

House & Garden

SINCE 1901

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the new kitchen
it's sleek, simple & warm



changing the script

Redesigning a modernist house near Santa Monica, architect Mark Mack started out with a bachelor for a client, but ended up with a family

THE LIVING ROOM, seen from the poolside patio, this page, is at the heart of the original early-'60s, open-plan house. The outdoor-furniture cushions are covered in a red-and-white Sunbrella fabric from Diamond Foam & Fabric, L.A.

THE TWO-STORY ANNEX, opposite page, is a recent addition by L.A. architect Mark Mack. The green patio chairs placed outside the annex were a flea market find.



IT'S AN OLD Hollywood story. First, someone has the modest kernel of a good idea; then the hotshots get involved, the script gets rewritten, and the costs begin to mount. Before you know it, a small-scale production has grown into a big-time blockbuster.

No doubt screenwriter Larry Levin has seen the scenario played out time and again with movie deals. This, however, is the tale of Levin's house, near Santa Monica. And for his money, it couldn't have a happier ending.

The scene opens in 1994, when Levin, an Illinois native with, he says, "no taste," decided to buy a 3,500-square-foot '60s-modern house in the Rustic Canyon area. "I'd been a renter for twenty-one years," he recalls. "My New York apartment was a bachelor museum.

This is the first house I ever owned. I felt it was time to be a grown-up." Besides, he adds, "I loved the neighborhood."

Rustic Canyon, not far from the ocean and nestled between hillsides covered with chaparral, has great cachet. The community was started in 1922 by the Uplifters Club, a group of Los Angeles artists and businessmen, as a rural retreat. In the 1950s, celebrities moved in, from Johnny Weissmuller and future Chief Justice Earl Warren to Lee Marvin. The canyon is still a tony address, but Levin's house had fallen on hard times. Built in the early '60s by architect Matthew Robert Leizer—and photographed in 1966 by Julius Shulman—the house, 32 years later, "was sad, dank, and dark," Levin recalls. "My friends' jaws dropped in alarm when they saw it."

BY WENDY MOONAN PHOTOGRAPHED BY MICHEL ARNAUD

STYLED BY PAULA FOX

Still, Levin saw its possibilities. As soon as he purchased the house, it went into development—in the Hollywood sense of the phrase. Which is to say: nothing happened. Preoccupied with his film work, in the midst of a divorce that left him sharing custody of his young daughter, Eden, and a bit intimidated by the prospect of renovation, Levin let the house sit, empty, for two years.

Then he read an article about architect Mark Mack, an Austrian who had opened a California practice in 1984 and was a professor at UCLA. The subject of several books, with widely published residential projects in the Napa and Sonoma valleys, Mack has an international reputation for his use of bold color and his smooth contemporary design sensibilities. He has worked on such public buildings as the temporary headquarters for the Getty Research Institute in Santa Monica, the Boise Art Museum, and the Nexus housing complex in Fukuoka, Japan. Given Mack's serious credentials, Levin was relieved to see him arrive for their meeting at the house wearing a pair of surfer shorts and sandals. "Mark was so understated," Levin recalls, "so humble and sweet."

Mack smiles at the reaction. "I like to be characterized as an easy-living California architect," he says. "I use indigenous and vernacular elements. You could call me a relaxed modernist."

Originally, Levin wanted Mack to remodel the small kitchen only. To open up the space, Mack knocked down walls, converting three tiny rooms into one. He laid a new cement floor, scored it in an irregular pattern, and stained certain quadrants palm green. He designed a large maple worktable and new maple cabinets, staining a few random cabinet fronts cherry red.

But the project gained its own momentum as Mack's eye for color began to roam over the rest of the house. He respected Leizer's original open-plan scheme, and didn't touch such elements

TO REMAKE THE KITCHEN, right and below, Mack combined three small rooms into one. Random blocks of color serve as a counterpoint to the natural wood cabinets and 1950s school furniture. Mack custom-designed the metal rack for the pots and pans. The vintage valet rack, below, is from Orange, in L.A. The aluminum Kartell stools are from Diva, L.A.



stacks of color

Emerson didn't even know her husband when she started collecting Harlequin, a sister pattern to Fiesta, in 1980. But it seems custom-made for their new kitchen.

cutouts

Openings that face the living room and the pool bring more light into the kitchen, and allow the parents to keep an eye on their girls.

random

The architect used unexpected color notes, like the four different hues on the legs of the worktable, to create spontaneity.

colorful

in sight

A large overhead rack holds all the pots and pans. The downside to open storage, Emerson notes, is that everything has to be kept spotless and neat.

double duty

The family uses the worktable for almost all food preparation. The second sink is convenient for washing fruits and vegetables. The table also serves as an island for socializing and eating.



as Mexican paving tiles, sliding glass doors that open out onto the pool, and a breezeway. But the interiors, Levin says, became “a blank canvas for Mark.”

Mack stained the wood beams white and covered the rough stucco walls with hand-applied colored plaster. Some walls are butter yellow, others mint green. Levin describes the fireplace surround and a few other walls as “the orange of the Golden Gate bridge.”

The renovation took four months. One day, Levin arranged a play date for Eden with the daughter of Sasha Emerson, then an executive at New Line Cinema and herself a single parent. Eden and Sophie Emerson had a grand time, but the adults had the real fun. Ten months later, Levin and Emerson married—and needed more house. “Suddenly,” Emerson says, “we were the Brady Bunch.”

e NTER MARK MACK for the sequel. Emerson had already renovated three L.A. houses, one a Paul Williams junior mansion, and Mack was happy to collaborate with her. “I like to get into the intricacies of merging my vision with someone else’s,” he says. One of their signal successes is the

ASIDE FROM MACK’S dramatic new fireplace, right, the living room is little altered from the original, down to the Mexican floor tiles. The sofa, covered in a cotton from Diamond Foam & Fabric, was found at the Rose Bowl flea market. The ‘50s Heywood-Wakefield chaise is from Orange and is upholstered in vintage mohair by Knoll. The ottoman is Sasha Emerson Levin’s own design. Sources, see back of book.

master bathroom—a riot of tiles in vivid stripes of red, yellow, blue, and green. “Mark sat at the kitchen table and sketched,” says Emerson. “We planned it out with graph paper and colored pencils.”

Mack is known for houses with independent pavilions. Here, he turned an L-shaped house into a U, replacing the carport with a square tower that includes two children’s bedrooms, two baths, a playroom, and a guest bedroom. He linked it to the main house by glassing in the breezeway. The parents sleep in the old house, the girls in the new. “The tower has big open rooms where we all play, but each child has her own room for privacy,” Emerson says, adding, “Mark designed the kitchen with cutout



windows, so I can see what’s going on.”

When it came to decorating, the couple headed for the flea markets. “Nothing in the house cost more than \$1,500—we spent everything on the architecture,” Emerson says. “The markets are so good here, you can bumble your way through if you have a good eye.” Along with china, glassware, and lamps, the couple found

an old wooden library book-card file, which they use to store art supplies. They dine off an old school table and sit on Heywood-Wakefield chairs that once graced a classroom. Most of the pieces are period, but Emerson explains, “We wanted great design, not names.”

The shopping was so much fun, it inspired Emerson, along with her friend

Marne Dupere, to open a vintage-furnishings store, Orange, in Beverly Hills. For Emerson, the whole experience of the Rustic Canyon house has been a homecoming of sorts. “It’s ironic,” she says. “I grew up in Manhattan in a Kips Bay building by I. M. Pei. My parents had bright walls, Marimekko bedspreads, Azuma pillows with Peter

Max designs. When they saw this house, they said, ‘It looks just like the place where you grew up.’”

For his part, Levin is content to bask in the satisfaction of the discerning patronage. “I didn’t know it was going to turn out so well. I sit on the deck and look back at the house and can’t believe it,” he says. “I finally have good taste.”