



Sheet metal expert Rick Garcia hands up a section of steel perimeter cap to his assistant, Joe Pebley. Once installed, the cap will adorn and protect the restored portico roof.

PHOTO: RUSS MCCOY/HELL

When the author and her husband bought their Los Angeles house, it was—like a movie set—mostly a facade. Now a large addition in back balances its scale and provides much-needed living space for the family.



LA residential

A 1920s Colonial near Hollywood is transformed into a picture-perfect home for a family of four

BY JULIA CLAIBORNE JOHNSON

In house shopping, as in the rest of life, you should be careful what you wish for—you may get it. My husband, Chris Marcil, and I moved from Brooklyn, New York, to Los Angeles in 1996 and spent the next two years looking for a place to call our own. After leaving about the fiftieth prospect, a ghastly, glitzy late-80s renovation that we couldn't afford and didn't even like, I remember thinking to myself, "All I want is an old house, preferably from the 1920s, that costs X and hasn't been renovated since the Eisenhower administration, so I can make it look true to its era."

We wanted to live in Hancock Park, a centrally located L.A. neighborhood where the homes, many built in the 1920s, are antique by local standards, and everything looks so movie-perfect East Coast that most days you can walk past film crews carefully staging "back East" scenes while they try to avoid the palm trees that line the streets. The week after I'd wished my idle wish, David Philp, our realtor (who, this being Los Angeles, had been the lead singer in a British punk rock band in the '70s), told us he'd found the place for us. Great location, between the country club and the tennis club, and across the street from the cinematic home of Kim Basinger's character in *L.A. Confidential*. Built in 1922, no major renovations since 1954, a huge lot. A mile walk from the studio where Chris works—commuting

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEREMY SAMUELSON STYLED BY GIA RUSSO

DONNING THE STEEL CAP



The steel cap atop Julia Johnson and Chris Marci's portico roof is an arresting architectural detail—in more ways than one. "It stops moisture from seeping under the roof membrane, but it's also an attractive way to dress the outer edge," says contractor Jay Bruder. To prepare for installation, Bruder repaired the water-damaged deck, laid down a synthetic-rubber roof membrane, and removed a small section of siding. That cleared the way for Rick Garcia, who arrived from Broadway Sheet Metal with the pre-fabricated steel cap in tow. Garcia first nailed an 8-foot piece of galvanized flashing, called a reglet, to the house. Into this he snapped and secured a counterflashing, which seals the joint between the portico roof and the wall (SEE LEFT). Next, he nailed 6-inch butt plates around the perimeter of the roof. He then riveted the coping, in three 8-foot sections, to the plates. After soldering the seams, Garcia made the roof watertight by counterflashing the inner lip of the coping (SEE LEFT). At that point, Bruder returned to reinstall the siding and touch up the paint. —Dan DiClerico

by foot in Los Angeles! And, the current owners might even take what we could offer, since it was a fixer-upper. How could we resist?

Then I saw it. It wasn't the ugliest house ever, but it was painted a jaundiced off-white and had columns out front holding up the roof of its suburbs-go-presidential half-round portico. The realtors called it "Colonial" despite its crazy combination of stucco siding downstairs and clapboard up top, which I guess was the style of some colony I've never visited. From the street I could see holes in the wood-shingled roof and some boarded-up windows, overgrown landscaping and a buckling asphalt drive. It was going to need a mind-boggling amount of work. This was what I'd wished for? I drove away without even going inside.

But David, bless his punk soul, knew this house could rock and roll. When he took me to look at it, he pointed out that there were hardwood floors under the mustard-colored shag carpet. The back wall's extensive water damage somehow made it psychologically easier to tear it off to build an addition. The backyard was big, although what wasn't taken up by a pool was asphalted over. Most important, the bones of the place were good.

Still, the roof and the plumbing and electrical systems needed to be replaced, which wouldn't be cheap, and there was no air-conditioning, unless you counted the breezes that blew in between the glass and rotted-out window frames even when they were closed—or nailed shut, as most of them were. The building inspector told me that such an advanced state of disrepair made it the perfect candidate for a remodel—or a demolition. We went ahead and bought it.

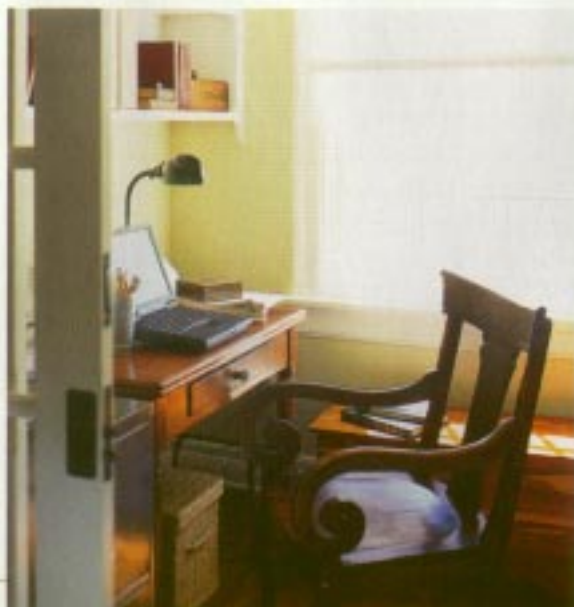
The funny thing about the house was that it looked big from the street. This being Hollywood, though, it was mostly a facade: There were just two bedrooms, one stacked over the living room, another over the dining room.

In back, behind the dining room, was a little addition that housed the 1950s kitchen/family room downstairs, and an office and a couple of closets above; the living room side of the house was only one room deep. Altogether, the place measured 2,610 square feet, which sounded good on paper, but almost a sixth of the living space was cored right out of the center by a grand staircase. Functionally, the place seemed smaller than the apartment we'd been living in, and we had to cram ourselves, two children, my mother, and two home offices into it. It was also dark. There were only two overhead fixtures in the whole house, and some windows had been walled in where closets were added, while others were boarded shut and covered up by pieces of furniture.

Then there was the pool. Dot, the 90-year-old owner who had bought and renovated the house with her husband and two children back in 1954, had had a deep one dug just a few steps from the back door—situated that close, she explained, because they liked to watch TV while sitting poolside. (The TV in question was still there, too, built right into the door of the basement, which made access to that space iffy.) The pool had to go.

LEFT: Chris's study fits into a small room off the upstairs hall, where the grand stairway curves (RIGHT).

Overall, we were looking at a couple of months for plan-



The old kitchen (BEFORE, LEFT) had not been touched in decades. In the new space, Julia chose for a retro look, with a restored cookstove as the focal point. The plans (BELOW) show how downstairs spaces were reshaped.



ning the renovation and designing the addition, and a minimum of six months of construction. In the end we would have a 3,726-square-foot, four-bedroom, two-office house with four and a half baths. We bought the house in December 1998

and hoped to be moved in by the following December.

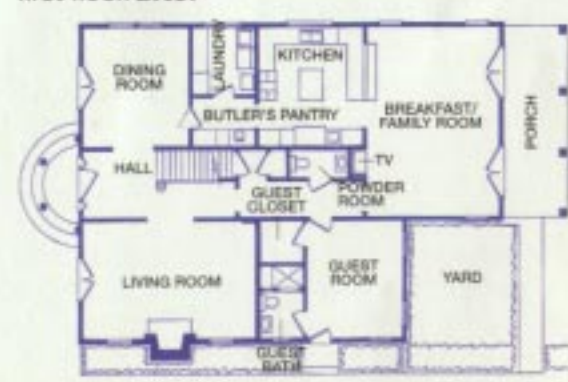
But first, I had to find an architect. I called the partners of a firm I had once interviewed for an article and had dreamed of using for the house I'd someday own. Booked solid. They recommended a friend from architecture school, L.A.-based architect Kevin Oreck. When I met Kevin, I fell for his period-sensitive work right away.

I asked him for a redesign with lots of light, plenty of living area, and a 1920s look, as long as it didn't conflict with our twenty-first-century need for convenience and comfort. According to Kevin, the easiest way to add these amenities was to extend the open-plan kitchen/family room pool-ward, in the process making the small office upstairs big enough to hold a master suite (a total gain of 576 square feet, upstairs and down), and to open both rooms to the outdoors with double sets of French doors—to the porch downstairs and the balcony above. Given the L-shape of the house, enclosing an old concrete porch within its elbow seemed like a good idea, forming a two-story addition that would roughly square off the structure (and add another 540 square feet on the two floors). Kevin pulled back the corner of that addition a little, improving the house's back profile and

first floor/before



first floor/after





Architect Kevin Oreck's family-friendly renovation of the downstairs opened up the breakfast/family room to the outdoors with double sets of French doors. Glossy white paint gives the beadboard ceiling a visual lift.

making it look as if it had always been there—a nice touch that also made it possible to have windows on three sides of the family room. “The interesting thing about your house from a design standpoint,” Kevin told me recently, “was that it was so clear what had to go—the earlier remodel at the back of the house didn’t even try to blend in.” Well, at least one of us actually had a plan.

Adding up the construction costs came to a mind-boggling \$250,000. The addition for my mother’s room and my office raised that another \$80,000, but we figured it would save money and trauma in the long run if we could somehow get a big enough construction loan to do it all at once. Our realtor was also a mortgage broker (did I mention that his band toured Japan this past fall?), and he managed to squeeze \$359,000 out of a bank. The terms stipulated that we had to move into the house by the end of January 2000 or, at best, pay a huge monthly fine. At worst, the bank would foreclose on our property.

As with childbirth, no one can really prepare you for the pain of renovation. For starters, we were shocked, but not really surprised, by the contractors’ bids. The cheapest, \$379,000, came from Jay Bruder. He’d done work for my husband’s lawyer, and

there were no lawsuits pending, so he got the job.

Shock number two: When the back walls came down, one weekend while we were out of town getting our second child, Coco, baptized, the team exposed massive water and termite damage, which meant that studs Jay hadn’t expected to replace had to go. New flooring components were needed, too, thanks to a concrete patio along the back side of the house, installed many years ago some 8 inches above the house’s mudsill (a pressure-treated Douglas fir framing element bolted on top of the foundation). Since the concrete of the patio was so far above the mudsill, it had been wicking in water for decades, and an unfortunate mix of moisture and termites had dissolved the mudsill, the rim joists that rested on it, and a roughly foot-long section of each of the floor joists. Jay’s bid hadn’t provided for replacing this stuff. Boom! Another ten thousand bucks. Kevin had made us set up an \$18,000 contingency fund within the contractor’s bid for emergencies like this, but we were hardly started and already it was more than half gone.

Then the foundation turned out to have over a hundred cracks, 12 to 18 inches long, each $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide, probably caused by the higher cement-to-sand ratio used in 1920s concrete. Work

stopped while subcontractors delivered bids for the cost of gluing the foundation together again with injections of epoxy resin. The first bid, from a guy who drove up in a Mercedes, was \$800. How we laughed—until the others came in thousands of dollars higher. Mr. Mercedes got the job.

I agonized over every cent. I knew a kitchen could blow through a fortune quickly, but the period touches I liked happened to be the least expensive options. Forget granite countertops—square white ceramic tiles, grouted gray, were much more retro. The superdeep, superwide farm sink I craved might be out of our league, but I definitely could swing the classic double-bowled enamel-and-cast-iron number available at our local home center. The kitchen floor had to be linoleum, which is to limestone what a Buick is to a Bentley. Instead of a stainless steel professional range, I opted for a retrofitted Wedgewood—top-of-the-1950s-line, double oven, grill plus four burners—from a place called Antique Stove Heaven, for half as much. After talking to Kevin, and Peter Scholz, the cabinet-maker, we decided that white-painted Shaker-style custom cabinets in the kitchens and baths would be truest to the look we wanted. Painting rather than staining made good budgetary sense, too; we could use poplar, a cheaper lumber, in combination with medium-density fiberboard. The great thing about MDF, they explained to me, is that it takes paint smoothly (no wood grain to cover) and doesn’t warp. Sold!

Bathrooms can be budget-busters too, and ours (powder room downstairs, one full bath upstairs, plus what was essentially a closet fitted with a shower and toilet) were beyond outdated. Luckily, my thrifty taste extended to washroom decor. Hexagonal-tiled floors and rectangular white wall tile were reasonable—and I love them. The only tub was a salmon-pink number that had been ruined when it was drilled for acrylic shower doors. New cast-iron tubs were expensive—about \$1,000—and they didn’t have the shape or the patina of age I wanted. So I searched salvage yards for vintage examples in good condition. A week before my daughter was born, I found two white tubs at a salvage yard, about \$600 for the pair.

The whole family got involved in the house: My sister-in-law in Troy, New York, sent porcelain sconces for the bathrooms and brass ones for the living room; two from her local salvage yard cost what one did in L.A. My mother sat in the car with my children while I rushed through plumbing centers, tile yards, and hardware stores buying whatever—whenever—I could to save on the contractor’s markup. My architect and my husband each spent a day with me sorting through crates of filthy old crystal doorknobs at the fabulous (and fabulously expensive) antique hardware store near the house. Most of the doors had apparently been removed in the last remodel, as there were only six interior doors with doorknobs in the whole house, including closet doors. Those well-worn knobs we sweated over worked wonders when it came to making our new doors look like they’d always been there.

And so Chris and I fumbled along, trying to make good decisions in situations where we hardly understood what we were trying to

second floor/before



second floor/after



As the plans (ABOVE) illustrate, the upstairs was expanded to include an outside balcony off the master bedroom (BELOW). All rooms throughout the house were brightened considerably by new windows—and by a pale color palette.



FLOOR PLANS: GORDON BOWYER



FILL'ER UP

Since the Johnson-Marcil household includes two small children (and their plans called for a large back addition), the couple wanted to trade in their swimming pool for a kid-friendly back lawn. Doug Harpel, of American Demolition/Concrete Cutting, managed the process, which involved partial removal of the pool's shell followed by about 150 tons of gravel fill. "We could've taken the whole shell out before filling it, but considering the amount of concrete and steel rebar used to reinforce it, the job would've cost twice as much," says Harpel. "Where city codes allow it, partial removal is usually the better option." Our *T.O.H.* photographer caught up with Harpel's crew on a similar project to record how the job's done: 1. A backhoe fitted with a 2,000-

pound ram breaker punches one 3-by-3-foot drainage hole in the shallow end of the pool, another 4-by-4-foot hole in the deep end, and various smaller weep holes throughout. It then breaks down the top two feet of the 12-inch-thick concrete from around the upper rim; an acetylene torch cuts away the surviving steel rebar "fingers." 2. Trading in the ram for a 3-foot bucket, the backhoe scoops up the concrete scraps from the remaining basin. A truck hauls away the debris, returning with a load of class-2 base, the same ¾-inch rock and soil compound used to build highways. 3. A backhoe fills the pool as a Bobcat spreads the base material in even 12-inch increments. 4. A vibrating roller with front and rear 40-inch drums compacts each layer to roughly 9 inches. 5. At each interval, a state-licensed soil engineer tests for compaction. First he drives a steel bar into the ground to create a ¾-inch hole; then he inserts a special device called a densitometer to emit low-level radiation into the hole. The device measures the transmission of gamma rays through the soil to determine whether maximum density (95 percent) has been achieved. The final 12 to 24 inches of the fill are pure topsoil, creating a fertile bed on which to landscape. —Dan DiClerico

decide in the first place. All that I had guiding me in my choices were some photos I'd taken over the years in old houses I loved—a tile floor here, a shelf bracket there. And, thankfully, I got great advice from my architect and contractor.

Over the next few months, Kevin and Jay became like brothers to me, and they assured me that the job was going smoothly, despite unexpected surprises. Deliveries came late (windows) or not at all (special tile for my mother's bathroom floor, now hexagonal just like the others), and some were simply wrong (predrilled doors that should have been blanks and had to be patched on-site). Jay even managed to keep us from having a heart attack when the tile guy, who had decided mid-job to spend Christmas in Russia, vanished for weeks.

No, we didn't get into the house by the millennium. Yes, we had to get an extension on the construction loan and pay whopping penalties for the two months we went over the time allotted us. The contingency fee evaporated, and we overshot our budget by about 10 percent. Every time I felt unusually dejected, I comforted myself with this: We were practically rebuilding an entire house in the amount of time it was taking our next-door neighbor to redo her kitchen.

Most of the job really did go smoothly. And then there was the house. Once it started to look like something, it really started to look like, well, *something*. During the final few construction meetings, I would sometimes wander off to another room, ostensibly so my colicky daughter could scream her guts out in private, but really to just look around and think: Wow, we actually get to live here. Jay put our place on the cover of his company's brochure; Kevin walked prospective clients through regularly; and the cabinet guy and painting subcontractor asked if they could take pictures for their portfolios. Unlike me, they didn't seem shocked that it had turned out well.

Then a friend walked into one of the baths we'd worked so hard to make look original to the house and said, "So, you didn't have to do anything to this." Except, of course, build it from scratch. Who says they don't make them like they used to? ■



BEFORE, ABOVE: A swimming pool filled most of the backyard. BELOW: Removing the pool gave the family much-needed play space, enjoyed here by the author's husband, Chris, and their son, Will.

