The distinction between the past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.  
—ALBERT EINSTEIN

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Phoenix Rising

Designer David Phoenix dramatically transformed his Hancock Park home.

By Virginia M. Campbell
Photography by Edmund Barr

David Phoenix’s decision to leave his small Massachusetts hometown at age 18 was clearly the right one. “I got on a plane and flew to Los Angeles,” says the interior designer whose client list includes the Governor and First Lady of California. He has, of course, crucial characteristics that made his success a near certainty. He’s exceedingly talented, enormously likeable, breezily self-effacing, and really hard-working.

“I knew what my passion was, and I was disciplined,” says Phoenix. “I had worked since I was 14.” Not long after he arrived in California, he landed the first in a series of positions at high-echelon design firms: the venerable fabric house Brunschwig and Fils,

Before

Phoenix renovated the property, including the backyard (above and left), in eight months.
the French provincial style purveyor Pierre Deux, and Ralph Lauren Home Furnishings. He observed the business, interacted with the best designers, and met many of the wealthy customers whose multiple dwellings support the high-end design world. After a decade of apprenticeship, Phoenix felt ready to emerge as a designer himself. "I felt confident about color—I'll take anybody on with that—and with fabrics," he says. "I could read plans; I'd pored over blueprints as a child. And I could sell." He began to create his own business. "I had rugs and lamps hanging out of my convertible," he recalls. "My 'office' was a calculator and two file cabinets with a piece of plywood across them."

Phoenix's very first client was Maria Shriver. He'd known her from his retail work, and when he ran into her at the Pacific Design Center, he announced himself in business on the spot. Shriver, with her husband, Arnold Schwarzenegger, hired him to do the interior design for their Sun Valley ski lodge, and would continue working with him on their Los Angeles home and later on the Governor's office. Major clients from the entertainment world followed, as well as such local luminaries as Nancy and Richard Riordan.

The Hancock Park house Phoenix bought not long ago (when Mayor Riordan rather than Mayor Villaraigosa lived around the corner) was a dark brick mansion with fussy, diamond-shaped leaded-glass windows and a

Phoenix restored a sense of history to the house's façade and entry (opposite), down to the ivy-covered walls and lush plantings.
Rich, masculine fabrics and textures warm up the den (left), which Phoenix transformed from a dark, cave-like space (below right) into a comfortable gathering spot. The powder room (above) glints with an aura of opulence and features elegant woodwork that includes ample bookshelves.

gracelessly serious facade that by no means promised a warm welcome within. "It was a Tudor crossed with German pancake house," says Phoenix matter-of-factly. "The bedroom was pink."

The house that stands today behind the relaxed, English-style landscaping still contains many of the original's bones but none by brittle, mish-mash spirit. It is, inside and out, Phoenix's personal homage to the English architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, a great influence of the late 19th and early 20th century whose imaginative recombinations of traditional forms could make classical elements seem beautiful and vice versa. (Lutyens once designed...
perfectly round nursery to ensure that no child would ever be put in the corner, and he’s said to have come up with the idea of a crocodile with a ticking clock in it for his friend Sir James Barrie’s play Peter Pan, whose sets he designed.) Phoenix’s channeling of Lutyens in this house is so lovely that, with this as his calling card, he could bring English enchantment to Southern California for the rest of his days if he were so inclined. He isn’t.

Some interior designers have a style so pronounced that a knowing eye could recognize any room they’d done. David Phoenix isn’t one of those. His preferences encompass such a range of styles that one project would not bear striking resemblance to another. The home he lived in before restoring his Hancock Park house was a spare little gem designed by modernist Rudolph Schindler. Lutyens and Schindler are from different planets, but both believed in designing from the inside out, as does Phoenix. The only design “principles” Phoenix admits to are “comfort and quality,” words that roll easily off his tongue but are rather exacting requirements in practice. Beyond that, he goes on instinct, and in that mode he is impressively untrendy. “I always ask, ‘How will this look in 20 years?’” he says, knowing full well that this is radically retro of him. “We live in an era of house-flippers,” he concedes.

(Phoenix, continued on page 110)
Pushing aside a delicate box to set down his teacup, the designer says, "I'm all about comfort. Things have to be lived with."

Gone Wild creator Joe Francis to New York for hip-hop's Damon Dash, and to Palm Springs for his latest project, the Colony Palms. The Spanish hacienda was built in 1935 for Seabiscuit co-owner and Purple Gang mobster Al Wertheimer. It is Lawrence-Bullard's first hotel commission. "I'm keeping the Spanish bones, but making it edgy and funky," he explains. "In fact, the basement was a speakeasy and brothel with these erotic art deco murals—which we're keeping." The owners were drawn to Lawrence-Bullard's taste for the dramatic, and encouraged the creation of outdoor sleeping areas with headboards upholstered with fabrics hand-woven in 400-year-old Turkish tribal patterns and "a Spanish side table and the odd Eames chair thrown in."

Begging apologies that he has to run off and check in at his new offices next to Fred Segal, Lawrence-Bullard glances around and says, "You know, it's gotten a little too fluffy in here. I need to be challenged, so I think I might be doing something new...." As his voice trails off, one wonders how balancing his explosive design career and international travel isn't already challenging enough.

(Ehrlich, continued from page 93) just the two of us, we sit at the table and enjoy the entire space," Ehrlich says. "We like to have people over and sometimes do parties for museum openings."

Like the living room, dining alfresco is effortless, thanks to 11-foot-tall glass doors that pivot on their stainless steel axles to open onto a courtyard. Ehrlich visited a quarry with sculptor Woods Davy, who designed the patio using Imperial gray granite for the stepping stones and sculptural bench. This outdoor room, with a mature Canary palm and another Aleppo pine tree, has a heated concrete pad with a built-in outdoor sofa, and a long table that incorporates a barbecue.

On the opposite side of the patio stands a second building with an outdoor metal staircase leading up to guest quarters. In the guest bathroom and other areas around the house, Ehrlich used Latvian plywood, a strong, inexpensive material that is pre-finished with a radiant dark surface. The ground level of the building is Ehrlich's studio, his "flex space," decorated with art by friends like Moses, whose studio he designed; John Okulick; and Don Bachardy. A photograph of Ehrlich as a long-haired adventurer stands on a shelf near the basket and painted gourds he collected while living in Africa in the 1970s.

After graduating with a degree in architecture from Renssalaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, Ehrlich became what he describes as the "first architect placed by the Peace Corps to work for the Moroccan government in Marrakesh." He remained from 1969 to 1971, then traveled and taught in Nigeria until 1977, when he moved to L.A. "In Africa, I learned a lot from seeing architecture built without architects. There, some of the most beautiful architecture in the world was done by people in tune with their environment, done with the materials available, and done with very little muscle. There they live delicately and in harmony."

Such ideals still affect his architectural philosophy. "The latest term I'm using is multicultural modernism, bringing in the experiences I've learned about while traveling and living in foreign lands. I learned about how a courtyard is a fabulous paradise for living. Outdoor rooms, privacy, and peacefulness—this is relevant for Los Angeles because of our marvelous climate, and through courtyard living, we can achieve greater density." A book chronicling his work and ideas, Multi-

Cultural Modernism (Images), will be released this fall, in conjunction with an exhibit on his work at the Palm Springs Art Museum. "This house is part of what I believe in," he says, "reinvigorating existing neighborhoods and reinforcing the community. I feel good about this house."