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SPECIAL ISSUE

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COASTAL COMMISSION

When a coveted lot in California's Laguna Beach beckons, an entrepreneur and his family turn to KAA Design and Atelier AM to create an oceanfront villa with simplicity and soul

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Rough stone walls and exceptional views add drama to the great room of Delise and Blake Sartini's Southern California house, which was conceived by architects KAA Design and decorated by Atelier AM. The oak-frame armchairs were custom made; the club chairs, upholstered in a Loro Piana linen, are by Hancock & Moore. For details see Sources.





Well before Orange County, California, became inescapably known as the O.C.—that is, eons before reality TV discovered its telegenic virtues—the coastal landscape featured sublime beaches abutting arroyos, mesas, and vast tracts of chaparral. That geographic richness, not to mention the magnificent water views, helps explain why Delise and Blake Sartini acquired a prime slice of Laguna Beach oceanfront, where they planned to build a family getaway. The Las Vegas couple, fixtures in the Nevada entertainment-hospitality industry, hoped to replicate the sand-between-the-toes livability of the seaside villas they'd visited in Mexico, Sardinia, and elsewhere, as well as incorporate those resorts' expressly modernist melding of inside and out. What they ended up with is all of that, plus a nod to old California ranch country seldom seen in the newer architecture of the region.

To achieve everything on their checklist, the Sartinis reached out to seven architects “from all design perspectives,” Blake says. “We didn’t want to limit ourselves to one particular style in the creative process.” Having had experience developing large-scale commercial properties, he followed a familiar procedure, sending an RFP (request for proposal) to each professional, just as if the house were a major facility. “In commercial building, much of the design

involves the logistics of moving people around,” he says. “Here, the spaces are simply for everyday comfort. What we really wanted was our own small resort, and we had in mind a collage of architectural examples from our travels.” He and Delise winnowed the field of architects to three and then sponsored a design competition—another rarity for residential work.

The winning scheme was by Grant Camden Kirkpatrick of Los Angeles’s KAA Design, who responded to the complexities of the steep, trapezoidal lot with a 14,000-square-foot structure that gracefully descends the creased slope in five levels. The building angles off slightly at each floor to comply with the unusual geometries of the site and to maximize the sea vistas, some strikingly framed by mature Monterey cypresses. “We came up with the notion of the home as arroyo,” says Kirkpatrick; the architect conceived the plan as a series of stepped elevations and linked terraces, with water flowing from the entrance court (on the fourth floor) down through a small rill and various vessels to the infinity pool and the main public space (on the second level), where a great room extends onto the terrace. By following the water’s path, one can, via exterior stairs, directly access the beach from any of the five bedroom suites without ever entering the public areas.

The rough stone walls stand in solid contrast to the changeability of the omnipresent ocean. Inside and

Above, from left: The stepped façade unfolds over five levels. A guest-room terrace features a table and chairs by Xavier Llongueras; the floor is French limestone tile by Exquisite Surfaces. **Opposite:** A classic Orange County vista—the Pacific through a gnarled Monterey cypress—seen from the private study’s terrace, on the third level; an oak low table joins a banquette with cushions of Perennials outdoor fabric and patterned pillows of antique textiles from Kathleen Taylor the Lotus Collection.





out, Kirkpatrick employed Nevada-quarried limestone rubble, sponged with an overgrout wash for consistency of character, and complemented those walls with others of smooth plaster. The effect is a rusticity that transcends locale and era, referencing California as much as it does Mexico and the Mediterranean. “We were after a look of permanence and timelessness,” the architect says, adding that “working with stone is always tricky. It can pin a house down to a certain decade if you’re not careful.”

Furnishings and finishes, courtesy of Alexandra and Michael Misczynski, wife-and-husband principals of interiors firm Atelier AM, play off the architectural palette. (Correspondingly, Kirkpatrick notes his group’s “discipline in simplifying” that palette to serve as a background for the interior design.) Three primary materials were used: limestone, shagreen, and meranti, a mahogany-like timber from Southeast Asia. “The idea was to reduce the number of materials so that your eye quickly gets used to what it is seeing,” Michael says, emphasizing that Atelier AM opted for a quiet, casual, sun-washed statement “because



From top: A Caesarstone sink and countertops matched to the wall color bring warmth to the kitchen; the cabinetry is mahogany, the range is by Wolf, the sink fittings and pot filler are by Waterworks, and the limestone floor tile is by Exquisite Surfaces. A custom-made light fixture is suspended above a dining table and chairs designed by Atelier AM.

Seventeenth-century Dutch mirrors from Lucca Antiques hang in the TV lounge; the sectional sofa is covered in a Manuel Canovas cotton, and the vintage textiles used for throw pillows and the ottoman are from Kathleen Taylor the Lotus Collection. **Below, from left:** A trio of bronze pendant lights inset with translucent sand dollars, by Atelier AM. The pool bath, with porcupine fish dangling from the ceiling and round baskets from Mecox.



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A quartet of Barlow Tyrie chaise longues overlooks the pool, which is lined with a stone-and-abalone-shell mosaic by Llongueras; a Santa Barbara Designs umbrella partially shades the dining area.



of the strong visuals of the natural surroundings. In a house like this, anything but the most minimal pattern becomes an unnecessary distraction."

There are compelling fillips nonetheless. Fanciful sea elements (porcupine fish hanging in the pool bath, bronze-and-sand-dollar pendant lights in the first-level wine alley) mix with robust antiques, such as the oak vintner's table in the great room and a walnut table in the foyer, both 18th-century French. For the mosaics of stone and crushed abalone shell used throughout the house, the designers commissioned Xavier Llongueras, an artist who relocated to L.A. from the South of France, and gave him carte blanche to install mosaic "carpets" as well as a mosaic ceiling in the master suite.

Genius loci—the distinctive atmosphere or pervading spirit of a place—is a term Kirkpatrick likes to cite as a central theme of his firm's work. "It's never about style for us," he explains. "You make it authentic, contextual, of its place—over time, the style unfolds." And at the Sartini house, so does the building, unfolding elegantly down its slope, enlivened by the gentle sounds of water, a getaway for a couple whose dream is now reality: a resort experience on a domestic scale. □



From top: In the master suite, a custom-made bed sheathed in shagreen is dressed with a cashmere throw by Ralph Lauren Home; the floor lamp is by Christian Liaigre. Pocket doors and sheer curtains of a Loro Piana linen create a divide between a bedroom—simply furnished with a rush-seated armchair and antique watercolors—and its adjoining terrace.

A Waterworks tub borders the sybaritic master bath; the pendant light, in the manner of Jean-Michel Frank, is by Paul Ferrante, the shagreen chair, another Frank-inspired piece, is by Atelier AM, and the limestone counters are from Exquisite Surfaces. The mosaic floor was custom made by Llongueras.

