

# Picture Perfect



Designer Susan Cohen, ASID And Architect A. Thomas Torres, AIA  
Create A Contemporary Ranchito On An Historic Farm In Malibu

TEXT BY LYNN MORGAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATHAN KIRKMAN

OPPOSITE "I found a Japanese cabinet from Tenengo at the Pacific Design Center—totally out of left field for the house, but it works," Cohen says. The table converts into a round configuration and was made by John Van Court. The chairs were custom made, upholstered in fabric from Kravet, and given a matte lacquer trim to match the ten foot long console. The photographs displayed on the wall create a dramatic mosaic of black and white images by legends Minor White and Brett Weston, a collection of stark yet sensual images arrayed against a deep terracotta wall, surrounding a capricious pair of mirrors introduced to reflect the stained glass windows, opposite. Gerald Olesker of ADG Inc. in Los Angeles "concocted" the light fixture, a sculpture comprised of Venetian lanterns. ABOVE In the hallway the walls are gold and terracotta, colors repeated in other rooms of the house. The light fixtures are wrought iron, custom made by Ferro Lighting in Los Angeles.



OPPOSITE The fireplace is painted the same color as the walls and ceiling so as not to dominate the great room. The painted and beamed ceiling is 18 feet high, adding volume and grandeur. The 19th century chair was purchased at auction, and re-upholstered with a striped fabric from Kravet. The wrought iron and glass coffee table is from the owners' collection. The antique rug is from Lawrence of LaBrea in Los Angeles; the bookshelf is an antique from Susanne Hollis in Pasadena. Cohen designed the sofa and love seat and had them built by Structure Design in Los Angeles.

RIGHT The round table of green concrete, graced by a phalaenopsis orchid, features a pencil thin "racing stripe" of metal inlay, resting on an iron base. Designed by Susan Cohen, it overlooks the tack house and riding ring behind the main house.



Ruth and Alan Berliner are dedicated to fine art photography. In addition to owning the Berliner Studio in Los Angeles, Alan Berliner is an accomplished photographer in his own right: he worked as an in-house photographer at MGM, and was once employed as Frank Sinatra's personal photographer, capturing and chronicling the "Rat Pack" in all its glitter and glamour. The couple has also amassed an impressive collection of photography by twentieth century masters including Imogen Cunningham, Max Yavno and Arnold Newman. A. Thomas Torres, AIA and designer Susan Cohen, ASID, of Susan Cohen Associates, were retained to create a gallery for living.

On a hilltop above Malibu, Thomas Torres, AIA and The I-Grace Company, general contractor, began the process of renovating what Cohen describes as a "shack" on two acres of land that were once part of the Adohr family dairy farm. They stripped the existing house down to its posts and studs, and re-created it as a contemporary ranchito, paying homage to the rich Mexican, Spanish and Native American history of the mountains and canyons of Malibu. "They wanted the house to be very comfortable," Susan Cohen says. "A retreat from the city. It's truly in the country; you feel very far from Los Angeles."

The house, both architecturally and in its interior design, is wedded to its setting. Its rich details of hand painted beamed ceilings, colorful tilework and wrought iron were inspired in part by the well known Adamson House nearby. It sits amid gardens and orchards, shaded by a row of olive trees, and most of its rooms have French doors that open onto patios. "You open the doors and step outside, right into nature," says the designer.





▶ Landscape designer Laurel Stutsman designed the lush and abundant grounds surrounding the house featuring plum and peach trees and a citrus grove filled with oranges, lemons and exotic fig trees. The equestrian history of the property has been preserved in the riding ring and the original tack room behind the main house.

The house is entered through a U-shaped courtyard, which follows the floor plan of a traditional Spanish style house. The walkway is paved in limestone and hand placed pebbles mimicking an area rug, leading to the front door, flanked by a pair of concrete spheres balanced on pedestals.

Once inside, the originality of Cohen's design is immediately striking. "There are no white walls," the decorator says. Instead of a predictable palette of neutrals, she assembled a refreshing arsenal of colors and deployed them fearlessly throughout the Berliner house. Using warm colors native to the environment as well as those used in Laurel Stutsman's landscape design, she flooded the walls with color in bold shades of gold and terracotta, mango and aubergine.

"The clients loved the colors," she says. "They are very adventurous people and world travelers; he has taken photographs in Africa, in Greece. They wanted their house to express all of that."

Susan Cohen's own travels are also reflected in the Berliner house, as they are in many of her projects. "I never really stop working," she says. "I am constantly looking at art—at buildings, at fixtures, thinking about ways I can adapt them." As she travels, she draws inspiration for her work; art and architecture from around the world can be translated into domestic interiors, enriching them. The Berliner house features a vaulted ceiling in the breakfast room, crafted of slender, aged bricks. It was inspired by a restaurant the designer visited in Sevilla, Spain. "It wasn't part of the original design of the house. I saw it while I was on vacation, and fell in love with it. I took pictures of it, then showed them to Tom, and he re-created it for this house."

"Tom is an architect as well as an artist," she says. "He really felt this house, and he was willing to make changes as it evolved. It was thrilling to watch the job progress day by day."





OPPOSITE Concrete spheres, balanced on pedestals, flank the front door carved out of dark wood. Susan Cohen designed the walkway of limestone pavers and hand placed pebbles, leading inside. LEFT The office and swimming pool are set in a Mexican inspired landscape of “water-stingy” grasses and succulents, designed by landscape designer Laurel Stutsman.



The finished house is very “transparent” according to Cohen. Rooms flow into one another, and most open directly to the outdoors.

Susan Cohen and Tommy Torres spent hours walking the property with the Berliners, observing the native landscape, following the progress of light across the hilltop. That light became an important component of both the architecture and interior design. “We stood on the site and thought, this is almost like the light in the south of France. It clarifies and intensifies all the colors,” says Cohen.

The magical realism of Malibu’s light spoke to the artistic sensibilities of the photographer/collector client, and the design of the house, both inside and out, acknowledges this. Susan Cohen took that light into consideration and made it part of her design. Stained glass windows in the great room capture the light at sunset and reflect it back. The architect manipulated light and space throughout to create what he describes as “a sense of mystery as one moves through the house, by having the interior spaces unfold one from another, allowing partial vistas from narrow corridors into public spaces, and long, light-filled passages leading towards, but not directly into, private quarters.”

The Berliners’ extraordinary photography collection is the touchstone of their home. Cohen selected the bold colors for the walls in order to complement the graphic black and white images, and re-framed each of the prints before arranging them. The photographs were not the only personal collectibles incorporated into her design: she created entire rooms around their existing antiques, like the ottoman, chair and armoire in the master bedroom. The Berliners are also animal lovers; they own horses, and share their Malibu sanctuary with two cats and three German Shepherds. There is a separate patio for the felines, and the canine family members enjoy their own private space close to the gym. “You have to make room for the owners’ own things. Those small personal touches make the space uniquely theirs.” 