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# housebeautiful

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# D.C. CLASSIC

One of Billy Baldwin's greatest decorating jobs was the Washington house of Bill and **Deeda Blair**. House Beautiful last published it twenty years ago. Here it is again—maintained, refreshed, yet faithful to the original scheme

Deeda Blair, wearing Chanel, against the 12-panel Coromandel screen that is a potent presence in the pale living room. Silk table skirt is hand-painted from a wallpaper design.

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: BARBARA ZATCOFF FOR THE ARTIST AGENCY





## {EVERY POSSIBLE

**I**N THE SPRING OF 1968, THE YOUNG MRS. WILLIAM MCCORMICK BLAIR, JR., stood in the foyer of her splendid new house near the Belgian embassy, dreaming. She had both vision and a sense of detail, and was determined to create "the most tranquil of retreats." Every possible surface had to be the shade of chalk—not just any shade of chalk. And her decorator would be Billy Baldwin, whose pared-down brilliance she admired. The house they created would evoke the era of civility, a Washington of dinners where Nobel laureates dropped by. In that Washington, cooks were trained at home, voices were modulated, nuance was all.

Deeda Blair arrived in Washington in the last days of the Johnson administration, after her husband's tour as ambassador to the Philippines had ended. Extravagantly beautiful, with eyes set wide apart and a skin without a pore, young Deeda in her Givenchy and Chanel surely dazzled her painter, Mr. Stuckey. Inspired by a shade of white worn by the nuns in her convent school in Chicago and by a childhood passion for lilies, she instructed him ever so politely, "More stone! More stone! More stone!" Remembering this, Mrs. Blair said simply, "It worked."

"It worked" is a phrase I have heard from her on more than a few occasions. It is the hidden code for Deeda Blair's lack of self-congratulation on her remarkable accomplishments. Soon after she married, she went to work with Mary Lasker at the Lasker Foundation. Lasker had made it her personal mission to try to find a cure for cancer. Blair, next posted to Manila with her husband, had herself tutored by researchers and scientists.

"It worked" applied at the very beginning of the beginning in her work for the Harvard AIDS Institute and its innovative research scientist, Dr. Max

**[above left]** The room beyond the marble-paved entry hall with its swirling staircase is the "dining room that doesn't look like a dining room," in Deeda Blair's words. There is no sideboard, no woody table, no stiff chairs. **[right]** "Billy started every room with the seating layout," Blair remembers, and "everything here is exactly where he placed it," she says of the library.





SURFACE HAD TO BE A SHADE OF CHALK}





The much-used library opens to a back porch surrounded by trees. Most of the Blairs' antique chairs are Louis XVI. Sofa and curtain fabrics from Nantucket Looms. On the floor: five coats of paint.



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# {THE HOUSE IS



Essex. In the mid 1980s, when 7,000 Senegalese prostitutes seemingly failed to contract HIV, Dr. Essex set out to discover the reason why. The Institute needed start-up money at a time when AIDS was little known and certainly not a popular cause. Blair had the idea to approach Maurice Templesman, the African expert, for advice. "The money is yours," Templesman told her. He has been deeply involved in the quest to bring an AIDS vaccine to Africa ever since.

"It worked" applied to her recent mission for two automated DNA sequencers to evaluate samples from the new Botswana clinic that the Harvard AIDS Institute is set to open in December—the largest regional AIDS research lab on the continent. "I went to truly generous and wonderful friends," she explains. "It worked" also sums up another campaign of hers at the National Institutes of Health to support a new center to study the human brain.

Then there are her board responsibilities for the Scripps Research Institute and consultancies for a number of biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies, the meetings with stem-cell scientists and human genome researchers, the frequent trips to explore emerging science companies. She also makes time for the private help she gives week after week in long letters and memos written in perfect convent penmanship to cancer patients all over the world suggesting state-of-the-art clinical trials and research that might help them. Her telephone rings "at least fifty times a day," according to her assistant, Jerry Levis. "Mrs. Blair prefers the quiet of the fax," he says.



[above left] Deeda Blair takes care of some of her correspondence in this office. On the wall is part of her toile flower collection, all made by a certain Mrs. Munnecke of Chicago, now deceased. Fresh flowers and floral motifs are everywhere in this house. German 18th-century watercolor of a pheasant was a gift from Blair's great friend Khalil Rizk. [right] The flower-strewn armchair in the main bedroom wears a silk warp print Blair discovered at a Galliano fashion show and tracked down the source. Bed is a French antique.



MEANT TO EVOKE THE ERA OF CIVILITY}







And certainly, her vision for every detail of her house “worked”—fringes copied in a Paris atelier because no fringe available looked like an antique piece she had in mind; curtains and bedspread made of her Porthault trousseau sheets. “Please don’t use the word perfectionist to describe me,” she says. “I hate that.”

One day, soon after Billy Baldwin came to help Deeda with the house, Bill Blair returned home to discover on the floor his framed collection of autographs and photographs of statesmen

like Churchill, Gandhi, and Roosevelt (begun in prep school). They had always decorated the embassy residences in Copenhagen and later Manila. Not here. It was then that Bill Blair had the first idea of Deeda’s mettle and her determined vision of tranquillity on Foxhall Road. “I sold the collection and we now sit on it,” he said, looking at the Louis XV chairs in the library.

I had been to the Blairs’ house once before, a decade earlier, to talk to Bill Blair about his long friendship with the late Marietta Tree, a woman of comparable elegance and public service. That day, the cook had served us an unforgettable cheese soufflé—more intense and refined than any I had ever tasted—it was of course from Deeda’s own recipes. When I visited this June, the menu was repeated at my request. By the time I returned to my own chaotic, un-Deeda Blair-like household that afternoon, a fax had already arrived. The cover sheet was impeccable, the border and the neatly printed “Mrs. William McCormick Blair, Jr.” She had sent her recipe for the pasta cheese soufflé and a note. A friend had made two rubber stamps for her, she wrote. “One of them says ‘Aspiring to be a national treasure’ and the other says ‘Memo from a domestic goddess.’” The note ended with a Deeda-like refinement: “Of course I do not use these stamps on any of my letters to Harvard AIDS or the NIH.” ●





[facing page, clockwise  
from above] Antique  
French bed in a guest  
room is draped in Porthault  
sheet material; edging is  
narrow self-pleating.  
Deeda Blair in a Christian  
Lacroix hat tending the  
flowers in the box garden's  
central bronze basket, a  
favorite object of hers.  
Powder room.  
[this page] Main floor  
back porch on this sloping  
site is high in the trees.

