

International Impact

A contemporary La Jolla home weaves in modern Mexican inspiration for a new take on beach living.

WRITTEN BY LIZ ARNOLD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY BARTLAM





The owners of this La Jolla abode tapped their longtime friend, residential designer Carlos Wellman, to both build and design the home. Landscape designer Alejandra Cuentas of Nectagarden made durable, drought-tolerant choices for the backyard. Overlooking the pool by Pete deCamp Pools are a pair of Room & Board loungers.

Y

ou won't find beachy wicker at this La Jolla residence. Nor will you find, for these Mexican-born residents who desired a rooted, Latin aesthetic for their home, the saturated colors of traditional Mexican design. Instead, interior designer Michelle Salz-Smith

appointed the spacious, minimalist rooms with the kind of spare but comfortable earth-tone furnishings reminiscent of contemporary Mexico City galleries, softening them with finishes that have a hand-hewn sensibility. "They wanted a livable luxury," Salz-Smith says of the couple. "At first glance, the house looks simple and straightforward, but that's where the nuances come in."

To build a bigger home for their family, the owners tapped residential designer Carlos Wellman, a friend of the husband's from his boyhood in Mexico City. "I remember when he was born," says Wellman, adding that their working relationship goes way back too. "This is the third home I've designed for them." For this dwelling, Wellman, who also built it, offered a take on minimalist architecture combined with a sophisticated nod to Mexican materials. Rendered in synthetic stucco, exposed concrete and wrought iron, the dwelling also features Japanese burnt wood vertical siding and plentiful glass, the latter resulting in interiors awash in light.

The program included a bedroom for each child, while the main spaces seamlessly fuse the indoors and out—functional for both adults and children. Wellman, working with interior architect Lorena Gaxiola, devised a one-story floor plan that accomplished both: Bedrooms are tucked away along one side, behind the living room, and in the common area, bronze-and-glass doors pocket into the walls, exposing a patio, pool, sport court and a welcoming lawn bordered by a rock wall with concrete and wood accents. "It flows really well," the residential designer observes of the plan, which prioritized simplicity and clean lines. "There aren't a lot of hallways—the rooms are connected."

When it came to furnishings, Salz-Smith's comfortable, chic choices complement the plaster walls, wood trusses and steel-framed clerestory. "The furnishings were extremely important against a deceptively simple backdrop," she explains. The interior designer planned an earthy palette of textured fabrics, such as nubby bouclés and soft leathers, that mixes well with

the patinated metal finishes seen in much of the linear, modern lighting. "Pops of black lend that edge," she says, "and they're great for an airy space. They're like exclamation points."

Her vision translated into the living room's taupe sofas that are generous but restrained and rectilinear; crisply tailored armchairs in an ivory bouclé, softened by rounded corners, that rest in slender black metal frames; and, to layer in an organic sensibility, a live-edge walnut coffee table. "Irregular textures add beauty," she says, noting that the flair of the natural materials not only gives homes a lived-in, collected sense of cool but also helps connect spaces to their outdoor environments.

The spare but compelling mix continues in the kitchen, where a ceiling-high backsplash of hand-selected book-matched Arabescato marble pairs with the Van Gogh quartzite island countertop and is balanced by teak barstools. In the primary bedroom, linen bedding stands out against the chocolate-brown bed frame, and gauzy sheers graze the glass, offering peeks of the lawn and floating in the breeze when the doors open. Book-matched marble repeats in the shower walls of the primary bath, where a clerestory punched high above the vanity allows light to pour in.

Salz-Smith notes the design process was particularly collaborative amongst the international team. Gaxiola, who has an eponymous firm, now resides in Australia, and landscape designer Alejandra Cuentas of Nectagarden, who planned the grounds with an assortment of agave, along with other succulents and drought-tolerant plants, is based in Mexico. The interior designer also worked closely with the wife, who was interested in pieces made by artisans in Mexico, such as the hammered brass pendant above the breakfast table and the artwork throughout the home.

While the homeowners have happily settled in their new digs, they occasionally call on Salz-Smith for help reviewing the occasional piece of furniture or artwork or just to meet up for a cocktail. "They're really using their home," she says, "and that outdoor area doubles their square footage." The outdoor furniture was even planned to be interchangeable with the indoor furniture to help it feel seamless. It's all part of the plan for livable luxury: making things feel not so precious, especially for this very active family. "You have to be okay with things being imperfect," says Salz-Smith with a smile. ■



Right: In the breakfast area, interior designer Michelle Salz-Smith paired more imposing items such as the oak pedestal table by Harbour with lighter finds, including the chairs from Arhaus and the hammered-brass pendant sourced in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Opposite: Interior architect Lorena Gaxiola collaborated with Wellman on the home's design and specified the finishes, opting for a minimalist palette including Arabescato marble for the perimeter countertop, backsplash and hood, as well as Van Gogh quartzite for the island top, all from Tutto Marmo. Stools by From The Source contribute a warm note, as does the Katy Skelton leather-and-metal light fixture. The taps are by California Faucets.



A clerestory floods the living and dining areas with light. Noir chairs from Bassman Blaine surround the dining table. Artwork by Eliana Portilla, flanked by Triple Seven Home sconces, and a ceramic wall hanging discovered in San Miguel de Allende enrich the space. Salz-Smith reupholstered the clients' sofas in a fresh linen and rounded out the seating options with Lulu and Georgia lounge chairs.





Right: "We really embrace *wabi-sabi*, where irregular textures add beauty, and beauty in the imperfect resonates well here," Salz-Smith observes. A found chair in tooled leather and embossed velvet and nail-head trim stands before the primary bedroom's Fleetwood Windows & Doors sliders treated with custom linen sheers.

Opposite: The primary bedroom plays host to furnishings with a spare presence to amplify the airiness of the space. Salz-Smith dressed the client's existing bed in simple white linens by Parachute, while a Visual Comfort lamp tops a turned-wood table by Pfeifer Studio.

