skills and nearly forgotten techniques—this is where Vervoordt inevitably turns when he begins expressing his interior design. "For me, natural materials are critical," Vervoordt explains. "Especially in Florida, where there is so much that is fake,

you must be honest, you must be organic, you must be true."

Of course, Vervoordt is too deft simply to specify throwing a walnut doorframe up, for example, varnishing it and leaving it at that. Alison Antrobus, the project's on-site design director—for three years she basically lived in a trailer parked out front—remembers the day the decorative painters arrived from Belgium to execute Vervoordt's finishes. "Axel had told me to leave all the walnut casing alone. I thought: In Florida? In that weather? Then the painters came and applied a concoction, a mixture of something like crushed walnut shells and the sap of an exotic tree, and rubbed it into the wood, and, I tell you, the grain began to pulse, the

*continued on page 238*

For Axel Vervoordt, the spirit of a house lives in the touch of a human hand.

being so new, and being filled with modern art, needed a bridge that reached across time to span the years."

And so, in the end, can a spirit be said to have come forward in this new building, and if so, what kind? "The thing no one tells you about Axel's work until you live with it," Trudy Cejas observes, "is how serene it is. Whenever I walk into this house, my shoulders drop. It's the strangest thing."

"Not so very strange," says Vervoordt. "Interior design is a kind of magic. Never underestimate the power of the human hand. What I'd hoped for here was the flavor of a big Italian house with little corners balanced and worked to look like jewels." □