

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

ON LOCATION

A Spanish-Modern Mashup

By MICHAEL CANNELL

WHEN it comes to architecture, Los Angeles can sometimes seem like a battlefield of styles. Mixed into the mishmash of nondescript buildings that dominate the city are a large number of houses with distinct characters and little apparent interest in getting along — in particular the bright white Spanish-style villas that overtook the town early last century, and the earnest early Modernist boxes that followed a decade or so later. These two domestic forms have been dueling it out for nearly a century.

David Bernardi was reluctant to commit either way when he bought a 1917 Spanish-style duplex on the western edge of the Silver Lake neighborhood five years ago for \$440,000 and began imagining how he might conduct a renovation. He liked his Spanish building, with its curvy, kitschy stucco detailing and view of the Hollywood sign, but no more than he liked the 1939 Falk Apartments built across the street by Rudolf Schindler, who, along with Richard Neutra, introduced European modernism to Southern California.

What he did not want was a renovation that would dutifully follow the taste herd, which in recent years has leaned toward a doctrinaire worship of Modernism, particularly the midcentury variety. Mr. Bernardi, a senior vice president at Imagine Entertainment, the production company started by Ron Howard and Brian Grazer, interviewed three architects with impeccable Ivy League credentials, only to find them offering the same prescriptions.

"They were all trying to make it 'modern,' like a Calvin Klein ad," he said. "I don't need them to do that. I could make it modern

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David Bernardi's Los Angeles home, originally a 1917 Spanish-style villa, is now wrapped in a white stucco facade. Fritz Haeg, the designer, used mica dust to make the stucco sparkle when viewed from certain angles.

The overhangs and wing-walls of the corner openings help shade windows from the intense southern and western sun.

Redwood siding lines the corner voids.

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The pool, lined with black pebbles so its surface reflects the house and plantings, extends to the edge of the terrace, eliminating the need for a view-spoiling railing.

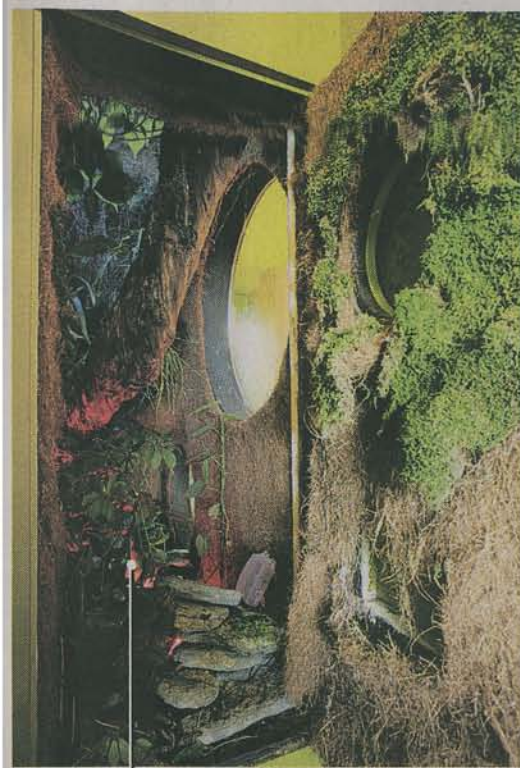


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Two small rooms and a closet were combined to make the pine-plywood lined "gathering room." ("All rooms are living rooms," explained Fritz Haeg, the renovation's designer.) The ceiling color was chosen to match the setting sun, which floods in at day's end, said Mr. Haeg, shown cross-legged on the right. His client, David Bernardi, is on the left.

The house contains almost no free-standing furniture. Instead, curvy built-ins (Mr. Haeg calls them "seating terrains") are set up for solitary reading, socializing or gazing out windows.

The house's location is central to its character. The big window frames a view of the Hollywood Hills and, in the distance, the Hollywood sign.



A hallway in the center of the house was opened to the sky and covered with translucent polycarbonate to form a terrarium with plants like orchids on the walls, water trickling down rocks and port-holes into the dining and gathering rooms.



Mr. Bernardi sent each of his three sisters fabric left over from upholstering the built-in furniture. The sisters sent back handmade pillows with unique detailing.

Mr. Haeg echoed the curve of the original vaulted dining room ceiling in the opening to the gathering room; the built-in seating matches the curves of the dining table.

The table, carved from glued laminated wood, was sanded smooth, "like river rock," Mr. Haeg said. "With eyes closed, you could easily mistake it for polished stone."

The front is landscaped with edible plants, including grapes on a trellis that covers the enclosed terrace and citrus trees that surround it. The shrubs are rosemary.

The curve of the two-tone bathroom wall, concrete below and cedar paneling above, is meant to reflect those of the Hollywood Hills, visible through the window.

The six-foot-long sink is carved out of glued laminated timber, with two basins sunken into its wavy surface and finished in marine varnish.

The walls of the media room are covered in inch-thick cork, typically found in recording studios. "It has a masculine, musky, charred aroma, like a smoking den," Mr. Haeg said.



Seating is covered in six brown fabrics from Maharam. Two of the cushions are the size of a queen mattress, so the room can double as a guest space.



The Spanish-style gable roof of the 1917 house was left intact above a new entry court clad in redwood.

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myself. I was, like, go back to school. I needed somebody capable of making something new."

In 2004, Mr. Bernardi sent an e-mail message to Fritz Haeg, a designer, artist and unconventional environmental activist who lives in a geodesic dome in East Los Angeles — the home, for six years starting in 2001, of the Sundown Salons, a series of fashion shows, marathon plays, all-night knitting sessions and other offbeat events presided over by Mr. Haeg and staged by a loose network of friends. Mr. Haeg is especially well known for his environmental work, including Edible Estates, an ongoing landscaping project in which, over the last few years, he has persuaded suburban homeowners to replace their front lawns with vegetable gardens. The project is intended not just

to call suburban aesthetics into question but to change people's minds about them; its initial results are documented in "Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn," published in February by Metropolitan Books. At this year's Whitney Biennial, which opened in March, Mr. Haeg filled the museum's sunken courtyard with habitats for eagles, beavers, bats and other animals that would have lived in Manhattan 400 years ago.

"I e-mailed him thinking he was a rock star, and that I could never get his attention," Mr. Bernardi said. "He e-mailed me right back."

Most designers of Mr. Haeg's prominence pass on home renovations, focusing instead on wholly original work. "I've come to not believe in that at all," Mr. Haeg said. "I'm much more interested in working with and responding to ex-

isting conditions."

After accepting the job, Mr. Haeg gave Mr. Bernardi a homework assignment: write an essay about how you live — how you really live, not the life of dinner parties you imagine for yourself. In the course of that exercise, Mr. Bernardi said, his design ambitions began to falter. "I aspired to the conceptual," he said, "but at the end of the day I'm a gay guy who wants it to look cool and beautiful."

For all his adventurous intent, Mr. Bernardi still wanted a pool, media room and home office. "How can I redo the house," he asked, "and have all the bourgeois things I want without bourgeois-ing up the house?"

Mr. Haeg obliged him, and still managed to create a highly original synthesis of Spanish and modern with an exterior that both reveals and conceals the original building within a pair of swoop-

ing apertures. Mr. Haeg calls it "a cubic wrapper with cut corners."

Every room has its own color, with the brighter colors reserved for the upstairs. The palette grows muted as you descend. Much of the seating seems to grow off the walls in curvy forms, as if it were rock outcroppings upholstered in Maharam fabric. A sliding glass door opens onto a full view of the Schindler building, and a filmic vista down Sunset Boulevard. It's as if Mr. Haeg took the whole history of Los Angeles, the Spanish and the modern, and synthesized it into one gluey, seamless experience.

"I wanted to blend everything together," Mr. Haeg said, "so you can't tell what's old and what's new, what's the house and what's the landscape."