



ON LOCATION

They Turned the ‘Ugliest Rundown Condo’ Into a Hawaiian Dream

For a couple in San Francisco, finishing a renovation in Hawaii during the pandemic wasn’t easy. Returning to daily life in the Bay Area was even harder.





By **Tim McKeough**

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When Nicole Hollis and Lewis Heathcote began making regular trips to Hawaii a decade ago, their visits invariably mixed business and pleasure. The married couple, who run [NicoleHollis](#), a San Francisco-based interior design firm where Ms. Hollis is the creative director and Mr. Heathcote is the chief executive, were looking to break out of the Bay Area.

“We were starting to hear more and more of our clients say, ‘Yeah, we’re building, or we’re buying, or we’re spending time in Hawaii,’” said Mr. Heathcote, 46. “So about 10 years ago, we had a real intention to spend time here.”

“We had our honeymoon here,” added Ms. Hollis, 49. “But we also wanted to work here.”



Nicole Hollis and Lewis Heathcote gut renovated a condo in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, to create a vacation home that served as a long-term escape during the pandemic. James Rubio for The New York Times

Their many visits over the years helped them build a network of professional contacts and demonstrate that they were serious about working in the area. The couple’s firm has since designed numerous private homes in Hawaii and is presently at work on the 1 Hotel Hanalei Bay and Kona Village, a Rosewood resort.

Along the way, they fell in love with the islands for more personal reasons. “If you come from the East Coast, like Nicole, or you come from Europe, it’s just so otherworldly,” said Mr. Heathcote, who was born and raised in England.

As business trips increasingly grew into extended family trips with their children — Poppy, now 10, and Beckett, 7 — the couple decided it was time to buy a vacation home in Hawaii.

When they began hunting around Kailua-Kona on the Big Island in 2019, they knew exactly what they wanted. “We just started looking for the ugliest rundown condo we could find, because we knew that we would want to remodel it,” Ms. Hollis said.

They found it at the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai: a three-bedroom, 2,800-square-foot condo with a series of lanais that hadn’t been changed since it was built about 20 years earlier.



“It was super dated,” Ms. Hollis said, with creamy wall-to-wall carpet, gold-hued slate and orangy woodwork, along with cabinetry and built-ins installed on diagonals that formed awkward corners. “It was all ’90s angles.”

After buying the home for \$1.9 million that April, they gutted it, seeing little they wanted to keep beyond the cedar-paneled vaulted ceilings, which they refinished, and the indoor-outdoor flow. “We were the first people here, in any of these condos, to truly take it down to the studs,” Mr. Heathcote said.

In place of the cream-and-orange color scheme, Ms. Hollis developed a high-contrast palette of light and dark grays, along with bleached and blackened woods. “I wanted something calming and relaxed, not a lot of decoration,” she said. “A lot of these places have tons of tile, and lots of accents, decoration and sconces. We just kind of stripped all that away.”

Aiming to play up the textures of various materials, she added bleached, reclaimed teak flooring, light white-oak doors and warm-gray lime plaster on the walls. Then she brought in furniture with a natural, unfussy appeal. The great room is furnished with a low-slung sectional sofa covered in Belgian linen from Restoration Hardware, a blackened-oak Beam coffee table by Marlieke Van Rossum, vintage French rattan armchairs and a handwoven jute rug from Mark Nelson Designs.



Artful light fixtures — including a Planck pendant by Jérôme Pereira with a sculpted oak frame that hangs above the dining table and free-form pendants by Rogan Gregory above the night stands in the primary bedroom — add visual flair.

The couple's contractor, Dowbuilt, began construction shortly after Ms. Hollis and Mr. Heathcote closed on the property, and made swift progress bringing Ms. Hollis's vision to life — right up until the pandemic struck, at which point the project hit a standstill.

Last July, wanting to push the renovation over the finish line, the couple flew to the island with their children, quarantined and then personally oversaw the final stages of work, which cost a total of about \$1.2 million. Their intention was to move into the apartment for a quick vacation before returning to San Francisco.

“We planned on going home in August,” Ms. Hollis said. “And then we changed our minds and said, ‘Let’s stay. The school’s not open. What’s the point in going back?’”



Over the following months, they kept planning new departure dates, only to change their minds. “We were like, ‘OK, we’ll go back for Christmas,’” Ms. Hollis said. “Then we didn’t go back for Christmas.”

It wasn’t until April of this year that they finally returned to San Francisco. But after their extended experience of island life, they now plan to return as often as possible.

“If you’re fortunate enough to buy a second home, you always have this sort of wistful thing where you say, ‘Can you imagine a time when we could live there full-time?’” Mr. Heathcote said.

After getting to do just that, Ms. Hollis summed up the experience succinctly: “It was magical.”

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Correction: June 30, 2021

An earlier version of photo caption number four in the slide show with this article misstated the name of the artist who created the painting over the sofa. It is Blaise Rosenthal, not Luke Silverman.

A version of this article appears in print on July 4, 2021, Section RE, Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: The Magical Pull of an Island Makes It Hard to Leave. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)