

# Distinction

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*"The distinction between the past,  
present, and future is only  
a stubbornly persistent illusion."*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

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Wendy Block photographed by Art Streiber

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BY VIRGINIA M. CAMPBELL / PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDMUND BARR







# Phoenix Rising

Designer David Phoenix dramatically transformed his Hancock Park home.

By Virginia M. Campbell

Photography by Edmund Barr



**D**AVID 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,



Phoenix renovated the property, including the backyard (above and left), in eight months.





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om left,

Phoenix restored a sense of history to the house's façade and entry (opposite), down to the ivy-covered walls and lush plantings.

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



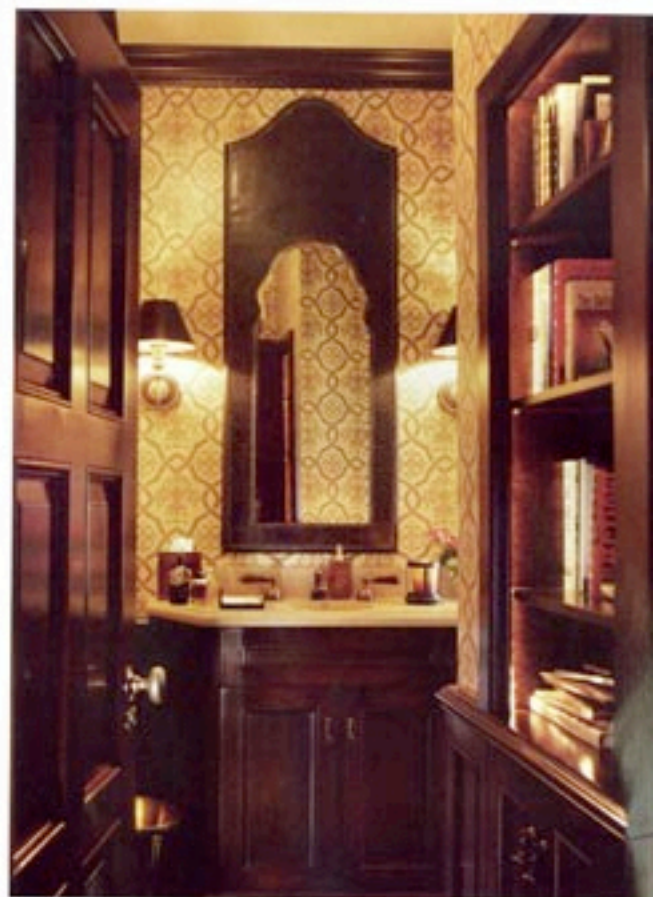












Rich, masculine fabrics and textures warm up the den (left), which Phoenix transformed from a dark, cave-like space (below right) into a comfortable gathering spot. The powder room (above) glints with an aura of opulence and features elegant woodwork that includes ample bookshelves.

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

The house that stands today behind the relaxed, English-style landscaping still has many of the original's bones but none of its brittle, mish-mash spirit. It is, inside and out, Phoenix's personal homage to the English architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, a giant of the late 19th and early 20th century who used imaginative recombinations of traditional forms could make classical elements seem fanciful 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)



Three former rooms became the gracious kitchen (top left and right). Phoenix reoriented the master bedroom (left and bottom right) to take advantage of views while maximizing privacy. The new outdoor fireplace (opposite, with adjoining guest quarters) is a favorite place to entertain.







(Lawrence-Bullard, continued from page 74) by original Moroccan tiles. But ask for champagne and he opens the refrigerator to reveal bottles of Veuve Clicquot, Pink Cristal, and Dom Perignon, plus a few liters of Fiji water for good measure. (And should you be lucky enough to be invited to spend the night, don't bother to pack your jammies; perfectly pressed French *toile du jour* pajamas—in your size and matching your suite's walls, curtains, and linens—await you in the closet.)

Clearly there is little reason to stock the kitchen with perishables. Lawrence-Bullard's schedule revolves around three TV shows, including TLC's *Material World*; designing a new furniture, fabric, and home-fragrance collection; and opening a jewelry store on London's Walton Street with actress Tamara Beckwith. He globe-hops from London ("I just landed last night; we're working on Vidal Sassoon's new home") to Mexico for *Girls*

## 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 With the Wind* 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. **D**

(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 axes 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 studios he designed; John Okulick; and Don Bachardy. A photograph of Ehrlich as a long-haired adventurer stands on a shelf near the baskets and painted gourds he collected while living in Africa in the 1970s.

After graduating with a degree in architecture from Rensselaer 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, really. 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." **D**

(Phoenix, continued from page 100)

The home Phoenix created for himself is a warm, untrammelled expression of his refined instincts and disciplined energy. He designed everything from the down-to-the-studs architectural renovation to the landscaping. He raised the roofline, added gables, changed almost every door and window, enlarged rooms, and created a pitch-perfect overhanging surround to the front entry.

Inside, he masterminded a pleasantly civilized cocoon with masculine English leanings, pepped up with well-behaved exotic touches. Eschewing popular recessed overhead lighting that flatters no one, Phoenix uses lamps and sconces to set his rooms aglow. The generous, human-friendly quality of his design extends to the subtle tactile pleasures of various polished and woven surfaces and comfortable upholstered furniture. And while most "contemporary" houses leave out a formal dining room, Phoenix conjured up a haven that seats ten and feels perpetually ready for the best Thanksgiving dinner ever.

These days, perhaps more than ever before, top designers are held in celebrity-level esteem. Phoenix blithely dismisses most of the expertise that commands princely sums as "common sense." In his own living room, the walls, moldings, trim, and ceiling are painted in hues between brown and white, but he shrugs and says, "They're all just beige." It's another pleasant expression of his lack of pretension.

Since the Internet put every ottoman, rug, and damask on the market at everyone's fingertips, Phoenix says, "there are so many resources out there, you can get anything you want." But an approachable guy with terrific taste and a sure eye makes the ocean of choice navigable, and one who breezily removes the mystique from the process is invaluable. Phoenix can claim with typical deflation, "People just want you to tell them what they want," but that's no small thing. He's where he is today because clients want his uncommon "common sense" to save them from the things they think they want and to create the house they actually want to live in. **D**