

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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**SPECIAL ISSUE!**

*Before*



*& After*



# CALIFORNIA CLASSIC

## REJUVENATING A WALLACE NEFF RESIDENCE IN BEL-AIR



BEFORE



AFTER

*Architecture by Charles T. Young, AIA  
and David E. Martin*

*Interior Design by Bettye J. Young*

*Landscape Architecture by*

*Robert E. Traskowski, ASLA*

*Text by Michael Webb*

*Photography by Philip Clayton-Thompson*

**W**allace Neff, an erudite eclectic who created some of southern California's most beguiling houses in the two decades before and after the Second World War, was a master of period style. He flitted effortlessly from Spanish colonial to French Rococo to English Regency, fulfilling the dreams of Hollywood clients who were themselves in the business of make-believe. He also understood the importance of well-proportioned spaces, good siting and fine craftsmanship—qualities that have sustained his reputation.

A young couple in the entertainment industry fell in love with an Italianate villa that Neff designed in 1931 for movie producer Sol Wurtzel. Later occupants included Howard Hughes, Prince Rainier, who lived there during his courtship of Grace Kelly, and Elvis Presley. Sixty years on, when the new owners first saw the house, its exterior was crumbling and the interior was dark and cluttered, but its good bones and tree-filled vistas persuaded them to gamble on its future. They quickly assembled a creative team that would restore and enhance it. To satisfy contemporary needs,

**ABOVE FAR LEFT:** A couple's Bel-Air, California, residence was designed by Wallace Neff in 1931 and later inhabited by Howard Hughes and Elvis Presley. **ABOVE LEFT:** "The exterior hadn't been maintained for thirty years," says architect Charles T. Young, who refurbished it with his partner, David E. Martin.

**LEFT:** "We reconfigured the pediment and balcony to make the façade more dominating." **OPPOSITE:** A small rotunda was constructed just off the entranceway as a central access to the main wings.





BEFORE

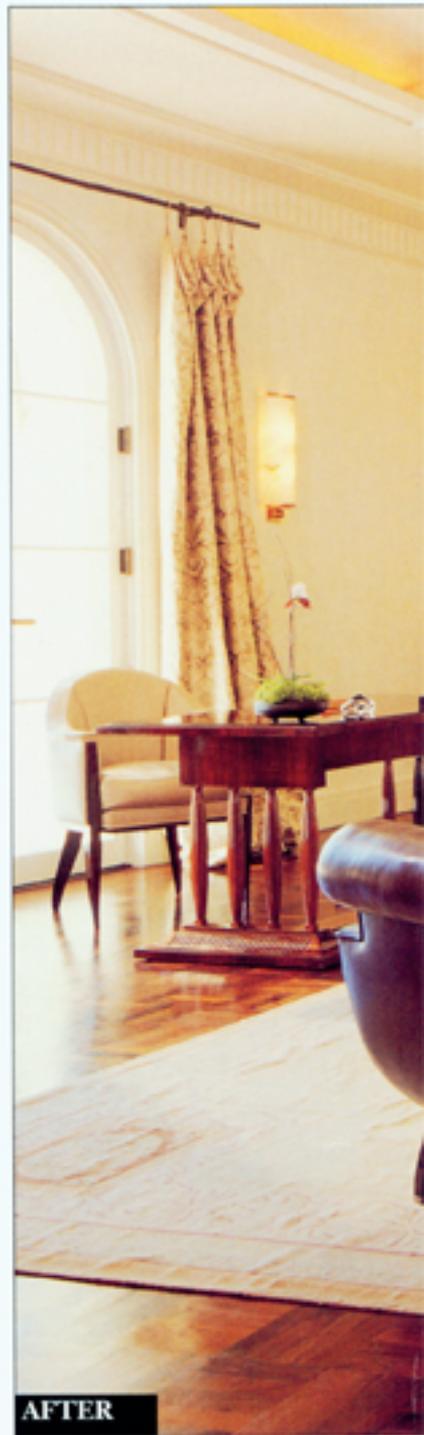
LEFT: "The double-height entrance hall was the only room where Neff's Italianate detailing survived a fifties redesign," notes Young. "Our work here was largely restorative." BELOW: The repainted and refloored space has a Russian chandelier selected by Los Angeles designer Bettye J. Young.

the kitchen and master suite would be enlarged, the old screening room remodeled and a new exercise room and spa tucked beneath an expanded pool deck.

For the architects, New York-based Charles T. Young and his partner at the time, David E. Martin, the challenge was to create a seamless mix, adding spaces in the spirit of Italian Renaissance villas that had inspired Neff while preserving the integrity of the crescent plan. "How do you excavate a full story, build new walls and add a tennis court without overwhelming what's there?" Martin wondered. Their first move was

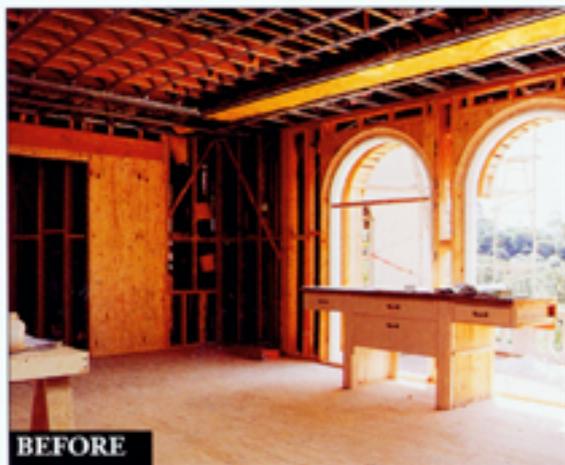


AFTER



AFTER

RIGHT: "The dining room ceiling could be raised only one foot." BELOW: For architectural interest, Young repeated the Art Déco-style frieze used in the living room. "It's Moderne in its simplicity, but its detailing is empathetic to the 1925 table and chairs by Pierre Chareau."



first-floor terrace. Their ceilings were coffered and stenciled to set off graceful arches and handsome, all-weather furniture. New cast-stone balustrades were made from molds of the old, and damaged ornamentation was cleaned or replaced. With consummate skill, Young and Martin wove scattered elements into a composition that is stronger and more expansive than the original.

Their efforts were reinforced by the bold strokes of landscape architect Robert E. Truskowski, who has worked on several major projects with the ar-



"NEFF'S HEAVY ITALIANATE DETAILING HAD BEEN REMOVED IN THE FIFTIES, AND WE WERE LEFT WITH A BLANK CANVAS."



to construct pergolas, punctuated by open pavilions, around the swimming pool and what would become the tennis court, turning them into outdoor rooms.

To balance these extensions, the architects built up the south façade of the house, remodeling the graceful south loggia—which the previous owner had enclosed—and extending the double staircase down to the garden. The west loggia was also reopened to create a secondary axis from house to pool. This generated a pair of breezy outdoor rooms that are linked by the



“Our goal was to bring the interior up to the quality of the exterior,” says Young. **LEFT:** The “low, pedestrian” living room was stripped to its bones. **BELOW:** “We heightened it several feet by creating an inset barrel vault.” The Art Déco club chairs, desk and desk chair are all by Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann.



chitects and who introduced them to the clients. His goal was to salvage as much as possible of the existing landscaping during construction and then to reorganize the plantings to complement the Italianate character of the house. "As the landscape matures, the pergolas will be overgrown and the wall of the exercise room will be covered by vines," says Young. "Then the new buildings will emerge from a green base."

The interiors posed even more questions for designers and clients. "Neff's heavy Italianate detailing had been



LEFT: "The space had been a staff kitchen and still had 1930s iceboxes, linoleum and Formica," the husband recalls. "We gutted it." BELOW: Exterior walls were knocked out, and the kitchen was extended to include a covered rear porch, now the breakfast area.



**BELOW:** The sleeping area of the master bedroom was created by enclosing a loggia; the curved wall of the sitting room defines the original exterior wall. **BOTTOM:** "We employed a classical device of columns and niches," says the architect. The Ruhlmann-inspired bed was designed by Bettye Young.



**BEFORE**

removed in the fifties, and we were left with a blank canvas," says Martin. "When the clients decided to collect Art Déco furniture, we felt we should try to achieve a sophisticated simplicity." For Young, the thirties were "a period in which architects were still trained to appreciate classical proportions but came up with a new language, stripping ornament and articulating the surfaces." He and his colleague began by enhancing the proportions of the major rooms, raising the ceilings as much as the structure would allow and surrounding them with cove-lit soffits that can be removed to service concealed speakers, art lighting and air vents.

Next the architects refined Neff's arrangement of rectangular rooms within the crescent plan, inserting a tiny rotunda two steps up from the lofty oval hall to serve as a point of entry to five rooms and staircases. There is more architectural invention and refined craftsmanship in this thirty-square-foot cylinder than in most large

**OPPOSITE:** A stepped passageway, excavated beneath the enlarged pool terrace, leads to the new exercise room. Says Young, "The farther we got from the entrance hall, the more license we had to make modern spaces." The sculptures are Kenyan.



**AFTER**



BELOW: "We ripped out the dark, tired wood in the theater," says Young. BOTTOM: The new walls were covered in olive ash. Two 1920s panels—designed by Edgar Brandt for the elevators of Selfridge's department store in London—hide the projection screen. Hinson & Company sofa chenille.



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“YOU HAVE TO SAY NO TO MANY INTERESTING  
POSSIBILITIES TO GET THE ONE THAT’S ABSOLUTELY RIGHT.”



**ABOVE:** The west porch “had been crudely enclosed with wood and glass,” says the husband, “but the original arches and ornamentation were there. We restored them, and now we have a furnished open room that’s protected from the sun.”

residences. Slender columns frame shifting axes and stand inches clear of angled walls and the circular inlay of the marble floor. You feel as though you are standing on the joint of a well-oiled hinge as the house swings slowly open.

Working in close collaboration with Los Angeles-based interior designer Bettye J. Young and project supervisor Mark Spector, the architects pushed and pulled the entire house, creating a breakfast room within the kitchen porch, extending the master bedroom over a covered terrace and building a master bath over the projecting garage. Dressing rooms now flank a curved passage that leads to an oval sitting room.

The bath, which the owners jokingly call their “temple of hygiene,” is treated as a detached and symmetrical Palladian pavilion. A tall, slender cupola admits a

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**ABOVE:** “You had to take a circuitous route to get from the house to the swimming pool,” remembers the husband. **OPPOSITE:** A new Italianate bifurcated staircase, similar to a larger one Neff built on the south façade, provides direct pool access from the west loggia.



AFTER

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soft overhead light. Shower and tub are concealed behind doors of sandblasted glass framed in grids of nickel steel. Round-headed windows are recessed behind a green-marble arch at either end, and the floor and side walls are paneled in perfectly matched sheets of pale-gray-veined marble bordered in the same green. They evoke similar walls in houses by Mies van der Rohe and Adolf Loos and express the luxurious minimalism that characterizes every piece of this make-over.

"The most important aspect of design is knowing when to stop," says the husband. "You have to say no to many interesting possibilities to get to the one that's absolutely right." Throughout the eight months of design and three years of construction, the clients participated in every decision. Meanwhile, they honed their taste on a visit to Venice and studied interiors by Le Corbusier, Pierre Chareau and Jean-Michel Frank. With their designer's help, they began to build a collection of rare furnishings by these and other modern masters. Pieces bought over several years came together with a sense of inevitability when the house was complete.

Colors and textures played a crucial role. "Having come from New York, I wanted to reinterpret the white California look and add richness," says Bettye Young. She brought in artist Jo Lesoine to create parchmentlike finishes on walls and recessed ceilings in subtly varied tones of ivory. The paint on the ceilings is mixed with pearl powder and shimmers at night. In the oval library that projects out of the south loggia, the original oak floor and built-in shelves have been retained, but the ceiling has been brushed with gold and defined by a narrow rope molding.

The oval entrance hall is the one room that looks as it did in Neff's day. The delicate moldings and iron balustrades, which survived the earlier attempt at modernization, have been cleaned and are set off by a starburst marble floor and a Russian rock-crystal chandelier. Two bronze console tables by Diego Giacometti—the brother of the legendary sculptor—leave the space uncluttered.

The other rooms share that spirit of restraint. In the living room, furniture is arranged in sculptural groupings at the

corners and center of the room, allowing the eye to appreciate the refined forms and details of each in turn. Classic Moderne chairs, including a pair of wing chairs by Jean-Michel Frank, turn out to be surprisingly comfortable, and the sparseness of the room engenders a feeling of serenity. Anchoring a far corner is La Religieuse, Pierre Chareau's conical floor lamp, which was named for the angular shade of white alabaster that suggests a nun's wimple.

The dining room reunites a commission that Chareau received in 1925: polished rosewood chairs and a table of lustrous wenge wood with a base of exposed steel, plus a sideboard of the same wood. A painting by Dubuffet presides over the room, together with a chandelier of hammered silver cranes, ivory and alabaster. Here and in the living room, there are new parquetry floors of imbuia wood, in which oiled blocks of varied tones are laid together as carefully as in a piece of fine marquetry.

For Bettye Young, a primary goal is to juxtapose disparate objects in a pleasing way. In the oval office, an elegant Art Nouveau side table by Louis Majorelle, an angular Art Déco fire screen, a faded Aubusson rug and a Cy Twombly sketch work together astonishingly well. Elevator doors designed by Edgar Brandt for Selfridge's department store in London slide back to reveal the projection screen in the theater, which has walls covered with perfectly matched panels of burl olive ash. In the master bedroom, the bed of chocolate-brown burl makore and the richly textured bedcovering play off island carpets of Venetian gray green, one of which has an ombré border that accommodates a shift from pale to even paler gray.

"To me, the house suggests a contemporary stage set, perhaps for an Italian opera," says Bettye Young. "The walls seem to wrap around you, and though we've kept things simple, there are plenty of surprises and touches of whimsy. There's a strong sense of place that is generated by lines and forms and subliminal shifts of tone from one room to the next." Thus, the house that began life in the Depression as an escapist dream of Renaissance Italy has evolved into a provocative mix of romantic and modern taste. □