

# atomic ranch

MIDCENTURY MARVELS

SPRING 2015

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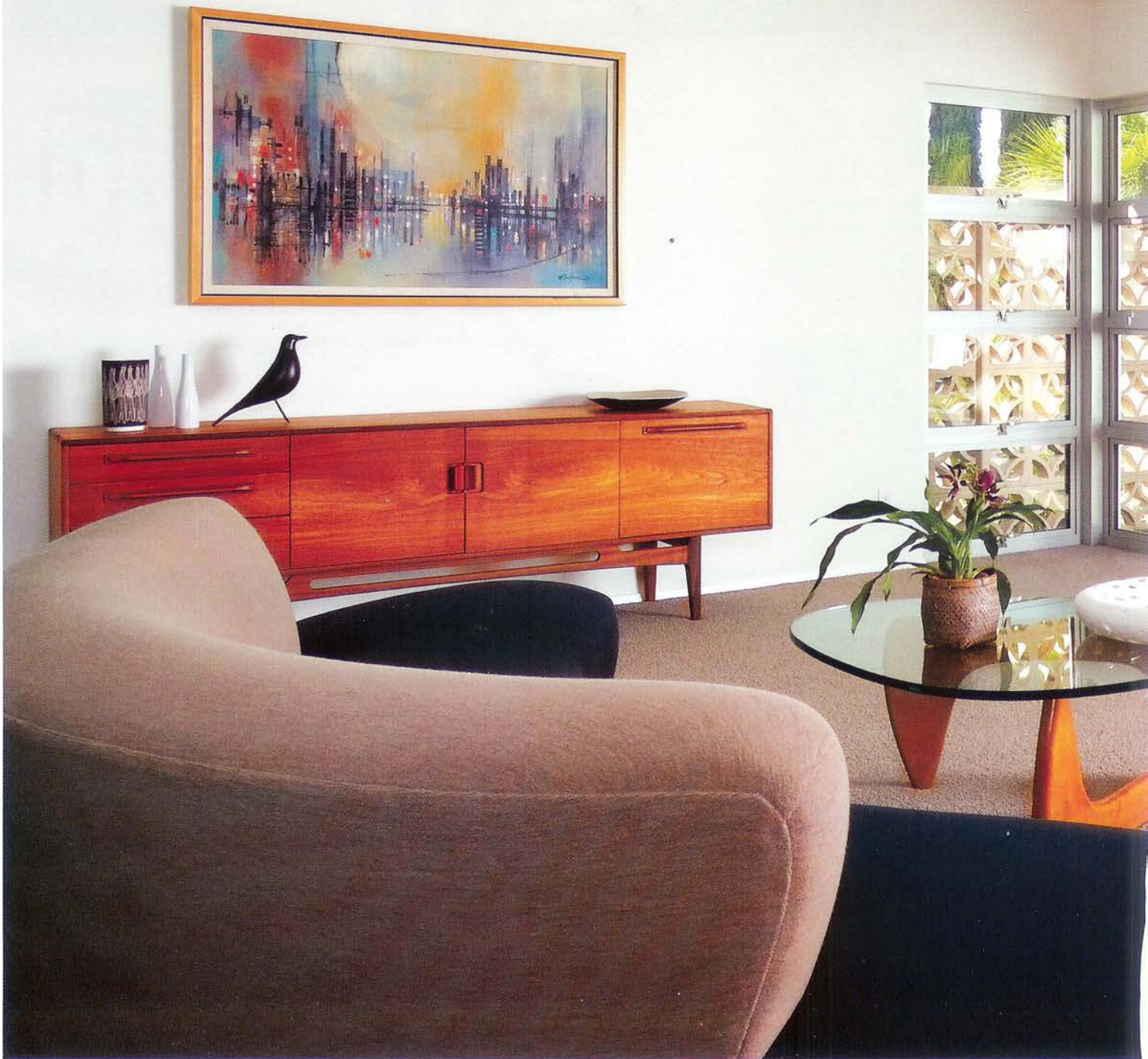
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# Notes from a Remodel Gone Right





It was a rainy Super Bowl Sunday in 1996 when, having searched for a year for the right midcentury modern home, we reached the last house on the list our Realtor had given us. It was a bank-owned property whose price had been lowered recently and hadn't been lived in for 18 months.

A ratty-looking juniper hedge and an oozing sprinkler that looked as if it had been running for months greeted us as we crept around the back of the house. Someone had inadvertently left one of the sliding glass doors unlocked, so we sneaked in and

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*photography* PJ McMullan





made our way through each room. What we faced was dirty, orange shag carpet; glossy, flowered wallpaper; cheap lights dangling from ceiling hooks; and bathrooms that looked like they hadn't been cleaned since Nixon was in office. But after a year of Sundays searching for any MCM home for sale, we knew what to look for and what to ignore.

### **Rife with potential**

This home had a flow and bones like none we had seen—forget the stale cigarette smell and linoleum-from-hell. As we stood in the entryway, the setting sun managing to work its way through the ribbon-glass windows like some kind of sign—we knew we had finally found it.

'The Darby House' was how it was known in the neighborhood, named for Academy Award-winning composer Ken Darby and his wife, who bought the home in 1961. It was the cheapest house for sale in an upscale neighborhood, so we made a lowball offer (figuring that the bank wasn't sentimental) and it was soon ours.

To make it livable, we needed to replace the carpet, lose the wallpaper and decaying light fixtures, and paint everything. I had been collecting midcentury furnishings since the early 1980s, so items like my Franciscan Starburst dinnerware from 1954 would finally have a proper home. We were now spending Sundays at the Rose Bowl swap meet and retro shops, and managed to score some wonderful signed and dated California artwork, as well as a beautiful Heywood-Wakefield dining room set. To add to the vintage furniture, our friend Jay Novak, who owns Modernica, built us some wonderful repro pieces—a pair of Pierre Paulin Orange Slice Chairs, a Vladimir Kagan 'Cloud' couch and a Isamu Noguchi table.

The focus of the home is on the back yard, with large windows and sliding glass doors, so it was soon obvious that the less-than-pristine landscaping was next on the list. Should we do it ourselves? That could save some bucks! But we had seen Mark Rios' work in a magazine article, and since he was one of the top landscape architects in the city, in 2000 we decided to call him to see about designing our yard.

Mark literally walked around the property for about 15 minutes, then we sat down and he started to go over what he thought would work. We told him that nothing was sacred and that the hodgepodge of messy eucalyptus, redwoods, innocuous shrubs and overgrown junipers



**This home had a flow and bones like none we had seen**





Previous spread: Modernica's Cloud sofa, Slice chair and Noguchi-style coffee table in the living room; over the vintage credenza hangs 'Blue Haze' by William Saltzman from 1959, found at a flea market for \$100. Contractor David Stumfall suggested aluminum cladding on the bottoms of the all the windows and sliding glass doors for a finished look that would mask any unevenness where they meet the concrete patio. Outside, the powder-coated-steel and glass fence was fashioned after one at Craig Ellwood's Case Study House #16 in Bel Air.

Updated frosted-glass louver windows were retained since they were functional and offered privacy for the guest bath. The lap pool has a fishpond outside the living room near the original pierced-concrete block wall.



Opposite, top: The rechromed wall sconce and rock fireplace surround in the den are original to the house, while the new bar cabinet hides the flat screen. "Susan always hated the TV just sitting there when it wasn't being watched, so her idea was to have it slide into the bar. Kasey Mangum, our subcontractor, talked with his cabinet guy, and they came up with a glide rack used on city buses to swap batteries in and out," explains Van Lenten.

Opposite, bottom: The Eames Storage Unit is new, as is the pony-skin butterfly chair, while the coffee table is Heywood-Wakefield. The project painter suggested using aluminum paint on the perforated metal screen between the den and the hallway to tie in with the doors and windows.

In the den, an Eames lounge chair and ottoman teams with a repainted vintage pole lamp and a Cyclone end table from Modernica. The homeowners replaced almost all of the glass to meet California energy requirements; the awning and fixed windows are from Metal Window Corp, while the sliders are Fleetwood. "Having lived with the awning windows now for two years, I have been amazed by their insulation properties and the fact that you can't hear a sound outside when they are closed," says Van Lenten.

could all go—the blank slate approach. We threw some ideas back and forth—Susan suggested we make a section of the lap pool a koi pond separated by pavers, and I moved the placement of French drains from the patio to underneath the Mexican black stones so they couldn't be seen—and within a week the design was in our hands.

### Lesson one: Get a total plan

An architect, whether for the landscape or your home, knows a lot more than you do and can save you a lot of pain and money—like when you find out that your pool would be too close to your neighbor's property line, or that the new drainage now leaves your driveway a swamp after a big rain. Good architects also have a tried-and-true work force, in contrast to hiring an independent pool guy, a hardscape guy and plant-material guy.

Another realization was that the original 1959 electrical panel we nostalgically left in place might be a bit outdated. When we tried to use both a toaster and a new deep-fat fryer at the same time, it blew out all the fuses in the front of the house. The Magic Chef appliances from the 1980s







**We came up with a design to have the television slide into the bar**







were also dying, and the cheap maple veneer cabinets were peeling badly. So we started interviewing—interior designers at first. They clearly did not get it.

One designer wanted to get rid of all the original artwork we had collected and replace it with rococo prints! Another, pointing to the iconic petrified rock fireplace in the den, asked, “You’re not going to keep that, right?” A change of program was in order.

I knew about architect Cory Buckner and her prominent role in the preservation of the Crestwood Hills neighborhood in Brentwood from my membership in the Los Angeles Conservancy. And my partner, Susan Cushing, actually lived in Crestwood Hills in the 1980s. In 2011, we had Cory come over to the house to see if she would be a good fit. She got it. And yes, she had a team already in place.

We realized that this was an opportunity to do things that should have been done in 1959—insulation!—and to improve upon existing things—like expanding the master bath to take advantage of the now-beautiful

yard. Basically, a sensitive remodel to complement our MCM lifestyle was the goal.

### **Lesson two: Do everything at the same time**

We realized if we were going to do this right, it should be done top-to-bottom. Replacing load-bearing walls with glass to let the outside in required additional beams and concrete pylons for reinforcement. Since we were planning to tear apart the ceilings to put in spotlights, we decided to spray foam insulation into all the walls. We also took the opportunity to add a Sonos sound system with speakers in the ceilings and amplifiers in a closet for an uncluttered look. And of course, we installed a new electrical panel to allow us to not only use a toaster and deep-fat fryer at the same time, but anything else we might want to add in.

The original plan was to live in the house while the nine-month remodel was going on. But after talking with Cory and contractor David Stumfall of Palisades Construction, and thinking about living in a nomadic, dust-covered,



A craftsman who'd worked on the Beverly Hills Hotel and other famous eateries in the '50s fabricated the turquoise banquette in 1996, Van Lenten notes. "He said ours was to be his last job." The wall color in the dining room is 'Pink Flamingo,' from Sherwin-William's Suburban Modern historical palette.

## **a sensitive remodel to complement our MCM lifestyle was the goal**

Custom cabinets, concrete-look sheet linoleum on the floor and Compac technological quartz counters in apple green were selected for the new kitchen. The couple chose Thermador appliances for their retro look, and the company threw in the range hood and dishwasher for good measure. The backsplash is London Nacar from Porcelanosa, and a Jackson Pollock-esque Plexiglas door slides open to reveal the ironing board; display shelves under the cooktop hold Franciscan Starburst dinnerware.



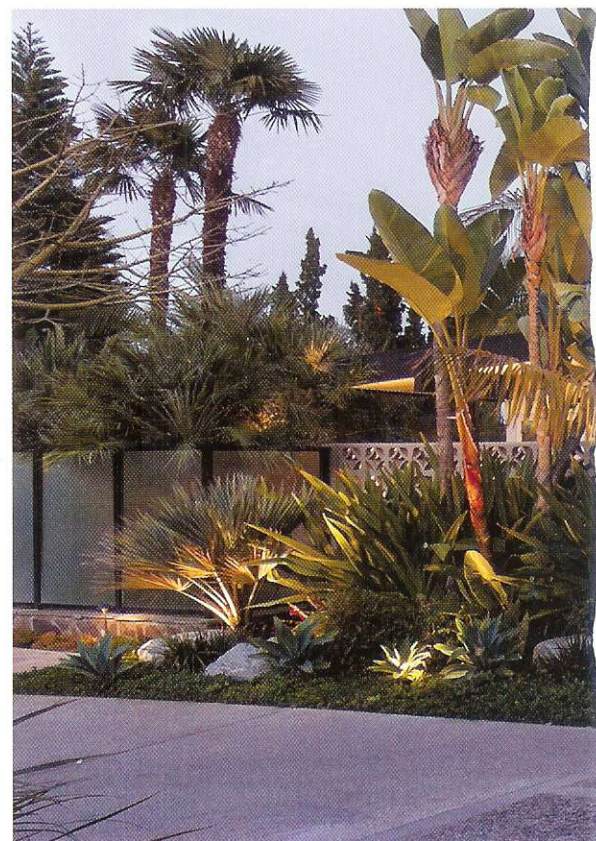




plastic sheet-wrapped enclosure with a microwave for the duration, we realized that there was no way we were staying there. We found a vacation rental in the Hollywood Hills, which was not only fully furnished, but included all utilities. It was a month-to-month rental, which is ideal if work takes longer than planned (it did). We highly recommend a vacation rental for any extensive remodel.

As readers of Atomic Ranch we embrace the MCM ideal, but we live in 2015 and must deal with the codes and regulations of modern-day construction. For instance, I was hoping for Case Study-like louvers, but that was not to be here in California—insufficient insulation properties! So we opted for awning windows from Metal Window Corp., a practical and attractive compromise. Placement of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, a certain percentage of fluorescent lighting and where to situate the air conditioning and laundry vents are examples of things that need to be factored into an overall design. We repeat, having a complete plan is operative here.

Likewise, a good working relationship with both architect and contractor is essential to meeting one's goals. With Cory, David and subcontractor Kasey Mangum always accessible, we were able to make the project go







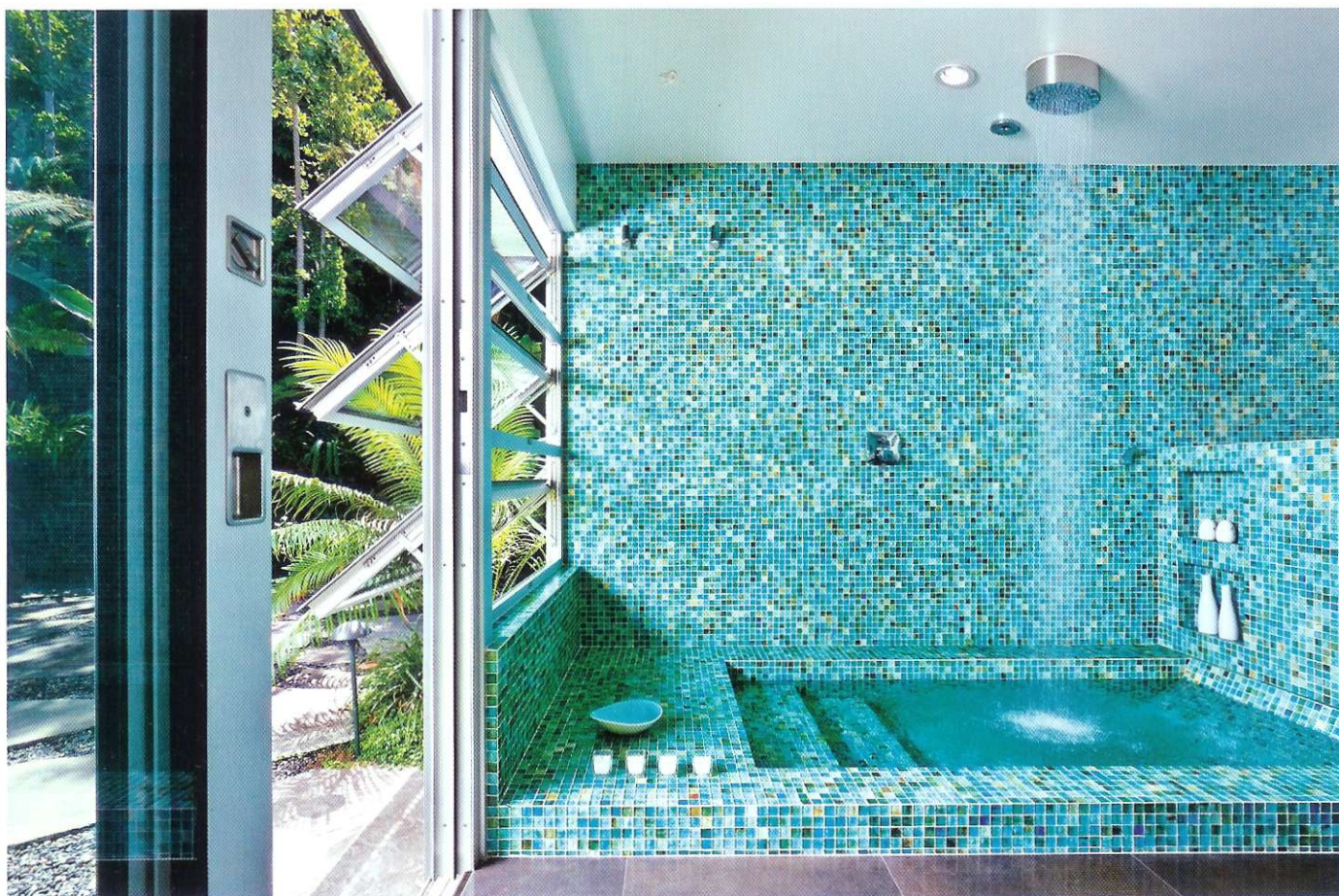
'Holiday Turquoise' paint focuses your eye on the display wall in the living room, with the pond in the foreground.

Behind the clerestory windows of the carport is Van Lenten's workshop, a must-have he put on architect Cory Buckner's program.





**We expanded the master bath to take advantage of the now-beautiful yard.**



smoothly, downtime was minimized and it allowed for constructive discussion and timely alterations if we thought a new approach was better than an earlier one.

For instance, coming up with a design to have the television slide into the bar when it wasn't being used was a great collaboration. In addition, the time we spent doing our homework before the project began, lining up all the appliances, tile, flooring, etc., was integral to keeping things on schedule. We now have the perfect home in which to enjoy our midcentury lifestyle. ✨

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For more on Crestwood Hills and Cory Buckner's work, we recommend 'Mutual Admiration Society' in issue No. 39, available at [atomic-ranch.com](http://atomic-ranch.com).

The new master bath has swathes of glass mosaic tile, with porcelain tile on the floor over radiant heating. Cory Buckner's solution for divergent opinions on the need for a bathtub—Van Lenten has no use for them, while Cushing thought it would be good for resale—was a Roman tub with a filler spout near the ceiling rain head.

*Susan Cushing is director of scientific affairs at a global healthcare company, while Brian Van Lenten is on the cardiology faculty at UCLA. He grew up in a 1955 New Jersey split-level and collects vintage watches and fountain pens, first editions of modern American literature and anything MCM that will add further charm to their home. See more of PJ McMullan's photography at [pjmcullan.com](http://pjmcullan.com).*