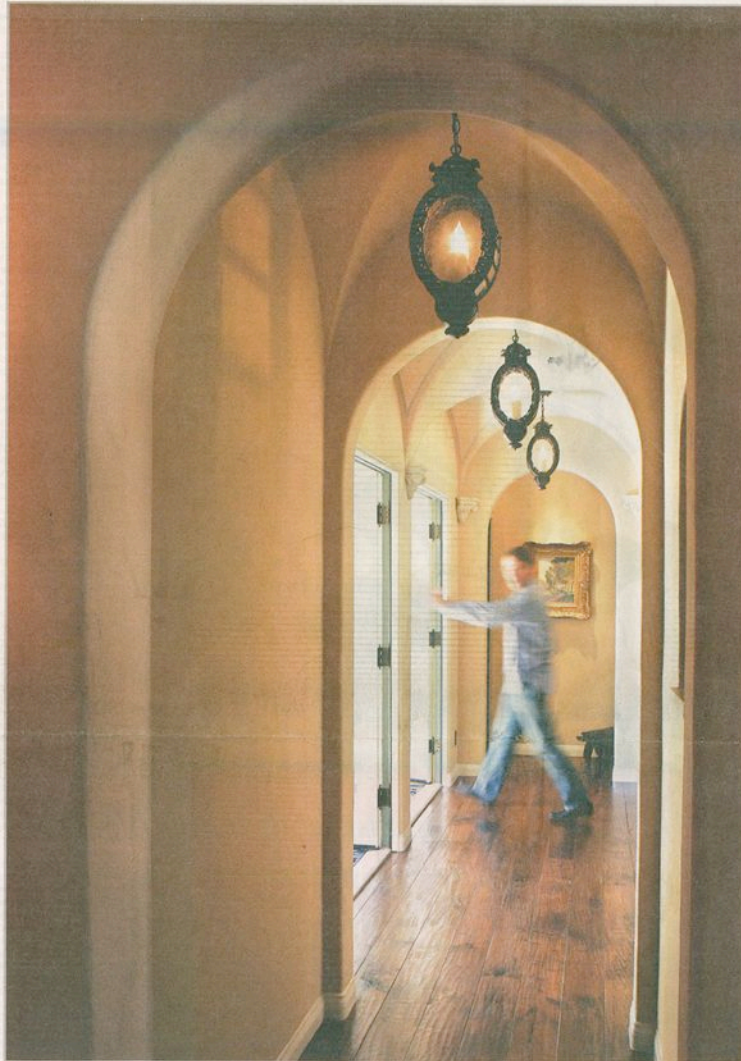




## INNER LIFE



Photographs by RICARDO DRABATANKA Los Angeles Times

**PERSONAL TOUCH:** The hall is lined with custom lighting patterned after a lamp from owner John Simpson's mother.

# Revival, their way

**THE MIX:** Spanish doors open to the vanity, a Chinese rice bin.



One couple's Spanish house becomes an experiment in tweaking the traditional.

By CRAIG NAKANO  
Times Staff Writer

**O**NLY in Los Angeles could the label "traditional" be construed as an insult. For a place obsessed with the new and the unnaturally enhanced, the T-word connotes everything that so many here strive not to be: tired, old, ordinary.

But anyone who buys a classic piece of Southern California architecture — whether Craftsman, ranch, beach cottage or midcentury Modern — soon finds out that tradition often comes with the keys. Each type of home is well furnished with long-standing notions about what's right and what's oh-so-wrong, especially when it comes to the interior design.

For Eva and John Simpson, Spanish Revival was less of a style than a question: How could their San Marino house feel classic yet not a cliché, translating an architectural tradition with a definitively personal voice?

For part of the answer, the couple looked to a completely different language of design. "I'm of Chinese descent, and I really want my kids to have that heritage and know that's part of who [See Fusion, Page F8]



**FLUTTERY:**

Lauren Simpson is framed by the billowy white sheers selected by interior designer Carolyn Oliver, right. "I call those my señorita drapes," she says.



**INNER LIFE**

# Tweaking tradition to suit their style

[Fusion, from Page F1] they are," says Eva, who called upon some cultural fusion to create a home that's now Spanish with a twist.

Witness the powder room, where a vintage door salvaged in Spain opens to an antique Chinese rice bin converted into a vanity.

"It was a Chinese box, but when set under a Monterey-style mirror, it could pass for Spanish Colonial," says Carolyn E. Oliver, the Pasadena interior designer to whom the Simpsons turned for help blending periods and places without undermining the house's 1920s Spanish Revival roots.

The synthesis of cultures didn't stop there. In the living room, eight months of searching yielded just the right antique Chinese chests to flank the Batchelder fireplace. Seemingly disparate elements crafted thousands of miles apart look as though they were designed to sit side by side. "They just talk to each other," Oliver says.

Adding an Asian influence in the wood-beamed master bedroom was a bit trickier, but ultimately Oliver suggested it be done through color—a porcelain white and deep china blue that appear in easy chair upholstery and a custom Michaelian & Kohlberg rug.

"I call those my señorita drapes," Oliver says, nodding to white sheers intricately sewn with hundreds of silk squares, at once reminiscent of a flamenco dancer's billowy dress and a thousand pieces of rice paper, fluttering in the breeze.

**A**S co-founder and managing partner of the vintage Spanish door showroom Portera in Pasadena, John Simpson had a passion for Spanish architecture but wanted his own house to feel distinctive, not formulaic.

The point of hiring Oliver, Eva says, was to get help expressing the couple's taste in tandem with the house's inherent style, to "broaden our horizons and show us things that we wouldn't have picked out for ourselves."

"I know what I like and have a sense of my own style, but you can stall," Eva says. After looking at hundreds of pieces of furniture or fabrics or artworks for each room, "I'd stop and say, 'I've just lost my steam.' And Carolyn would respond, 'That's OK, I still have it.' And she would keep us going."

The process can be overwhelming. John Brinkmann, publisher of American Bungalow magazine, says he regularly hears from Craftsman owners who feel pressure to decorate in an "authentic" way. Move into a classic bungalow and you very well may be welcomed by neighbors bearing instructions on the proper paint palette for your rooms.

Yet, Brinkmann says, many Southern Californians would rather tweak tradition than blindly conform to it. They want a home that's more modern, personal or simply more comfortable.

"They don't want company to come over and sit in a wood chair that just doesn't feel good," Brinkmann says.

"I see no reason why you should adhere to some standard. Newness comes out of experimentation, not imitation."

Cameron Silver, founder and owner of the vintage fashion boutique Decades



Photographs by RICARDO DEARATAMA Los Angeles Times

**CASUAL:** The Simpson children relax on an ottoman in the family room, which has a large pass-through window, left, into the kitchen. The red quatrefoils on the ceiling echo the tile pattern on the kitchen floor. Artist Ken Moffatt spent five days hand-painting them.



**SO WARM:** Batchelder tiles form the living room fireplace, flanked by Chinese chests set on custom bases. At right, colorful tile work lines the pathway to the front door.

in Los Angeles, has made his name forging a fresh, modern look from pieces of the past. Eight years ago, inspired by R.M. Schindler's radical re-imagining of what the Southern California home could be, Silver bought a 1930 residence by the Modernist icon and spent a year and a half reversing alterations that previous owners had made to the original design.

Though it stands as a piece of architectural history, "I didn't want it to feel

like a museum," Silver says. "It's still a home."

So French 1950s furniture shares the space with a Frank Lloyd Wright chair, a George Nelson table, a new chenille sofa and paintings by emerging contemporary artists. It's a mix of eras and styles that feels natural for a Schindler yet is still Modern and, most important, for Silver, "quintessentially Los Angeles."

"My own sense of luxury is probably the antithesis of the Schindler aes-

thetic," Silver says with a laugh. But any doubts about design concessions he's made in the name of authenticity—limited closet space, the galley kitchen—fade away when visitors see the house.

"People who don't know it's a Schindler walk in and say, 'When did you build this?'" Silver says. "It's like when someone in the shop walks up with a vintage dress that's a size 4 and says, 'Do you have this in an 8?'" That's great design. It seems completely timeless."

**T**HAT was the Simpsons' aim when they took on their remodel, keeping the basic footprint of the house, opening up the first floor layout and expanding the second floor so the overall living space grew to about 3,500 square feet.

When the project required many walls to be knocked down to the studs, some neighbors clearly had their doubts. Even though the construction was guided by an architect, James V. Coane of Pasadena, many nearby residents simply couldn't imagine anything good coming of the redesign.

And now?

"They've just been amazed—shocked—at how different the house is," John says, "and yet looks like it has always been here."

From the street, the house does look like quintessential period revival, with entry steps adorned with decorative tile and an antique front door imported from Spain. But walk inside, and the house begins to reveal its personality.

Rather than employ the marble floor so familiar in high-end Spanish homes, the Simpsons went with walnut—hand-hewn planks that were laid into place, then distressed by hand.

Though Batchelder tile is often associated with early Craftsman bungalows, many of San Marino's Spanish houses are graced with Batchelder fireplaces, Oliver says. She tracked down a collection of the vintage tiles in earthy tones,



Photographs by RICARDO DEARATAMA Los Angeles Times



**VIBRANT:** In the kitchen, left, the tile backsplash echoes the softer hues in the concrete tile floor, which Oliver describes as whimsical yet historical. Keeping the home's original footprint allowed outside space for a pool and dining area.

#### More photos on the Web

For an expanded picture gallery of the Simpson house, go to [latimes.com/home](http://latimes.com/home).

then collaborated with Eva to devise their final arrangement. Solid colors are mixed with squares depicting birds, autumn leaves and a lion that, given its proximity to the Chinese chests, begins to look like a dragon.

In the kitchen, the biggest design statement is underfoot: a bright blue and yellow concrete tile floor. The effect is vibrant but not overbearing, thanks to a concrete tile backsplash that echoes the softer hues in the floor.

"The cement tile is colorful, durable and it camouflages the dog hair," Oliver says while the family's Labrador plods off to the courtyard. "It's art on the

floor. It's whimsical and it's historical."

Walk through the house, and it's easy to forget that each space also was designed with the Simpsons' children — ages 2, 4 and 7 — in mind. "Everything I have in the house has to be kid-friendly," Eva says, thumping her palms on a coffee table in the courtyard, as though her littlest one were scurrying across the top. A fountain nearby was positioned so that a Big Wheel could tear by without side-swiping a palm tree. Eva points to the antique farmhouse table in the kitchen and declares with confidence: "My kids cannot destroy that." The three children come

scampering into the family room, their hair still damp from a romp in the pool.

They plop belly-down on an ottoman in front of the TV, lined up like little sea otters sunning on a rock, oblivious to the ceiling above. Hand-painted quatrefoils in a Spanish Colonial red echo the cement tile in the adjacent kitchen. Like so many elements in the house, it's a bit of the past on loan to the present.

"It's easy to go new and nice," Oliver says, smiling at the sweet scene. "It's hard to create old and special."

[craig.nakano@latimes.com](mailto:craig.nakano@latimes.com)