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What began as a little fixer-upper project—a modest Santa Barbara refuge for designer Madeline Stuart and her husband—turns into a labor of love

TEXT BY MADELINE STUART PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD POWERS PRODUCED BY ANITA SARSIDI



Interior designer Madeline Stuart renovated a historic bungalow in Santa Barbara, California, as a getaway to share with her husband, writer Steve Oney. In the living room, their Parson Russell terrier, Mr. Peabody, rests on a Madeline Stuart Collection sofa, which is covered in a Great Plains fabric. The mix of furnishings also includes an 18th-century Danish armchair and an antique Chinese lacquer low table, both from Lief, a Stephen Antonson plaster table lamp, and vintage chesterfield chairs from T. L. Gurley Antiques. The curtains and Roman shades are made of Indian blankets from Hollywood at Home, the rug is by J. D. Staron, and the walls are painted in a Benjamin Moore white. For details see Sources.

BEFORE



Honestly I had no intention of buying a house that day. I had told my real-estate broker I needed to put my search for a Santa Barbara getaway on hold while my husband, writer Steve Oney, was away at Harvard on a five-month fellowship. It didn't seem like a good idea to purchase a home in his absence. But she sent an email with images just enticing enough for me to call a friend whose family has lived in the area for generations and ask him to go on a scouting mission. His report was decisive: "You must come and see this house." I made the hour-and-a-half drive up from Los Angeles the very next day.

I found the house and location so beguiling that I made an offer on the spot. The modest Spanish Colonial Revival bungalow was one of several dwellings built as artists' studios in the 1930s in a charming landmarked enclave called El Caserio, which loosely translates as "the Compound." Some have been remodeled (a few by Lulah Maria Riggs, the brilliant successor to George Washington Smith, Santa Barbara's architectural saint), and many have remained in the same hands for more than 40 years. The compound is in a historic Santa Barbara neighborhood around the corner from the Presidio, a fort built by the Spanish in 1782. While that might not sound impressive in other parts of the world, it's ancient by West Coast standards. In fact, the Presidio is the second-oldest building in California.

I don't recall thinking much about whether the house was a sound investment. I just knew I wanted a place where Steve and I could take long walks with our dogs, Beatrice and Mr. Peabody, shop at the farmers' market (one of the best in the country and just a few blocks away), and find a measure of peace whenever we could escape from L.A.

Perhaps I should have considered how much work our little Casa Caserio, as I call it, was going to require. Given my chosen profession as a designer, you'd think I would have paid more attention to the deplorable condition of the wiring, the dreary pine paneling, the dilapidated storage shed in the backyard, and the problematic circulation. To get to the only bedroom, you had to pass through a bathroom—not an ideal route, even if my husband and I have been married for 30 years.

But once the deal was done, I set myself to the task of resolving the structure's architectural problems, the worst involving that bedroom, a feng shui nightmare with no parallel walls. I quickly realized I'd taken on far more than a cheap and cheerful fluff project. The house wasn't quite derelict, but in order to do the place right, I needed to take a holistic approach to the renovation.

I rode in on a white horse, confident that I could easily remedy decades of neglect and shoddy fixes. Water-stained ceiling? I brought in the brilliant decorative artist Jean Horihata to faux-bois the bad bits. Cheap builder-quality doors? I designed new ones with stiles and rails consistent with traditional 1930s detailing. Odd, mismatched door and window casings? I had a millwork company custom make moldings for the entire house. Ghastly light fixtures, ugly door hardware, unattractive plumbing fittings? No problem. My credo was "Redo, replace,



rectify." As for the bedroom, I took it down to the studs, righted the geometric wrongs, and rerouted the entrance.

Of course, the expenses kept mounting, but I was acting like the worst of all possible clients. My inner Veruca Salt had taken hold, and all I could say was, "I want it now." There were numerous times when I was tempted to fire my designer for cost overruns, but that would have been a bit awkward.

The one decision I didn't have to struggle with was the paint: Benjamin Moore's White Dove OC-17, a designer's best friend and this house's savior. It's not too sterile and has virtually no yellow—just enough to take the edge off. It instantly transformed the home. The furniture also fell into place easily. I found some stunning Spanish antiques for the living room, combining them with baroque Portuguese mirrors and a pair of perfectly distressed leather chesterfield chairs that matched a sofa of my design. The place is too compact for houseguests (no room at this inn!), but for our tiny den, I designed a sumptuous sofa that has become Steve's preferred recumbent reading spot.

Fortunately I was surrounded by an incredible team of supporting players, including landscape designer Lance Lortscher, who solved the problem of how to make the most of my diminutive garden. Oh, and yes, I can now admit that I also had a decorator who knew what she was doing.

In spite of the mishaps, the mistakes, the money, and the misery, I ultimately created a sanctuary. While I love our home in L.A., Casa Caserio is my dream house. It's small, but small happens to be the perfect size. It's where we go to rest and read. A refuge without all the stuff, the accumulated detritus of many years. How happy I am that I didn't listen to reason that day. □

Stuart (pictured opposite with Mr. Peabody) designed the outdoor lounge area's sconce and stone table. The vintage seating, from the Wicker Shop of Old Saybrook, has cushions covered in a Janus et Cie fabric.





BEFORE



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Designer Lance Lortscher of New View Landscape transformed the garden. *Above right:* Boxwood spheres punctuate the pebble-paved front yard. *Opposite:* The terrace now serves as an alfresco dining room, featuring a teak table by Janus et Cie and Palecek chairs; the star pendant light is by Reborn Antiques.





DESIGN WISDOM

RESPECT THE PAST: To honor the bungalow's Spanish Revival roots, one of the most critical moves was installing new doors and windows whose dimensions and details are consistent with those from the 1930s.

WALK SOFTLY: The original terra-cotta floors provide strong character, but Stuart used a variety of area rugs—cowhide, mohair, natural grass—to temper the hard surfaces and lend a distinct feel to each space.

SAVE SELECTIVELY: While Stuart kept the kitchen's cabinetry (she often uses similar styles in her own designs), she replaced the peach tile countertop and backsplash with a scheme of black limestone and white tile that changed the room's entire complexion.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER: The outdoor space, while compact, feels much larger thanks to the decision to split it up into three zones, each of which is experienced differently.

WORK THE WHITE MAGIC: Benjamin Moore's White Dove OC-17—which Stuart calls her go-to paint ("it's not too sterile and has virtually no yellow," she says)—transformed the house.

Top: A bespoke Madeline Stuart sofa is paired with a 19th-century Japanese cocktail table in the den; the vintage rattan chairs are from the Wicker Shop of Old Saybrook, and the mohair rug is by J. D. Staron. **Opposite, from top:** The dining room's banquette and stone table, both custom made, are joined by chairs from the Madeline Stuart Collection; all of the seating is upholstered in a leather by Old World Weavers. Stuart kept the kitchen's original cabinetry but updated the space with a BlueStar range, Zephyr hood, and sink fittings by Chicago Faucets.





Clockwise from top left: A 17th-century Spanish cabinet from Robuck stands in the master bedroom, which opens to the garden. The crisp white master bath has a marine-style ceiling fixture from Circa Lighting and sconces by Thomas O'Brien for Visual Comfort. The office features a 1940s plaster table lamp, a 19th-century leather-top desk, an Eames chair from Design Within Reach, and an Afghan flat-weave rug from Woven Accents. *Opposite:* In the master bedroom, a vintage brass lantern and an Onik Agaronyan mirror, both from Downtown, hang above a custom-made bed upholstered in a Fortuny print and dressed in vintage coverlets from Pat McGann Gallery; the 19th-century Chinese chair is from Charles Jacobsen.

