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April 14, 2003





Sand Box

SEASIDE MODERN A Malibu getaway with a diva in its past finds new life in a spa-inspired renovation.

The modern beach house has a long tradition along the shores of Malibu, where filmdom's lucky few have been cavorting since the days before movies had sound. These days—Coastal Commission constraints being what they are—it's a lot easier to get permission to renovate than to build anew on the wet side of the Pacific Coast Highway. And that's just what Monica and Seth Epstein did to create their dream house on the sand . . . well, hovering above the sand, actually, since the ocean sometimes likes to come calling, and building codes dictate how high the lowest floor must be above the tide crest.

The house the Epsteins rebuilt (he's an entrepreneur with a television-graphics background; she used to work with him at his own firm) dates from the 1950s; its current footprint is from

a 1977 renovation. Like most houses along Malibu's Carbon Beach (aka "Mogul Beach"), it has a Tinsel Town past: Its previous owner was Diana Ross, and the next-door neighbors—in a community where side yards are measured in inches—were the Family Osbourne in their pre-MTV days. "They were very quiet," says Seth Epstein, "no trouble at all."

The house has its own kind of quiet. The intimate give-and-take between the architecture and nature, the constant interplay of indoors and out, light and shadow, old and new, rough-hewn and sleek, contemporary furniture and vintage tribal pieces creates a hide-and-go-seek kind of playfulness that makes living here seem like a captivating puzzle or game.

PRODUCED BY LINDA O'KEEFFE AND LAURA HULL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM STREET-PORTER. WRITTEN BY MICHAEL LASSELL.



Park alongside the busy highway, then open the flat sheet of fire-etched glass that serves as a front door. On the other side, you find an exterior courtyard that winds under the second floor between the garage and the main living space. But the first thing you notice is the dazzling sun flickering on the Pacific through wall-size glass sliders at the far side of the house (the effect is like looking into facing mirrors, of boxes within boxes).

This fantasy of light is not, however, exactly the house the Epsteins bought. "Every surface was completely reworked," Seth Epstein remembers. "We changed virtually everything except the footprint."

"The house was stripped to the studs," says architect Russell Shubin of Shubin + Donaldson, the architectural firm that won prizes for the building they created for the Epsteins' business several years ago. "We left the dining room as a kind of memory of the old house," Shubin says, "but that's it."

"Seth is better at seeing the potential in things," says Monica Epstein (who agreed to marry Seth on their first date but put off the ceremony for two years). "This love of lighting, of architecture, of design is the glue that holds our relationship together, but this was our first big domestic project as a couple."

At 2,900 square feet (not including the garage), the new home is surprisingly spacious given the 40-foot-wide lot. The first floor consists of an open kitchen/living/dining room leading out onto a deck. On the second floor, two guest bedrooms and a media room sit atop the garage. An open corridor leads to the master suite and another deck, this one on two levels.



The open living area pairs clean-lined contemporary upholstered seating with African and Asian pieces collected by the Epsteins; Jasper Morrison stools (bottom) stand on a limestone floor (used throughout the house) and face a kitchen counter of wenge wood. Opposite: The cozy dining room has a window grid that extends and matches the dimensions of the kitchen storage cubicles.





For the master suite, custom window shades rise from the floor for privacy with maximum light. The painting over the bed is by Chris Yormick. A sliding wall of glass separates sleeping area from bathroom (opposite). The bedroom also contains an ingeniously engineered TV cabinet: The screen can sink out of sight and swivels away from the bed, the bathtub or the deck.

The Epsteins' mandate to their architects was for an "urban spa retreat." They wanted a house that was of the city but a respite from the city—with all the amenities of an upscale spa. Shubin provided an open-plan master suite with a bath that has double sinks (and double mirrors that rise in front of a new etched glass window). The shower and toilet are contained in individual limestone rooms behind glass doors; the couple's clothing hangs in closets behind a pale blue chaise. The fire-etched glass is also used in sliding pocket doors that separate the sleeping and spa areas.

Another unique feature of the house is the deck outside the sitting area in the bedroom. The architects created a pergola-like structure that can be completely closed for privacy. First they erected an enormous wooden arch, then they strung sail fabric

baffles between the ceiling beams attached to the house and the upright supports. "We spend whole weekends out there," says Seth, "and at every party, that's where people wind up."

Clearly the clients—both of them self-confessed perfectionists—and their able architects have bonded during the yearlong renovation. "I find that you get the best results with really hands-on clients," says Russell Shubin, "especially really creative clients. This house is a collaboration in the truest sense."

"Before we lived here," says Monica, "we used to travel a lot. Now we spend a lot of time at home. When we first moved in, I kept waking up at night to watch the patterns of light on the walls, and I'd think, I can't believe I actually live in this amazing house." ☛

See Resources, last pages.