Duke chose to live unconventionally by blending traditions from the East Coast, Hawai’i, and the Islamic world, and the design of Shangri La reflects this idiosyncratic blend. Shangri La has no imposing entryway, no grand façade of the type one might expect to see at the home of one of America’s wealthiest individuals. The estate cannot be seen from the road at all, and only tantalizing glimpses are offered to those who surf, sail, or swim along the spectacular coastline that Shangri La overlooks. The main house is approached by descending a sloping driveway that ends at a courtyard with a large, old banyan tree. The façade here presented to the visitor is deceptively humble with its simple plaster walls and ceramic tile roof. It reveals little about the size or layout of the house. Were it not for the smiling stone camels that flank the doorway, one might not know that this approach was indeed the proper mode of entry into the house.

Stepping from outside to inside, guests are presented with startling juxtapositions: from a plain façade to a highly ornate interior; from a tropical Hawaiian landscape to refined Islamic elegance. The effect is heightened by the diversity of Islamic artistic traditions displayed in the foyer. Guests are surrounded by an array of colors produced by six hundred İznik tiles from Turkey, eighty-four colored glass, Spanish-style windows complemented by hints of sunlight and lamps, and opulent textiles, urns, and wood chests.
with a diving board and diving platform. The buildings and the pool run parallel to a high sea wall with a lava rock veneer, which protects the estate from the surf just beyond. A sinuous jetty was built into the ocean to shelter a yacht. On a secluded section of the property, separated from the residential areas by a tennis court, stand a modest caretaker’s cottage and garage. The rest of the property is appealingly landscaped with gardens, fishponds, grass, palm trees, and other lush vegetation.

The design reflects Duke’s love of swimming, surfing, sailing, and outdoor living in general. Instead of a movie theater, bowling alley, or large reading room, Shangri La features outdoor sporting opportunities: the large pool, direct access to the ocean, and tennis courts, for example. In 1939 *Life* magazine described Shangri La as “a stately concrete structure of Morocco-Persian architecture [which] stretches white and gleaming along the ocean ... make it an ideal playground. In it, some four or five months a year, the Cromwells find a haven of quiet retreat....And here, within earshot of the surf, the quiet, level-headed girl who is one of the richest heiresses in the world, fishes, swims, reads, prefers simple healthy living to social splendor.”

Though idiosyncratic, the plan of Shangri La does follow three main principles, all of which show sensitivity to the beauty of the surrounding Hawaiian landscape. First, the house is...
A mihrab is a recess or niche in a wall that indicates the direction of Mecca, and therefore the direction of prayer. At Shangri La, Doris Duke chose to locate the mihrab on an east wall, rather than in a north-western orientation, which would be the proper direction from Hawai‘i to Mecca.

Although this placement indicates that Duke did not use the mihrab for religious purposes, her decision to install it in one of the most prominent locations at Shangri La underscores her awareness of its widely acknowledged aesthetic and historical value.

Shuzo Uemoto
The living room at night.
Duke had special lighting installed throughout Shangri La to ensure that her collection could be viewed to best advantage day or night.
David Franzen

opposite
The view of the Playhouse, Diamond Head, and the Pacific Ocean is unforgettable.
David Franzen
the main house is terraced across the property to provide variation in its appearance. Second, the rooms and wings of the main house radiate around an interior, central courtyard. This courtyard and wing plan provides most rooms in the house with ocean views. Third, the main structures follow the orientation of the coastline, resulting in a strong axis that visually connects key areas of the property to the Hawaiian locale by the view just beyond. Diamond Head, the Playhouse, the pool, the living room, and a magnificent mihrab (prayer niche) that is considered Shangri La’s most important work of art are all aligned on this axis. The glass wall on the west side of the living room, also on the axis, descends into the basement. When the glass wall is down, the axis is reinforced, for one can then walk through the living room onto a grassy terrace, stroll past the enormous pool, and arrive at the Playhouse, all the time admiring the sweeping ocean and mountain views beyond. A writer for the Honolulu Star Bulletin described Shangri La in 1938:

There is nothing massive about the place: nothing that impresses by mere size. It is more like a perfectly cut gem with a flawless attention to detail, with a certain restraint in design that sparkles nonetheless. Its law, rambling architecture nestles against the hill behind it, its white walls sharpen the blue and green of the ocean, landscape and sky; its great brown stone retaining wall is in restful harmony with the sea that curls below it.**

In addition to being a home of beauty, Shangri La was also a home of technical marvels, of which the descending glass wall in the living room is perhaps the most remarkable. It is operated electrically by an Otis Elevator system. Both conceptually and technologically, a descending wall composed of an enormous glass pane was innovative at the time it was installed at Shangri La.** The use of glass ensures that the beauty of the surrounding landscape, as well as the Playhouse and pool, are visible regardless of the wall’s position. When the wall disappears, a dynamic blending of interior and exterior spaces occurs that is typical of much of Shangri La’s design. Another innovation Duke implemented at Shangri La was the use of sliding jalis. These lattice-carved screens with floral and geometric motifs were part of the marble bedroom set that Duke commissioned in India. Though based on the jalis seen in Mughal
architecture in South Asia, those at Shangri La are unique because they are not fixed in place. Instead, they and the glass doors behind them slide open or shut to provide varying degrees of light, ocean breezes, and privacy. Duke explained:

I tried to keep the house in character, using original Near Eastern pieces, but in order to make it livable as well, it was often necessary to adapt them to uses for which they were not originally intended. Thus in my Indian bedroom, carved, cutout marble jalis or screens, which were formerly used by Indian princes to keep their wives from other eyes, have a new purpose: they are not only decorative, but a means of security, for they can be locked without shutting off the air, and when not wanted can be pushed back into the wall.16

Various principles of Islamic domestic architecture may be seen in the plan and appearance of Shangri La, such as the unassumming façade, central courtyard, and abundance of gardens. Though Duke and her husband originally called for a “Hispanic-Moresque” style home, Shangri La’s design resonates with Islamic domestic architecture from a larger sphere, especially the Middle East and North Africa. In crowded urban centers such as Cairo, for example, family homes, possessions, and lifestyles were shielded from street life by presenting a simple façade to the public. Inside, however, rooms were as elaborate as a family could afford. These urban homes were often built around inner courtyards that permitted sunlight, air, and vegetation inside. The courtyard plan was practical, for it separated female spaces from male ones and the family’s private spaces from those of guests.17
At Shangri-La also, the courtyard separates guest areas from private quarters. Wings, such as those leading to Duke’s bedroom and the staff quarters, extend off the central courtyard, but are fitted with lockable doors to limit access. In contrast, rooms intended for guests’ use, such as the Turkish Rooms, living room, and dining room, are connected directly to the central courtyard. The idea of separating guest areas from the owner’s private spaces resonated with Duke. Her husband wrote:

“Doris is planning to construct a very large pool where the present pool is situated, and is also planning to have a sort of combination guest-house and boat-house Cabana arrangement, built on or just above the swim pool. This guest-house would probably have double guest rooms with a ‘hau’i’i, for each, a miniature kitchen and sports room connected to the pool. We got this idea from India and the purpose, of course, is not to have our guests continually in our hair, and vice versa!”

The buildings at Shangri-La surround, and are surrounded by, gardens and other landscaping, another feature characteristic of Islamic architecture. The Moon Garden is located at one corner of the estate. Along the length of an upper terrace is another garden, Duke’s interpretation of a Mughal garden. In between the two lie the lush central courtyard, gardens near the pool and Playhouse, and a private garden adjacent to Duke’s bedroom. Each area features a unique combination of still or moving water, vegetation, trees, grass, and fishponds.

To walk from one room to another, one usually traverses both interior spaces and covered exterior spaces. The numerous gardens play an important role in enhancing the exterior parts of the journey, as do particular works of art that Duke displayed outdoors. The close relationship between internal and external spaces at Shangri-La is characteristic of upper-class Islamic domestic architecture and is well suited to the tropical climate of Hawai‘i.

Although the main house demonstrates principles of design found within Islamic cultures, the façade of the Playhouse provides the most direct reference to a specific example of Islamic architecture. It was adapted from the Chihil Sutun, a seventeenth-century pavilion built in Isfahan, Iran, under the patronage of the Safavid emperor Shah Abbas II. Duke herself traveled to Isfahan in 1938 and took photographs of the Chihil Sutun to assist Marion Sims Wyeth with the design details. Mary Crane, a graduate student of Islamic art history at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, provided extracts from seventeenth-century travelogues that described the appearance of the Chihil Sutun. Crane also reviewed manuscript illustrations from the era in search of inspiration. Over a period of six months, the two women exchanged letters reporting on their findings.