



WHEN STEVE AND RITA EMERSON BOUGHT THEIR 7,000-square-foot lot in Westwood, they got the hulking frame of an unfinished, long-abandoned, twice-torched mansion in the deal. Neighbors had obtained an abatement order and were anxiously waiting for the city to tear it down when the Emersons put in a call to architect Dion McCarthy, who had built their beach house in Oxnard. He raced to stay the execution.

"We beat the abatement by accepting the footprint of the existing structure," says McCarthy, a DesignARC principal in West L.A. "It was challenging to build a modern house from that basis, like trying to paint with your hands tied behind your back. But it was fun." By taking a few chunks out of the site plan to break up its mass, McCarthy came up with a design that connects three distinct spaces, each with individual facades, in a flowing union. The result is imperious, graceful—and inspired by the hill towns of Italy. "It sounds far-fetched," he admits, "but we were thinking of places like San Gimignano. Each of the towers has its own identity." The exterior's Umbrian colors further reflect the theme.

"This is an art house, not a punch-it-out box," says Steve. Nevertheless, he wanted it to blend in on an otherwise conventional block. Thanks to Orange Street Studio landscape architect Michael Schneider, it does. Schneider softened the angles with ingenious landscaping. "I hate to see a walkway that goes straight to the front door," he says by way of introduction. "The time it takes to get to the house should be transformational. You're leaving your problems behind and entering another world." He made a curving path that meanders through a garden of blue agaves, hopseed bushes, bronze flax, ocotillos, Mexican feather grass, and blue fescue. A wooden bench under an olive tree suggests a park, and a phalanx of horsetail obscures a reflecting pool. The sound of its trickling water establishes the final break with curbside reality.

Inside the 4,400-square-foot house, a 5,000-year-old basalt Hittite lion, one of Steve's family treasures, stands sentry in a glass-enclosed courtyard centered by a tobacco tree that sprang to life of its own accord. "What we've created is an in-town oasis," says Steve, a stock market analyst who works in what amounts to the west wing of the house. "We didn't want to live in a wealthy ghetto like Bel-Air or Beverly Hills. We like to be close to things—here we're ten minutes from Century City. This is a people neighborhood."

His office, whose ceiling is 16 feet high, is fitted with an electric shade to modulate the light streaming through an enormous wraparound window. Horizontal cubbyholes allow him instant access to hundreds of folders that

ISLAND PARADISE: The Emerson kitchen (OPPOSITE) includes top appliances: Dacor stovetop and stacking ovens, Thermidor hood, and Sub-Zero fridge. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: The living room furniture was custom-made, the patio furniture is from the Kingsley-Bate catalog, and the anigre bed is dressed in Sephora linens



would be useless if filed traditionally, and a small conference table—within view of three active computer screens—gives business guests a perch. “I don’t have to fight traffic on my way to the office,” Steve likes to say. “I’ve created the perfect business-home environment.”

One of the first orders of business for the Emersons’ interior designer, Melissa Partridge, of Partridge Designs, was a trip with Rita to Marble Unlimited in Van Nuys to pick out the kitchen countertops. “The green granite starts the palette,” says Partridge. More important to Rita, it is “impervious to olive-oil spills and water rings and doesn’t need any care.” They decided on a veneer of *amigre* (an African wood cut laterally to display a watery design) for the cabinetry because it lets the granite shine.

Partridge commissioned and/or designed much of the furniture in the house. She chose gray and cream for the living room, which includes a pillow-seat nook that Rita, who is working toward a graduate degree in public health, requested as a study area. (Steve, incidentally, is no relation to the terrorism expert who shares his name.) “Rita was interested in looking out onto the street,” says McCarthy, who positioned her alcove to face the floor-to-ceiling picture window.

The coolness of many of the fabrics and the theme of glass and chrome throughout the house are offset by wood floors, cabinetry, and vertical support beams as well as by views of outside landscaping. “Modernism doesn’t have to be cold or academic,” says McCarthy. “There’s a lot of room for it to be contemporary and residential.”

And flexible. Just as the project was about to wrap, Rita decided she wanted a lap pool. “I used to swim at our club,” she says. “But it was always too hot or too cold or filled with babies.” Now a 78-by-8-foot stretch of aqua resides where a driveway once lay, running alongside the dining room and kitchen. Schneider hid the pool’s bulky machinery in the backyard with plantings that echo the front, adding timber bamboo for privacy, shade, and shadows. “I love our house,” says Rita. “It brings us a lot of joy.” —Margot Dougherty



HOUSE SEATS: Interior designer Melissa Partridge designed the microfiber chair and the pillows in the reading nook (top) as well as the kitchen table (bottom). The chairs are from Poliform