

MONTECITO MAKE-OVER

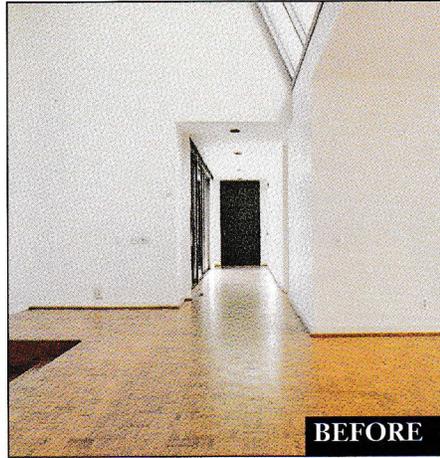
SOFTENING MODERNISM'S EDGES ON THE
COAST OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

FEBRUARY 1997
ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Architecture by Warner & Gray
Interior Design by Bruce Gregga, ASID
Text by Hunter Drobojowska-Philp
Photography by Peter Valli



BEFORE



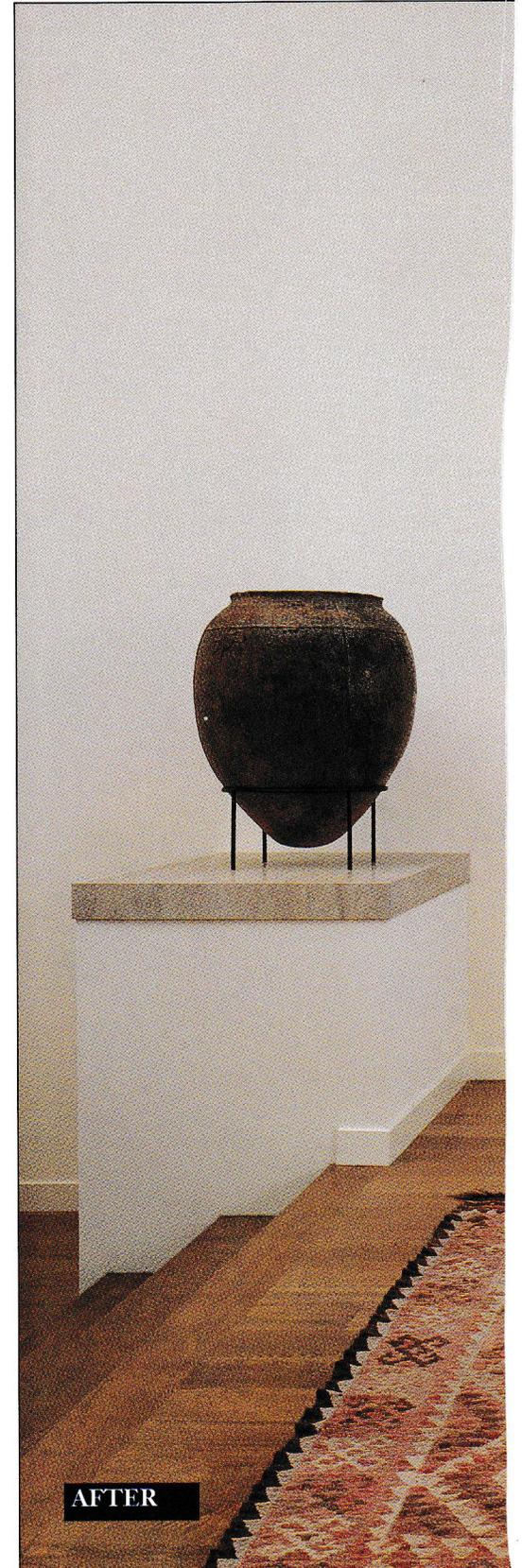
BEFORE



AFTER

The remodeling of a Montecito, California, house was a collaboration between interior designer Bruce Gregga and architect Jack Warner. TOP: The front door originally opened onto a narrow hall. ABOVE: In the widened entrance gallery, an oak sideboard and chairs are opposite the atrium. Mansour rugs.

TOP: In the entrance and throughout, the parquetry floor was replaced with quarter-sawn white oak. RIGHT: A kitchen was added off the open-plan dining room; the chair at the counter is from Richard Mulligan. The earthenware vessel on the limestone-topped pedestal at the steps acts to balance an Irma Palacios oil.



AFTER

High in the hills of the rustic yet elegant southern California coastal community of Montecito, houses enjoy sterling views of the eucalyptus-studded valley and the Pacific Ocean. The privilege of this panorama has not been lost on Chicago-based interior designer Bruce Gregga: After purchasing a house for himself in the enclave just south

of Santa Barbara, he became convinced that previous clients of his, a Chicago couple who were also seeking a retreat, would share his fondness for the vistas, climate and social life of the area.

His knowledge of the couple's preference for free-flowing, informal spaces led Gregga to a modern house designed by the Montecito architectural firm Warner & Gray. Although the residence had

not been updated since its construction in 1974 and was situated amid a forest of bamboo that had long since eclipsed its views, it had—or could have—the spatial qualities Gregga was looking for. With his clients' blessing, he began what he calls a "highly collaborative" relationship with the house's architect, Jack Warner, to restructure the interior. The two would retain the essence of



RIGHT: Painting the wood ceiling white opened up the living room.
BELOW: On the room-dividing pedestal is a 12th-century stone column. Near it hangs an oil by Francisco Castro Lenero; on the side table is a Ming Dynasty stone head fragment from Therien & Co. The solid chair fabric is by Brunswick & Fils.



the design while adding contemporary detail and Gregga's brand of multicultural eclecticism.

"The house was one of the first I ever did with my partner, Paul Gray," Warner says, "and I was delighted to have the opportunity to remodel it. Whenever you design a house, there are things you want to do but can't, usually because of budget constraints. So if you have a second chance, it's wonderful to be able to add some of those things that you initially had in mind."

In processional fashion, the team—

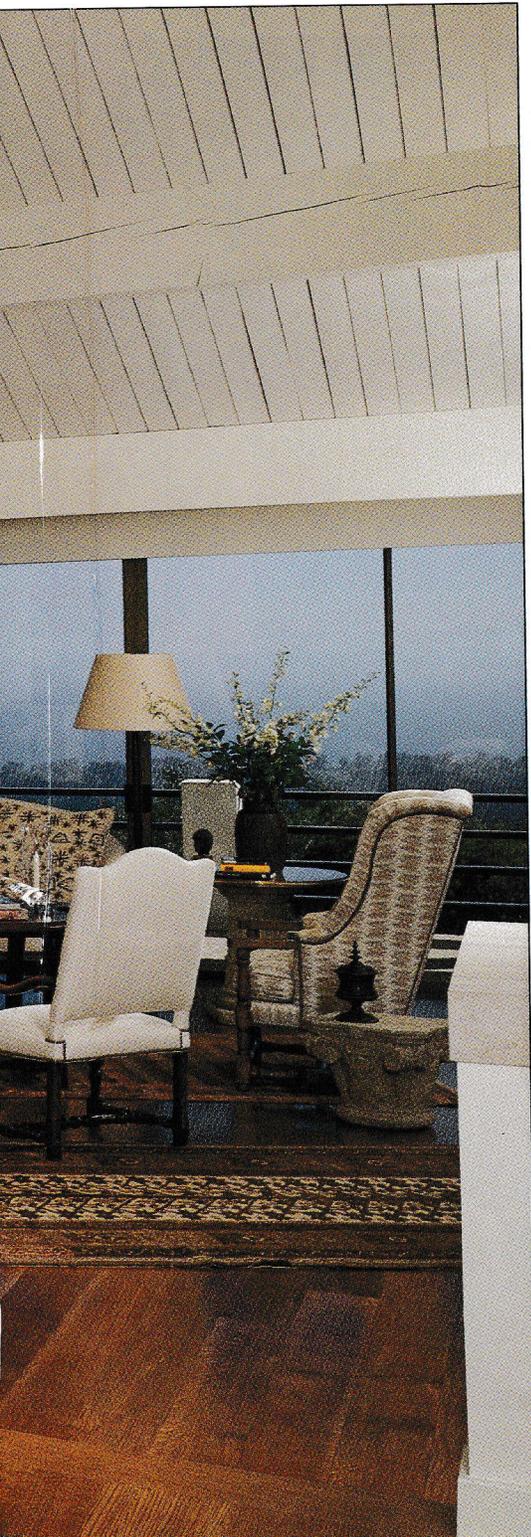


which included landscape architect Sydney Baumgartner—first cleared the overgrown property and established a streamlined, formal courtyard entrance with pots of succulents, young olive trees and a grapevine that tumbles around the dark oak front door. “We created an outdoor room, something that’s very inviting as you approach the interior,” Gregga says.

Warner and Gregga then tackled the entrance hall, which had been a slim corridor offering very little space for greeting visitors. On one side were



LEFT: Gregga and Warner removed a wall, enlarging the dining room. **BELOW:** Landscape architect Sydney Baumgartner extended the hillside up to the interior space, where Louis XIV-style chairs upholstered in Edelman leather join the iron-and-walnut dining table. A pair of Nigerian carved posts are near the glass door.



floor-to-ceiling glass doors opening onto an atrium and a rectangular pool, which they resurfaced with black slate tile. By tearing out the wall and unused maid’s quarters opposite the glass doors, they widened the hall by almost two feet. “When you come into the house now, you immediately see old English

high-backed chairs, a Spanish table, African sculpture, pottery, a rug,” Gregga says. “There’s a marriage of time and cultures, and right away you sense strength.

“The house being a form of sculpture, I thought it would be nice to take these pieces and treat them as strong, independent forms,” Gregga continues.

Using the square footage gained by pushing into the maid's quarters, he and Warner put in a powder room and a laundry and built a new kitchen. The kitchen, which features limestone counters and bird's-eye-maple cabinets, can be closed off, but, for entertaining, the clients wanted the option of an open plan.

Both architect and interior designer ("Every decision about the building was made together," says Warner of their successful working arrangement) saw the advantage of enlarging the small, asymmetrical dining room to be pro-



BEFORE

LEFT: In the former den, the installation of a door to the master bedroom made the new sitting room part of the master suite. **BELOW:** All of the seating—except the wing chair, with Clarence House cotton—is covered in Hinson & Company chenille.

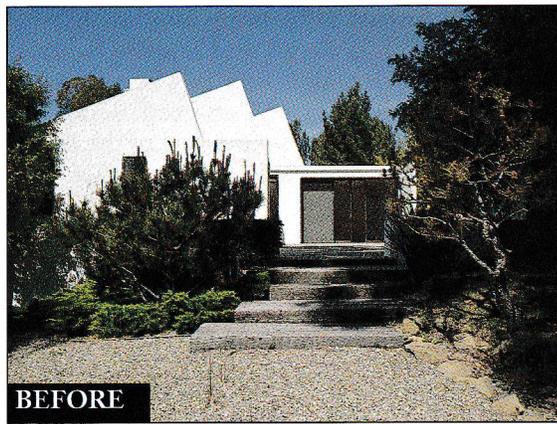
"Bruce does things for a reason—not just to make his pieces look good," Warner notes. **OPPOSITE:** The old, single bath featured a stall shower. **OPPOSITE BELOW:** The wife's bath, which looks out to the ocean and is part of the addition to the house, features marble floor tiles and limestone counter surfaces.



AFTER

floor. “As you go through the house, you’ll also see Japanese, Italian and Spanish influences,” notes Gregga of the mix.

By dispensing with an entertainment center and a wet bar built into the wall between the living room and what had been the den, Gregga and Warner gave a more distinctive outline to the fireplace. They squared the lines of the living room by placing two stepped pedestals where odd-angled walls had stood—capping each is a block of heavy limestone, whose installation required building a hoist on-site. One pedestal

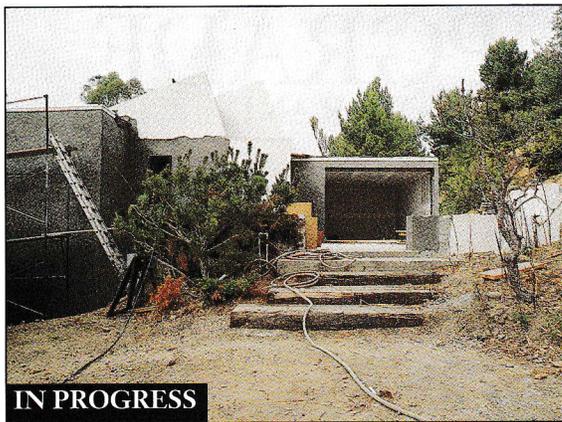


BEFORE

Playing to the house’s hillside orientation was Warner’s rationale for canting the roof. “The roofline—and consequently the high windows—points up the sharp angle of that inland view,” he says. **LEFT:** The property had not been significantly landscaped since construction in 1974.



AFTER



LEFT: Warner designed a small addition to encase two baths as well as a passageway to a lower-level office and bedroom. **BELOW:** Improvements to the grounds, including a terrace and a cutting garden, turned the rear of the house into an entertainment area. Giati teak furniture.



bears a twelfth-century Flemish column; on the opposite one is a bulbous turn-of-the-century vessel from the Ivory Coast.

Two of the three walls in the living room are fully glazed for views of the ocean or the atrium. To mitigate the sensation of being exposed, Gregga set the furniture and rugs at an angle. "In a house like this, with incredible views and no wall space, intimacy is made possible by orienting the seating to the fireplace and the exterior," he says. "Also, it seemed better to throw everything off scale. It made the room look larger."

Placed on the diagonal, and pulled around a gateleg table, are high-backed chairs and a crewel-embroidered sofa. "The wife had done a lot of needlework herself and loved stitchery, pattern and texture," Gregga remarks. "I played on the textures of the outside by bringing them inside." Russian rugs in faded shades of dried roses and leaves are an elaborate example of such handiwork. "We thought they would be better than putting one big rug in the living room," says Gregga, who likens the effect to "having paintings on the floor."

Some design decisions simply reflect changing tastes. Miniblinds were banished, and electric shades were concealed within the walls. Parquetry floors were replaced with wide planks of quarter-sawn white oak ("It has a finish like good furniture," observes Gregga of the new surface). The gray wood beam ceilings in the living and dining rooms and the master suite were painted white to approximate the airiness of an artist's studio.

Originally, the master bedroom had been fitted with a circular staircase leading to an office below. Gregga and Warner removed the stairs to provide more usable floor space and converted the bedroom to a master suite by taking out a dividing wall and annexing the old den as a sitting room. The den closet was transformed into storage for television and stereo equipment, which is now hidden behind a capacious Dutch-style armoire built by Richard Targoni, a local cabinetmaker. At an antiques show, Gregga discovered an eighteenth-century delft fireplace surround that fit the existing fireplace; he had the wood mantel sponged in blue and white to match the tiles. Corresponding to the soaring ceilings in the

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room is a massive nineteenth-century ebonized mirror.

Warner designed a small addition to the far side of the house, which allowed for an enlarged “his” bath and a new “hers” bath, complete with tumbled-marble tile floors and limestone window and tub counters. The addition accommodates a narrow stairwell to the office and a guest bedroom on the floor below, where there is now a private entrance.

The surrounding landscape asserts itself in the house’s interior design, and upgrading the grounds was a significant part of the restoration effort. Baumgartner shaped the yard by putting in elliptical beds of perennials and an arbor with climbing roses. Gravel paths lead around the garden, and a curtain of silvery olive trees has taken root. She devised service paths and filled the front of the property with olive trees and grasses that complement the mature trees.

“We bought this Japanese waterwheel to have sitting in the garden, and Sydney went crazy over it,” Gregga recalls. “She said, ‘We should really have it as it was meant to be.’” Baumgartner built a channel of concrete boulders so

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that the water pours down flumes and turns the wheel, giving it the presence of a fountain. “It was a folly that ended up being something wonderful,” Gregga concludes.

Relaxing in a patio chair, Gregga stops to enjoy the sound of gurgling water provided by the waterwheel—and the smell of mint and pine. The house completed, serenity reigns. “It doesn’t look new but has that softness of a structure that’s been remodeled,” the designer points out. “New construction can’t capture that. It’s never quite the same as something that has been through time.” □

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that I wished to be a fireman. In my youth my affections did not that way tend, and I chose another career and have become stuck with it. I have a friend who, at the age of fifty, dedicated himself to the volunteer fire department of his adopted New England town, and it seems to have changed his life. I tell myself that my job entails travel sufficient to debar me from a similar renewal and fantasize about creating a volunteer position tailored to both my special needs and, if I may, my skills—that of consulting fireman. To wit: “Hello? Yes. Can you describe it to me? All right—when you get close to it, is it ‘warm’? Aha. Well, I’m going to tell you what you’ve got there, but first I’m going to give you a number I’d like you to call. Got a pencil?”) But I digress.

The New House would, one hopes, be that bulwark, that “friend to whom the Shadow of Far Years Extends.”

But while and were they to so extend, would they not make that extension to a domicile empty of one’s so spiritually generous self? And, then, what is the point of the whole exercise in this new, foreign hulk that cost a fortune, where one cannot locate the tea and which may be nothing more than a dormitory for those ignorant of and unsympathetic to one’s sacrifice, one’s anomie, et cetera? Oh, boo hoo.

Well, in my family we are blessed to say that as long as we have each other we could live in a packing crate—and equally, one should never ask sympathy for a man with a solarium, and so I beg your pardon.

The days will come and the days will go. I will or will not be there to see them, and I hope my children will have the diversion of looking at the house and wondering how we could have persisted in considering it new when it had become, any outsider could see, aged and used long, long ago. □

I’ve been fortunate to live, off and on for thirty years, amid an extraordinary community of artists and craftspeople in northern Vermont. Their work figures prominently in these photographs. George Bernard Shaw wrote, “Beauty is all very well at first sight; but who ever looks at it when it has been in the house three days?” But on that point he and I must disagree. —D.M.

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rections, and designed a boxy version—covered, like much of the living room furniture, in a fabric shade he calls “smart greige.” With a prominent piece of furniture facing both ways, “the sense of space flowing back and forth through the room is enhanced,” he points out.

Affirming Porter’s interest in a range of twentieth-century furnishings, a circa 1900 Steinway grand piano stands at the knotty-pine wall at the west end of the living room. Balancing it, in the dining area, is an ebonized oak table, which was designed by Porter and crafted by Robert Russell. These large pieces and a deep red antique Bukhara rug, a family heirloom, provide dark counterpoints to the otherwise luminous room.

The apartment is marked by polar bursts of color: in the celadon library, with its hunter-green bookcases, and in the predominantly orange bedroom (“I thought color would be one way to introduce excitement there,” Porter deadpans), with its blue and green storage cabinets. For both rooms, the architect arrived at the idea of using standard laboratory cabinets, which—so much for sterile white—are produced in brightly hued enameled metal these days. “The colors appealed to me, and the reflection of the glass in the library makes that small room seem bigger,” he says.

Contemporary artworks are everywhere in the apartment, as much a part of the overall concept as any structural element. “I’ve always liked *forms*,” Porter says. “My interest in art predates post-modernism, with its attention to content and allusion.” Many of the pieces have a sensuous, tactile quality: “I want them to be touched,” he emphasizes. The anthropomorphically shaped poured-resin vases by Italian artist Gaetano Pesce, for example, have a strong visual presence along with the smooth feel of rubber. A 1995 Pesce side table, its top also resin, is both art and object.

Turning the idea of functional art around, Porter has, near the foot of his bed, a spiky-surfaced, sparkling chrome chest that he found in the local Wal-Mart on a trip home to Mississippi. It is a tool chest for the back of a truck—and its provenance says something about the architect’s approach to his living space as well as to his work. As he puts it, “I look for design wherever I can find it.” □