


Dynamic DESIGN

By Christi Bowler Elflein
Photography Michael LeGrand and
compliments of Julia Starr Sanford

Rooted in Place and Grace

Julia Starr Sanford: mindful architect & global visionary



Atlanta-born Julia Starr Sanford spent her childhood summers at her family home in Ponte Vedra Beach. Her fond memories of the Old Ponte Vedra community led Sanford to seek out the First Coast again as an adult. In 1996, she and her family sailed from Panama City Beach through the channels of Central Florida and up the First Coast, looking for deep water to dock their sailboat. They found a harbor in Old Town, a sleepy historic neighborhood on the north end of Amelia Island and settled down. Amelia Island would become home for Sanford for fourteen years. Today, the visionary architect lives in Atlantic Beach and runs her architectural and design businesses out of her studio gallery in Jacksonville Beach.

Right: Sanford with Michael Sherrod, assistant director of architectural studio of Starr Sanford Design and Beth Williams.

Far Right: Sublime Original is a gallery that houses her signature furniture line, Primitive Modern, as well as showcases the works of some of the region's best artists.



Sanford has a long list of architectural accomplishments ranging from development of residential prototypes for Alys Beach in Walton County, Fla. to movie set designs for Warner Brothers to town architecture for Amelia Park in Fernandina Beach. Globally, she is well sought after for her expertise in sustainable design that is rooted in her passion, vision and a drive to better the world we live in.

"There is a personal journey and philosophy that informs it all, an inspiration to live more consciously on the land," says Sanford. A common thread of sustainability, livability and durability weaves through-

out all her design expressions. It reflects an authenticity derived from an appreciation for the heritage of place and modern coastal living.

Today, Sanford is impacting the world from her studio gallery in Jacksonville Beach. She runs an architectural and interior design company, Starr Sanford Design Associates, designs furniture to fit the lifestyle of her homes through Starr Style, and houses a furniture and art gallery called Sublime Original.

Designing Smart in the Caribbean

Sanford is one of the founding members of the Sky Institute + Foundation, an international nonprofit inventing the village

of the future. "Driven by research, reflection, and greater social and environmental awareness," says Sanford, the Sky Institute is "exploring alternative ways of building and living in developing countries with less resources." The foundation is a community of experts in fields ranging from urban planning and environmental engineering to biology and food production working together to find sustainable solutions to support the growth of developing nations. Her specialty is creating prototypical sustainable house designs.

Transforming the prototypes and concepts produced by the Sky Institute into reality is the purpose of studioSky. Driven by Sanford and two partners, Steve Mouzon in Miami,

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Left clockwise: Mahogany Bay Cottages on Ambergris Cay in Belize; Mahogany Bay room interior designed with her furnishings; Dining room of a Ponte Vedra Beach home; Exterior of Ponte Vedra Beach home designed by Sanford; The Primitive Modern factory in Belize.



Fla. and Eric Moser in Beaufort, S.C., the design firm is engaged primarily in creating new international communities in the Caribbean. Their current projects include Schooner Bay in the Bahamas, Kalu Yala, an off-the-grid community in Panama, and Mahogany Bay on Ambergris Caye in Belize.

The firm's partnership with Mahogany Bay began when the developer asked studioSky to design the community's boutique hotel and 400 detached cottages. The cottages "celebrate the essence of living in sub-tropical environments." Sanford's design group was brought on to design the interiors of the hotel and cottages. Belize is blessed with a 360,000 acre sustainably harvested forest that is certified by the Forest Steward Council, an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes the responsible management of the world's forest. Sanford designed furniture for the hotel and the cottages using these sustainable Belizean hardwoods. Then the developer built a factory locally to build the furniture. Local craftsmen were hired and trained in the art of old wood joinery to be part of the manufacturing team.

The project is a success twofold. The design of the resort's rooms and cottages embody the elegant minimalism of old world coastal heritage, combined with sustainable craftsmanship creating spaces both rich and elegant in feel. Aside from the gorgeous amenities, the venture spurred the birth of a new Belizean furniture manufacturing facility providing economic opportunity for craftsmen in the region.

Starr Sanford Design Influences on the First Coast

Locally, Sanford's architecture and interior design team focuses primarily on designing carefully conceived, legacy homes here on the First Coast and throughout the South. Atlantic Beach and Ponte Vedra Beach are "still part of Old Florida and Old Jacksonville and I feel like somewhat of a steward of that," says Sanford.



Left: Sanford's architecture can be seen in Alys Beach; her design work in Rosemary Beach as well as other Walton County communities; Primitive Modern furniture is based on classic design with modern lines.



Sanford's custom homes draw from the history of the property's location, responding to place and climate. "The desire, by a few, for enduring and exceptionally crafted homes provides us a platform for timeless architecture," says Sanford. "We try to build legacy homes that you would pass down from one generation to another. Our focus is on really well built craftsmanship and durable materials." The firm also works closely with clients to create intimate interior spaces "full of grace and style" that speak to the personal nature of what defines a home. "A sanctuary of self and personal expression," says Sanford, "it is the soul of a home."

Starr Style and Primitive Modern

Sanford's interior design work led her to open furnishings stores, including Pearl Home in Jacksonville Beach. She recently sold Pearl Home and launched Starr Style, a wholesale furnishings company and gallery.

Dovetailing off the success of the custom designed furniture for Mahogany Bay in Belize, she created the furniture line, Primitive Modern. The Primitive Modern line of furniture has 200 pieces in four collections. Sanford says that each piece of furniture is "based on taking a traditional, historical, established furniture piece and injecting a bit of modern style." The furniture is crafted from the Belizean hardwoods that are certified as sustainably harvested and manufactured in Sanford's factory there. Old world techniques of wood joinery are used in construction. Then each piece is hand scraped, rubbed smooth and finished with the Starr Style signature white wash to showcase the exotic wood's natural grains. The rustic woods with clean lines create a juxtaposition of primitive with modern.

Sanford says, "Our hope is that every piece is a reflection of the beauty of the world we are in."

A Studio Gallery Hub for Creatives

A team of creatives run Starr Sanford Design and Starr Style from her studio gallery tucked just off 3rd Street in south Jacksonville Beach. The inventive space is a hub for

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other creatives as well. Several local artists have set up studios in the space including well-known artists Jim Draper and Thomas Hager, as well as emerging artists Wally Sears and Willy Meyer. Sanford commissions work from each of them to coordinate with her furnishings collections.

In the front of the building, Sanford has created Sublime Original (SO), a furniture and art gallery. The gallery is a thoughtfully curated collection of Starr Style furnishings and original artwork that resonates with the organic forms of the furniture. Every piece is a reflection of nature.

SO is open to the public on Fridays.

Expressing Design through Film

As a diversion and compliment to Sanford's architectural work, she has designed feature film sets for more than a dozen movies. Amongst her favorites include "My Cousin Vinny" and "The Legend of Bagger Vance," both filmed largely in Savannah. She also acted as NBC's art director for the Today Show and the 1996 Centennial Olympic Broadcast in Atlanta.

"That experience has helped me really imagine space in terms of all the lighting, the atmosphere of a space, not just the one dimension of drawing it. It's how it's furnished, how it feels—how it lives," says Sanford.

The many layers of her design and passion to deliver a sustainable world come together to create a dynamic vision of how a holistic approach to architecture and design can serve the greater good. And it's happening right here on the First Coast.

"I am focused on the principles of enduring architecture, and building as many examples of this in Jacksonville as there are patrons of this practice," says Sanford. 🐼