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The living room of Marc and Melissa Palazzo's home in Costa Mesa, California, mixes furnishings from their own Pal + Smith line—which includes the *Madison* sofas (shown in a Lulu DK fabric called *Chant*) and a leather-upholstered *Bettibelle* chair (a favorite of Ruby, the family's Boston terrier)—with flea-market finds and homey built-ins. The painting is by Daryl Millard; the chandelier is vintage. Henry Buckingham, the architect for the addition, designed a white oak stairway to bridge the two sections of the house. The living room and the adjacent rec room both open to the outdoors.





A pair of professional designers doubled the size of their *Southern California* home with a two-story addition and then furnished it with a quirky mix of their own pieces and vintage treasures.

# Twice as Nice





## Melissa Palazzo is used to hearing people say, “You can’t do that.” Her response? She just does it anyway. The California designer believes that decorating rules

are meant to be broken. So for her own family’s house, in Orange County, just down the freeway from Los Angeles, she installed limestone floor tiles upside down, because she liked their bottoms better than their tops, and created furniture groupings that defy convention. “I want people to walk in and be intrigued,” says Melissa, “to wonder, Why would you mix those things?”

Melissa and her husband, Marc, who own the interior design and project management firm Pal + Smith, had been living in the 1950s ranch house for almost a decade. But with their family growing—they now have three young children—they asked Henry Buckingham, a partner in the Los Angeles firm Techentin Buckingham, to find a way to nearly double its 2,500 square feet. Buckingham, seemingly influenced by Frank Gehry, worked with inexpensive materials, including corrugated metal that sweeps from roof to walls “like a sheet draped over the building,” he says.

There are lots of skylights, but they’re the kind that don’t open (which cost a lot less than the kind that do), and interior wood accents are “ordinary” Douglas fir. (By bleaching the fir, then staining it dark brown, Buckingham made it resemble much pricier wenge.) The resulting building is a mashup of what’s contemporary now and what was contemporary in the mid-20th century. “It’s definitely modern,” Melissa says of the house, “but there’s too much going on for it to be any one style.”

This page: A double-height rec room is part of the addition by architect Henry Buckingham, who chose corrugated metal for sections of the facade. The “lawn” is artificial (see “What the Pros Know,” page 104). Opposite: The Palazzos designed the marble-topped white-oak dining table and leather chairs; the wicker ones are by Mies van der Rohe, the stool by Lars Bolander. “Zebra skin” rugs from Edelman are faux; both the photo and the large chandelier are vintage.

PRODUCED BY LINDA O’KEEFE AND LAURA HULL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN ELLIS.  
WRITTEN BY FRED A. BERNSTEIN.



Melissa calls the house campy, a word with two meanings that both fit. Some parts of the house are almost kitschy, with a vintage chandelier from a Miami Beach hotel hanging above a pair of

zebra-print cowhide rugs. Other areas of the home, with their rough-hewn woodwork, suggest the buildings of a summer camp. The original house, on a quiet street in Costa Mesa, had an earthy quality, and architect Buckingham, who believes in letting buildings show their roots, decided to preserve it.

"There wasn't an effort to seamlessly blend the addition with the existing house," the architect says. Not only would that kind of makeover have been prohibitively expensive but, Buckingham asserts (with his clients' enthusiastic accord), the "juxtaposition of rustic and precision elements heightens the attributes of both."

Marc Palazzo supervised construction, a job that included getting the contractors to indent the baseboards (for a crisp, contemporary look) in most of the new rooms. That was a way of creating perfectly formed "reveals," like the one below the stairway, where moldings would normally hide any imperfections.

"The contractors fought us tooth and nail on that," says Marc. But being the construction manager on the project also had its advantages, like letting him slip in a media system, made by Brett Latrobe, that allows him to control audio and video from anywhere in the house. "It was a splurge," says Marc, adding, "I never told Melissa what it ended up costing."

||| This page (from top): Melissa and Marc Palazzo (pictured) framed the stairway in dark wood, she says, "to help define the space." The informal dining area consists of their own *Tribeca* table and two varieties of chairs: Pal + Smith's *Grayson* and Mies van der Rohe's tubular *Brno*. Opposite: A window over the sink offers views of the dining room. A Waterworks farmhouse sink and D-Line tiles and a marble countertop (both from Walker Zanger) give the kitchen a relaxed mien.











Despite her penchant for breaking rules, Melissa has one of her own, and she sticks to it in her new house: Her interior walls are always white, she says, “so whatever you choose to put in front of them pops.”

That doesn't mean she avoids using color. On the second floor, the white walls embrace bright-green doorways and the chartreuse “frame” that Melissa designed to display ten of her own photos. Like most great ideas, it's really simple: It consists of a long rectangle of ordinary house paint and picture-frame moldings.

In the master bedroom, the pop-y colors include the green of the contemporary Nepalese rug by Suzanne Sharp from the Rug Company and the violet of the silk pillows (from Pal + Smith). The couple enlarged their personal retreat by about six feet, to accommodate a new clothes closet behind the bed. But instead of building an interior partition, they simply hung a curtain. Flimsy? By hanging a large photo on the non-wall, they created the illusion of substance. (The photo actually hangs from the ceiling, as do the

two white pendant fixtures, whose perfect roundness contrasts with the sharp edges of the bed.)

For the Palazzos, an advantage to designing their own home is that they never have to consider it finished. When you work for clients, “they want you to turn over the place complete, which means the design is frozen in time,” says Melissa, ruefully. By contrast, their own place keeps evolving. That, Marc says, makes it “richer and more layered.”

Isabella, 11, and brother Luke, 9, play under a *Bing Bang* pendant, from Plug Lighting, that recalls the Sputnik-style fixtures of the 1950s and '60s; the glass partition with its sleek metal rail is pure 21st century. Opposite: In the master bedroom, curvy pieces like the spindly 1830s Italian wood chair and the planter (in the shape of a chess piece) keep the reclaimed Brazilian wood *Edge* bed by Environment Furniture from seeming heavy. The painting is by Rick Meoli.



### What the Pros Know

The Palazzos' front lawn (above) is as natural as the ancient coral tree that shades it. But in their backyard (page 99), growing grass proved difficult: Some parts of the oddly shaped plot are shaded; others get direct sun all day long. Watering it enough to keep sunny patches from burning out left other sections muddy, Marc recalls. So the couple decided to go with artificial turf. Their installer, Cutting Edge Lawns and Putting Greens,

showed them samples, from which they chose Mirage Waterless Grass Ultra Sod 60, a multicolored, multi-textured polyethylene that the couple says has the most natural look. It is so durable that moving heavy equipment through the yard didn't damage it, says Marc. And it means, of course, that the family is conserving water. The only problem is that the turf gets hot on sunny days, which requires that the kids wear shoes.



The home's addition has three main parts: a large, double-height rec room in the back; a new second floor containing children's bedrooms and a bathroom; and a dining room in the front of the

house. The last may have been the trickiest to design because the dining room couldn't encroach on the remarkable old coral tree, believed to be one of the largest in the state (the ecologically savvy Palazzos never even considered felling it). That constraint kept the room small, but it has a large presence from the street, with a compelling mix of wood louvers and corrugated metal.

Furnishing the front lawn as breezily as they furnished the interior, the Palazzos added a rattan swing and two contemporary Loll Designs Adirondack chairs (made of recycled plastic), with comfortable decorative pillows. The suggestion is that nature's exuberance and playful objects bring out the best in each other.

Inside the house, the same principle applies. Both natural and man-made elements are allowed to flourish; a 1930s Venetian chandelier hangs beneath a canopy of branches framed by a skylight in the master bath. Artworks chosen by the Palazzos further the feeling that the house is part of a larger, exotic environment. Han Lei's round landscape photo (in the master bathroom) and Melissa's own shot of Yosemite's Ahwahnee Lodge (hanging outside the powder room) suggest that the house isn't a closed container so much as a portal to other worlds. ▣

See Resources, last pages.

This page (from top): On the front lawn, Melissa, with her youngest child, James, 3, swings from a coral tree (it's one of the biggest of its kind); in the ground-floor powder room, the Parsons-style vanity and the trough sink meet an over-the-top Joie chair from Pal + Smith and Palm Leaves wallpaper from Cole & Son. Opposite: In the master bath, a George Smith tufted chair sits on the terrazzo floor; photos (from left) are by Han Lei and the German team Billy & Hells.



