

In the beginning,
there was white.

No-risk, play-it-safe, top-to-bottom, wall-to-wall, spec-house white. Two entire floors—3,200 square feet—of nothing but the noncolor color of last resort. It is, in short, the white we know all too well (and, sometimes, tire of all too quickly).

But now? Well, what once was all white—and, for a California couple, all white—*Continued on page 47*



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In the dining area above, Maria Stark watches a game of chess between Bruce Dobb and their son, Charley. The papaya color of the walls was inspired by photos Maria came across in a food magazine. "I have a hard time understanding why people feel as if they need to live in a vanilla box," she says. "They seem to assume that intense color means you can't live in a house in a relaxing fashion, and that's really not the case. Our house is extremely relaxing, both physically and visually."

The sun-faded blue and red stucco exterior of the house opposite presents a subtle contrast to the goings-on inside. Only the ceramic mosaic welcome mat and house numbers hint that this may indeed be a home of some artistic merit. "It is," architect Benjamin Clavan says, "a very unassuming entrance for a house of that size and scope. But that makes the surprise inside even more exciting."

Once inside the front door left, Clavan's colorful architecture rushes to greet visitors. Streaming in overhead, light is made even more intense by the strong yellow of a recessed well. A papaya ceiling presides over a floor of red sheet vinyl and a half-height stairway enclosure of striped violet and blueberry. Semigloss paint, used throughout the house, gives depth, dimension, and movement to color-saturated surfaces.

rainbow rooms



Clavan's strategy for giving shape and form to the austere house was to paint perimeter walls solid colors and interior partitions in multiple colors. In the living room, for example, the coat closet wall has a graphic grid, the stair enclosure features stripes, and a kitchen wall beyond is painted in horizontal cream and green stripes. The black chair and pair of white sofas are generic '50s pieces that Maria had reupholstered in synthetic leather. "I have an 8-year-old son and two dogs. Need I say more?" she says. "Besides, it's a playful type of material." More fabulous fakes: wall-to-wall zebra carpet and a cheetah bench.

Designed by Maria and crafted by a local welder, a wrought-iron gate is a decorative barricade that becomes an integral element in the art-filled environment while it keeps the family's two canines at bay. On the floor, serpentine mosaics in red and blue—a collaboration among Maria, Clavan, and artists Merle Fishman and David Catrambone—spill out of the kitchen door into a field of Mexican terra-cotta tile, throwing curves into a corridor that leads to the family room. "I'm not an artist," Maria says, "but this house was like a blank

canvas. I wanted the surfaces—the whole house, in fact—to look like a work of art." Wide bands of color on the walls encircling the kitchen give it shape, dimension, and a substantial but playful presence between the dining room and the family room.





Too new to be replaced but too generic-looking to be tolerated, the kitchen's plastic

laminate cabinets were sanded and painted to look more like painted wood, above. "It just seemed ludicrous, not to mention expensive, to tear out a brand-new, never-used kitchen," Clavan says. "Painting laminate cabinets is not something that I'd advise for all situations, but it turned out to be a pretty good solution here." The black ceramic tile countertops and lipstick red sink, original to the house, were retained for their colorful contributions. Showcasing collected Fiesta ware and other colorful pottery, the upper cabinets were painted melon on the inside. A high shelf above the kitchen window shows off vintage white California pottery. Los Angeles artist Tony Mack painted the top of a rustic wooden table to make it compatible with the kitchen's green interior walls.

Spindly '50s stools, right, belly up to the bar between the kitchen and family room while red mosaic tile seems to seep out underneath. In a 10-minute operation, Clavan removed the backs from the upper cabinets to open up room-to-room visibility and to allow the colorful pottery to be enjoyed from the family room.

Continued from page 41

wrong—is now an energetic, animated, entertaining, amusing, lively, glamorous, and dramatic testament to the transformative power of (drumroll, please) paint. Yes, simply paint—along with pluck and a passion for the exuberant hues of Mexico and the furniture of post-World War II America.

For Maria Stark and Bruce Dobb, as well as for architect Benjamin Clavan, paint is more than a cover-up. They regard it as remodeling by the gallon or architecture in a can, a way to give featureless spaces shape, form, dimension, distinctive detail, and a healthy complexion—all without raising the roof beams, rearranging the walls, or making costly structural changes.

Continued on page 53



Sets of French doors replaced a single glass slider in the family room. The glass deliberately blurs the distinction between indoors and out, connecting the room with a narrow wraparound deck and the hills beyond. A scenic green adorns the walls, while playfully fake banana palms and parrots bring flora and fauna inside. Clavan had violet-color planter boxes for living greenery made for the deck. "The idea here was to try to layer, extend, and enrich the view," he says. "So you get the green walls inside, the green plantings on the deck, and the green trees on the hills in the distance. It really expands the perception of spaciousness from the inside." Once components of a 1950s sectional, the sofas are, like the ones in the living room, upholstered in leather-look vinyl. The amoeba-shaped cocktail table is another familiar form from the same era.



Clavan's waste-not-want-not attitude was well-suited to Maria and Bruce's furniture resourcefulness. After workers removed marble tiles from the family room fireplace wall (because everyone agreed that the tiles weren't right for the look they wanted), Clavan called a halt to the project. The cementitious residue underneath, he decided, was both rustic and refined, a highly textured and patterned surface that was too good to replace or cover up. "The whole idea, throughout the house, was to differentiate surfaces," Clavan says. "One way to do that was with color. Another way was with texture. What we had here after the cheap marble tile was removed was a really arresting textured surface. Really, it was art by accident." And, except for the cost of demolition, free art at that. The volcanic-looking wall also serves as a good backdrop for two folk art urns and a painting from Mexico. A meandering mosaic of black tile splashes over the hearth and up the fireplace wall, drawing attention to the room's not-to-be-missed focal point.



Although there is no roof above the deck, painted beams and screened "walls" offer a reassuring sense of enclosure. Retractable canvas shades provide relief-on-demand from sun. Five sets of swing-out French doors seem to make the deck and the family room one continuous space. An area rug of indoor/outdoor carpet and the wrought-iron-and-canvas butterfly chairs further establish the area as a bona fide room. "Because the house is on a steep hill with no yard to speak of, the deck is really their backyard," Clavan explains. "There are areas out there for sitting, dining, and barbecuing." Terra-cotta pots and planter boxes contain citrus trees and miniature oleanders.



Two shades and textures of slate tile bordered by metallic glass mosaic tiles, above, lead from the main floor to the lower-level bedrooms. "We wanted a material that would hold up over time in a high-traffic area," Maria says, "something with texture and good traction. Mixing two kinds of slate gave it a fresh, unpredictable look." Although the glass block window is flush with the wall, its pretty-in-pink "frame" makes it appear to be recessed.

The velvet-upholstered bed *right*, designed by Clavan and former associate Bruce Gabala, almost floats in the room. Its anchor is the narrow headboard wall, painted in a blend of metallic hues, that holds a pop art print. That piece and the '50s-era nightstands are some of Maria's garage-sale finds. The faux-leopard rug rests on a new floor of crisp white vinyl tiles. Less graphic and more voluptuous than the public spaces, the master bedroom, Maria says, is a "fairly seductive room."



Continued from page 47

That should be music to the ears of those who are, by nature or necessity, frugal but still yearn for a home that's as personal as a signature.

The trio also regards Maria and Bruce's Los Angeles home, built in 1989, as a work in progress, a nonstatic environment that changes by evolution not revolution. Together, they have been cosmetically reconstructing the house periodically since the couple purchased it in 1991, painting an area at a time, then letting Maria and Bruce live with it for a while before moving on.

Purchased for its location, sound construction, roomy split-level floor plan, and high-altitude views, the house offered everything Maria and Bruce wanted. Their only objection was its white-elephant interior, as devoid of personality as it was of pigment.

Clavan, a master at defining and differentiating spaces and surfaces with paint, in effect employs color as architecture. "Color is an integral element of interior architecture," he says. "Here, it was a way of transforming a coldly modern house into a vibrant and intensely personal home on a fairly limited budget."

It was also a way of showcasing Maria and Bruce's prized possessions and colorful collections, including primitive folk art masks, Mexican sculptures and paintings, California pottery, and that All-American favorite, Fiestaware. Refurbished furnishings from the Eisenhower era (much of them rescued from flea markets and secondhand sources) tie a modern home from the 1990s to the moderne sofa, chairs, and tables of the 1950s.

"The best interiors are personal and even idiosyncratic," Clavan says. "They're a reflection of the owners' own varied tastes and interests." □

RESOURCES ON PAGE 104