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# TRADITIONAL HOME

## HOW DESIGNERS REALLY LIVE\*

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# back at the ranch

Thomas Callaway restores a classic California ranch home.

A DISTINCT AIR OF COUNTRY welcome, as well as a porch heavy with trumpet vine, awaits visitors who drive up the winding path to a vintage California ranch rebuilt by Thomas Callaway for Dan and Luanna Romanelli. In the backyard, plain as howdy-do, horses bob their heads in greeting from barn windows.

Yep, this is country, alright. You can practically smell the buttermilk biscuits baking in the oven. Yet here you are, in Brentwood, California, just a block from the hubbub of Sunset Boulevard.

The picturesque 4,500-square-foot house is part of a larger urban equestrian

community developed by famed 1950s designer Clifford May. May, also known as the "father of the California ranch house," was a builder who blended the Western ranch house with the Hispanic hacienda, added a dash of modernism, and made it all look easy.

However, this once lovely house, badly damaged by termites and water, basically needed to be knocked down and totally rebuilt—something that ▶

The trumpet vine-draped front porch offers down-home hospitality only a short way from the Sunset Strip. **Right:** Designer Thomas Callaway and client, Luanna Romanelli.



**Right:** In the dining room, as in the rest of the house, Douglas fir planks and rafters accent the high ceilings and add to the country spirit. **Below:** Tom redesigned the house to include fewer but larger rooms, like the spacious entry. **Bottom:** English and American antiques mix in the cozy living room.



Los Angeles designer Thomas Callaway was more than willing to tackle.

Of all the homes that Tom has worked on in his 20-some years of designing, he admits that this is one of his favorites. That's due, in large part, to the fact that it was his very first "from the ground up" project. It was an assignment that let him start from square one while keeping the original spirit of the home alive. For the Romanellis, Tom was an obvious choice. Not only does he greatly admire Cliff May, he is also known for deftness in marrying historic integrity with contemporary living. Further, the designer came highly recommended.

"When I heard that this was a Cliff May house, in one of his more well-known developments where every home was intended to have its own horse

stable, I thought it would be wonderful to work on the project," notes Tom. "My intent was to help the Romanellis rebuild in a way that stayed true to what May intended but gave them the details they were looking for as well."

The question was how to give a house that was basically new construction a warm and weathered feel. Tom's solution was to incorporate architectural details and design elements that revived the house's original mid-century character. These included a used-brick entry, cedar shingles on the roof, board-and-batten walls, double-hung mullioned windows, and dormers.

Out back, the barn holds court with its handsome cupola, complete with a decorative equine weathervane. Nearly every room has a door opening to the ►



outside, where gardens spill their vibrant color everywhere.

"It's the circle of tying the rural life to the city life, all in one courtyard," Tom says. "It's so Old-World, with animals sharing space with the homeowners."

The home's most formal space is the living room. Here a collection of English and American antiques contributes to a library-like feel, softened by one of many fine Middle Eastern rugs throughout the house. Douglas fir planks and rafters—stained and distressed—define the interior structure and serve as a touchstone of countrified spirit.

Painter Esther Carpenter coated the interior, using a variety of finishes and paint styles. In one of the bedrooms, a stenciled barn swallow nonchalantly flits along the walls.

The master bedroom and bath also hint at traditional formality. Each of the homeowners has a large closet, with white distressed beadboard dressing rooms and seating areas with skylights. Tom designed the early-American antique-looking bed himself, as well as the pop-up television cabinet at the foot, which conceals the modern intrusion of audio-visual equipment.

A serene minimalism reigns in the adjoining bath, translating into a rural elegance with limestone floors, a stone-block steam shower and honed French limestone countertops. Worn, painted

wood on the walls and high shutters in the gable seem to hint that there may be hay bales on the other side.

"I wanted the bathroom to be a little unusual in that it has real height for a ranch house," Tom explains, "sort of like—in case you forgot, we're still in a farm setting."

The Romanellis' favorite room, the kitchen, also offers surprises. Its soaring ceilings are one of Tom's well-received departures from California ranch style. "We lived in the kitchen," Luanna says. "It was just such a warm environment. When we'd have people over, we could ▶

**Top right:** The rustic charm and high ceilings in the master bathroom give the impression of a farmhouse setting. **Lower left:** French limestone countertops contrast with the rural elegance of the bath. **Top left:** Tom designed the master bedroom's early-American-inspired headboard and pop-up television cabinet at the foot of the bed.

**Right:** Tom meticulously restored the horse corral with recycled wood from the house.

**Bottom right:** The kitchen, with its harvest table, old train lights, and reclaimed terracotta floors, became the owners' favorite room. **Below:** The cupola and equine-inspired weathervane add the finishing touches to the Romanellis' barn.



never get anybody out of there. I'd have to crawl over the islands just to prepare food." (Though sad to leave their urban oasis, the Romanellis have since moved to the Malibu area.)

To add interest and a sense of history, Tom recycled many well-worn objects and materials. He rewired the old gas train lights that hang from the ceilings, and laid the floor with reclaimed terracotta from France. "All these different brick tones look great with the exterior porches that used American brick," he says. "There's a nice compatibility—the indoors flows into the outdoors."

The closest thing the house has to a formal dining room is a space connected to the living room, which is light and airy, thanks to skylights, transom windows, and a bank of French doors. The ▶



## TOM CALLAWAY

Growing up in Wisconsin, Tom Callaway loved drawing and painting. "Art has always been my calling," says the 50-something designer. "What form that would take wasn't always clear."

A gig with a local summer-stock theater changed that. "I was completely at home on stage," he says. Tom migrated to New York City, then Los Angeles.

Having studied fine art and architecture in college, he managed to live stylishly, even when times were lean. "Friends who saw my space would ask me to help with theirs," notes Tom.

He accepted his first design job from screenwriter Anna Hamilton Phelan (*Gorillas in the Mist*), immediately embracing his hallmark process of holistically addressing structure, landscape, and interior. Eventually, design kept him busier than acting.

Twenty years later, his clients include Steve Martin and Larry David, among others. "I've had wonderful opportunities—for no apparent reason other than it seemed to be ordained in some crazy way," says Tom.



doors open onto the rear gardens and the old-brick barbecue.

"On holidays, we'd light the living room fireplace and serve big dinners, with the main garden and pool just outside the doors," Luanna says. "It was so romantic. It just glowed at night."

The corral, horse fence, and corrugated tin roof of the outbuildings—and a pretty dovecote atop the tack room—help this three-quarter-acre lot seem far from the city. All were as carefully restored as the house.

Old factory lights with cages illuminate the sturdy barn. Board-and-batten walls in the garage, tack room, and stables are recycled wood from the house. Tom had an ironworks company weld bars to partition the horse stalls while still allowing the critters to congregate.

"We distressed the barn so that it looked like it had been there a long time. Then we moved the horses in, and in 20 minutes they had distressed it more than I ever could have," Tom laughs.

The pure rectangle of the pool adds to the tidy symmetry of the property. The restoration of the ranch home was a project that stole the designer's heart.

"Here's this rural scene that doesn't feel like Disneyland," he says. "It feels like the most natural thing in the world, even though you're only minutes away from the bustle of the city." ■

For more information, see sources on page 248.

**Above:** The rectangular pool adds symmetry to the three-quarter-acre lot. **Right:** A wall of windows opening onto the backyard loggia provides generous light for the dining room.

