

PALM SPRINGS LIFE®

FALL 2019

# HOME+DESIGN

## THE CALL OF THE CANYON

A MODERNIST 'CABIN' DROPS IN  
AMONG ANCIENT BOULDERS  
AND NATIVE VEGETATION.



ARTISAN RUG REVIVAL  
A CODY MAKES HISTORY  
DESIGNING WITH BLACK



COFFEE TABLE

## Tearing Down the Walls

*Enlisted to customize a “big-box” house in a planned community, designer Sean Gaston took one look at the 1970s building with its ’80s interior and called in a demo crew.*

WORDS BY LISA MARIE HART

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN CHAVKIN

□ “No character, no architecture, no sex appeal.” That’s how Sean Gaston sums up the “before” version of this three-bedroom home his clients purchased last year.

The comfortable ease of the country club community at The Springs in Rancho Mirage appealed to the couple as a strong fit for their on-the-go lifestyle. The home’s dated design, however, screamed out for a complete overhaul and designer vision. They called Gaston before they even closed escrow.

“I call it big-box living,” says Gaston, who had remodeled two of the couple’s previous homes. “But they didn’t want another huge house with a bunch of upkeep. They wanted to come home and not have to worry about all the maintenance. At the same time, this one needed to

rise to the same standards of their past homes. My job was to take this off-the-shelf floor plan and the bland vanilla spaces and rework them. What they truly wanted was a custom-home feel with the amenities of a planned community.”

During the renovation, the couple remained off-site, allowing Gaston the freedom to gut the rooms as needed and pursue any lengths necessary to elevate the home’s flow, finishes, and furnishings. “They were ready to spend a little bit more to get what they wanted because the home promised the convenience they were looking for,” he adds.

Here, Gaston explains how he erased the 1980s and designed a home for today.

**Were you familiar with The Springs prior to revamping this home?**

It was my first time working there. I heard a lot



— Gaston redesigned the main living and dining areas, opening them up and creating visual focus points with a white rift oak wall and concrete block fireplace wall. Capiz ball chandeliers and dining chairs (opposite) are Restoration Hardware.



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Architectural block used around the fireplace repeats at the bar, clad in brass with a black marble top. Rake Brass Bar Stools are CB2 x Kravitz Design. Painting is from the Modernism Show and Sale.



of people were discovering it because the spaces are a nice size and the price right now is great. I had seen photos of the house before they bought it, so I had some ideas.

**What was your first impression of the home?**

I might describe it as if Duran Duran and Patrick Nagel had a baby. It was so '80s; it was unbelievable. It was a step back in time. The home is 3,000 square feet, with three bedrooms and four baths. I knew some of it would involve engineering to change the layout, while other parts — the bedrooms, for example — would be mostly cosmetic.

**Which upgrade topped their priority list?**

A much bigger kitchen. The existing kitchen was tiny. I had to reconfigure the whole family room and entry to create a big eat-in kitchen with a 10-foot island. They also wanted grander spaces and a proper stand-alone bar because they like to entertain.

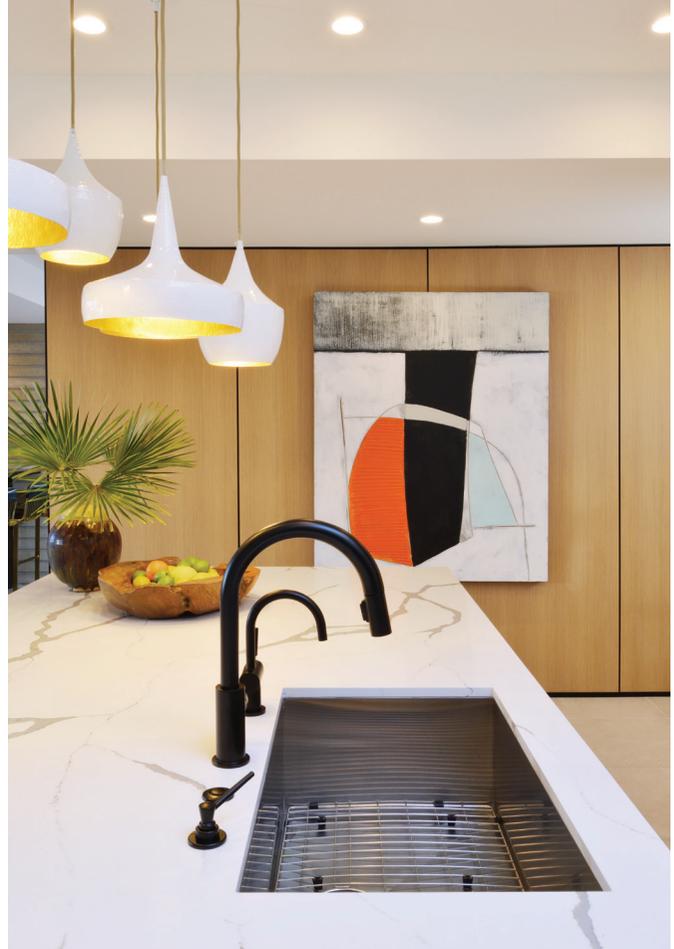
**How did the project unfold?**

The couple was leaving their home in Indian Canyons but stayed there until I finished this one. What was really nice was that once we put our ideas together and agreed on a vision, they let me do my thing. We had weekly walk-throughs to discuss what had been done and what was coming up. Beyond that, I had free rein



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A painting from Hedge dictated the palette for this seating area. The coffee table is vintage by Warren Platner. Left: Patterns are at play in the living area with Trina Turk pillows and a table from Anthropologie.

## COFFEE TABLE



to make the smaller decisions needed to move the project along.

### **Is that common practice?**

Sometimes. These are amazing clients and I have built that trust through working with them in the past. I think they like that I take them out of their comfort zone. If I say, "I'd like to go in this new direction," they say, "Let's go for it." Some people don't realize that the more trust they have, the quicker the job will get done. They want a tight deadline, but if they're so involved in picking out everything down to the lampshade, it will never happen.

### **Take us through the highlight reel.**

I moved some major walls to create the floating, block-panel feature wall made of

white rift oak, which anchors the entertaining spaces. There is a new seating area for watching TV, custom built-ins, and feature walls for their art collection. I relocated the dining room and enlarged the kitchen, where I also raised the ceiling. I delivered on the giant entertaining island for them, too; it's very dramatic. It's been exactly what they wanted.

### **Where do you see the greatest impact?**

The transformation of the fireplace: It was originally the size of a TV screen on a giant wall. I knew it could be an architectural element. By veneering it with midcentury-style concrete block, we infused history into a place that was otherwise whitewashed. Now it makes a real statement, just by going over the top and adding a hearth. I love turning something mundane into the hero of the room.

### **Is the amount of construction this home required typical of your portfolio?**

Absolutely. It's what I do. With the company I run in the Bay Area with my husband, Bee Renovated, we restore and resell high-end homes. It has trained me after 30-some houses to look for opportunities in existing



floor plans. Taking homes and reimagining them is definitely in my wheelhouse.

**Does that mean it was all smooth sailing?**

The challenge was in changing the floor plan. You have to bring in an engineer when you're moving load-bearing walls. We had to put in beams and break out concrete and put in new footings. It was expensive and it was an engineering feat, but the payoff warranted it.

**Did any aspects require community approval?**

Changes to the exterior and patios. We had to find out the rules and what their committees need to review. I think it showed the community we can modernize — that we can update both the interior and the exterior without losing what is The Springs.

**What is the turnaround time for a project on this scale?**

I completed this start to finish — meaning, down to the studs, in some cases, and new plumbing — in six months, which was pretty fast. The timeframe was accelerated because they didn't live on site. That's an ideal situation: I can work all day in an empty shell, and the clients don't have to live in construction. I have crews lined up and they work so well together that I'm able to schedule them ahead of time and get them there when they need to be. During the final month, my clients went to Paris while I purchased more art, installed all the furniture, rugs, pillows, plants, and accessories, and made final touches. The first time they saw the house, we had "the big reveal" with cocktails and it was a done deal.

**What's the takeaway here?**

Turning a house like this one into a custom home, you jump off the floor plan of what's been offered. You look at the box, not the interior walls, and ask, "How can we reinvent this?" You need to allow time to go through permit process if you're moving walls. But even in a planned community, you can have the same things people have in custom houses. You don't have to sacrifice that for the convenience of living there.

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The new kitchen, sized for entertaining with a 10-foot island, includes a recessed ceiling. A painting by Shawn Savage faces countertops by Cambria, leather counter stools by CB2, black matte fixtures, and pendant lighting by Arteriors. Backsplash tile by Walker Zanger.