

La Jolla Jewel

Ocean views on top,
multicar parking below,
lots of light in between

BY LAURA Du CHARME CONBOY

The day before the concrete trucks were scheduled to arrive to pour the 12-ft.-tall driveway walls, the concrete contractor called me to the site. “Are you sure you want those driveway walls at that height?” he asked. “They are going to be really tall, you know.”

I paused, hesitant to ignore the advice of such a seasoned professional. After registering my husband’s concerned expression, I blurted out, “Yes, I’m sure! Now is not the time to be timid!”

Starting from scratch

From the start, fear never seemed to be a guiding factor. We’d purchased a little cottage after seeing an ad that actually described the house as “surrounded by more expensive homes.” The first day we owned the house, we gleefully ripped out the old carpeting. Buyers’ remorse quickly replaced new-homeowner adrenaline when we found a ¾-in.-wide crack in the slab that literally split the house into two parts. When we discovered that part of the house had settled a full ½ in., we knew this project would be no remodel. Eight years later, we were ready to tear it down and start over.

We wanted to design a home that would blend into the well-established, traditional neighborhood of older homes that ranged from Spanish and Craftsman style to Tudor, bungalow, and even modern. Given the eclectic mix, scale became more critical than style. The new house would have to grow up to fit in with its taller neighbors.

Concrete walls: a one-shot deal

I’d always wanted to experiment with cast-in-place concrete. Concrete is a fascinating material that at once appears cold yet warm, earthy yet man-made. This dual nature helped us to choose other materials based on similar juxtaposition: mirrors, steel, and glass versus redwood, mahogany, and limestone. Overall, we wanted to create a solid, somewhat intimidating facade that contained an inviting, internal warmth.

Forming and pouring the concrete walls was a challenge. Originally, the structural engineer specified two curtains of reinforcing steel in each wall to prevent cracking. But the concrete contractor had the engineer reduce the requirements to one so that he could vibrate the concrete adequately to eliminate major voids in the tall forms.

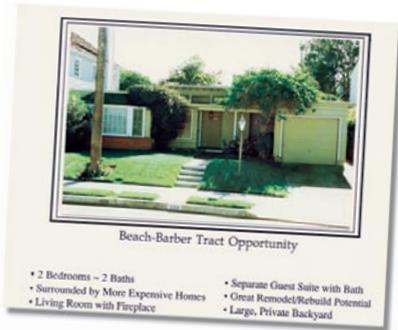
One day, we visited the nearby Salk Institute, a Louis Kahn-designed research center built of gleaming reinforced concrete. We asked about getting their white concrete for our job. The cost of the concrete turned out to be far beyond our financial means, but our clever contractor suggested using an extra-high-strength mix, which cures to a much lighter shade. We took his suggestion and got light-colored concrete without paying the price for white.

At the Salk Institute, we noticed ghostly horizontal lines in the concrete about 4 ft. from the bottom of the walls. We learned that these lines were cold joints caused when concrete starts to harden between lifts. To prevent cold joints, our contractor placed the concrete in a single pour rather than in the typical 4-ft. lifts, no easy feat given that most of the forms were 18 ft. to 28 ft. tall.

Both inside and outside the house, we left exposed concrete as it came from the forms: natural gray dotted with small voids and other

HIGH WALLS ARE WORTH THE TROUBLE

I could have made the building process easier by designing walls that were built one floor at a time. But the idea of the smooth, uninterrupted walls was too important to the overall design. Forming and pouring the high concrete walls was a bit of a challenge. After the forms were craned into place and rebar added, the walls were poured in one lift.



Better scale, better fit. Published in an enticing real-estate ad (photo above), the house proved to have too much structural damage to be salvaged, and it was torn down. The new house is taller to blend in better with its neighbors, and the contemporary look is a perfect addition to an eclectic neighborhood. Photo facing page taken at A on floor plan.



Forms for tall walls. Concrete forms up to 28 ft. tall were built on the ground; then a crane lifted them into place.





Warm walls of raw concrete. In the living room, painted plaster and wood soften the industrial look of concrete and painted steel. The concrete walls show the bolt holes and imperfections that were revealed after the forms were removed. Photo taken at B on floor plan.



A choir of materials, pleasantly combined. Concrete, stone tile, wood, glass, and paint all sing in perfect harmony in this first-floor guest bathroom. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

nonstructural imperfections. In the living room, concrete flanks the fireplace in the southeast corner. The rest of the living-room walls are plastered. Concrete walls grace the library and the guest bedroom on the first floor. Perhaps the most interesting mix of materials is in the first-floor bathroom. Here, the concrete walls create two sides of the shower area; tumbled marble and limestone finish the floor and walls. A glass door and a wood floor complete the materials palette.

Steel beams create and define open space

To help keep the concrete from becoming a dominant visual element, we opened the first-floor spaces as much as possible. Large steel I-beams support the upper floor and keep the walls stable and separate in the event of an earthquake. We left the beams uncovered to define and separate first-floor spaces visually. The beams form a border

around the living room and break the ceiling plane to denote the dining area. The floor also steps up to give the dining area a more intimate feel.

Another way to give concrete a warm feel is by introducing natural light. One entire wall of the living room is made of 11-ft.-tall mahogany-frame doors that open onto a private rear patio and extend the living spaces outdoors.

On the other side of the living room, horizontal bands of windows extending from the fireplace let in daylight. The stair landing has a wire-mesh balustrade that's nearly invisible, allowing a maximum amount of light.

Stone veneer warms the kitchen

The play of materials and their juxtaposition is most evident in the kitchen. I wanted to create a room that felt old to contrast with the extremely modern cabinetry and appliances. The kitchen walls, veneered in

PLANNING CAREFULLY IN A CONFINED SPOT



Because the narrow site lies on a north/south axis and is hemmed in by neighboring houses, I used steel framing to open the first floor's plan and to expose the living room, the dining room, and the kitchen to sunlight. Two important rooms, the kitchen and the master bedroom directly above, were placed at the southern end of the house for maximum light and privacy. I had them jut out at an angle from the main house so that three sides were exposed but still within the narrow confines of the footprint. The roof gave me a chance at extra space, which I used for a deck (photo above, taken at D on floor plan); the garage (photo below, taken at E on floor plan) also saved space. Accessible by one narrow driveway, the garage accommodates three cars below the house and doesn't waste space on a separate building.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 4

Bathrooms: 4

Size: 3700 sq. ft. (not including 1740 sq. ft. for the garage)

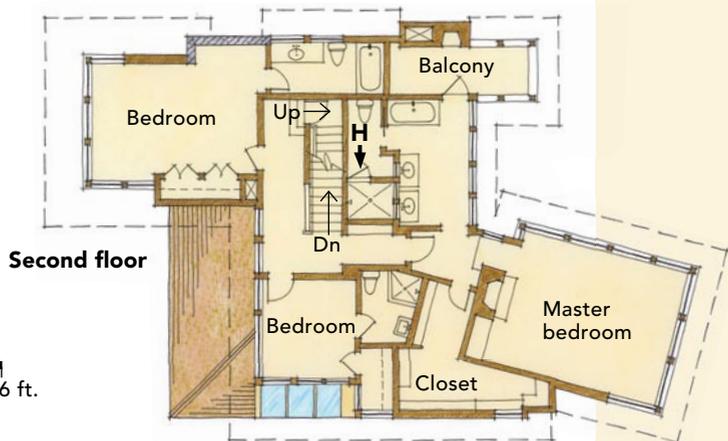
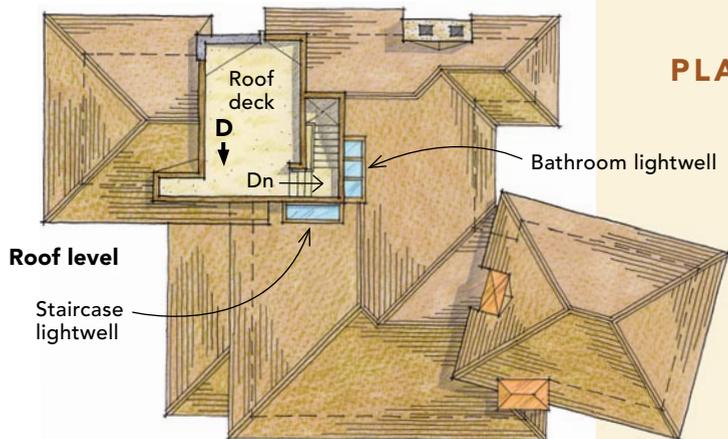
Cost: Approximately \$320 per sq. ft. (habitable space, garage, and landscaping)

Completed: 2003

Location: La Jolla, Calif.

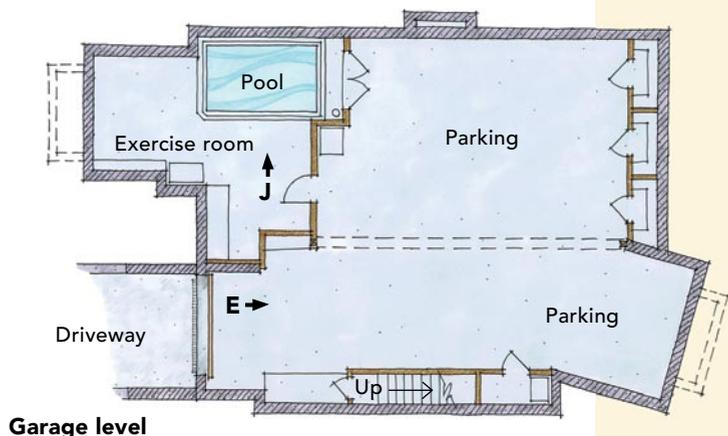
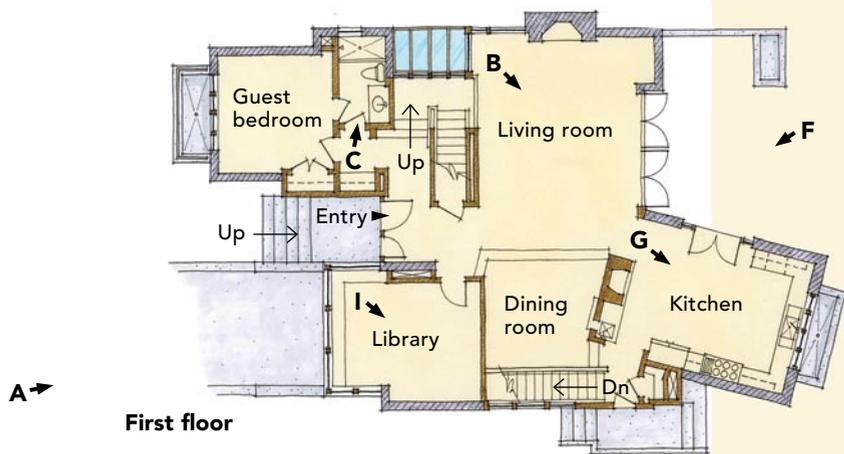
Architect: Laura Du Charme Conboy

Builder: David Taylor Development



0 4 8 16 ft.

Photos taken at lettered positions.





Medieval modern. Stone veneer, a full-length arch-top window, and an overhead light fixture with the look of many candles give this kitchen an ancient feel that perfectly complements the modern cabinets, glass doors, and stainless steel. Photos taken at F (left) and G (facing page) on floor plan.

rough limestone, give the space the feel of an old European farmhouse. Rustic structural beams were installed in the ceiling, and old-looking French limestone pavers cover the floors. Unusual for a kitchen, a 9-ft.-tall window stretches from the floor almost to the ceiling. A stainless-steel counter from Bulthaup (www.bulthaup.com) looks like a freestanding piece of furniture in front of the window. Light from the window streams in above and below the sink unit.

Dark-stained cabinetry with etched-glass doors on the wall units gives the rest of the kitchen a clean, contemporary look. Granite countertops carry the gray tones of the stainless steel through the kitchen.

The most striking visual element hangs over the kitchen table: a light fixture with illuminated cylinders, by Kevin Reilly Lighting. The north wall of the kitchen has a small

fireplace as well as a butler's pantry with a pass-through to the dining room.

Daylight everywhere

The second floor houses the master suite as well as the kids' bedrooms. Here, we wanted to maximize the number of windows to let in the most daylight. Concrete walls, however, presented an interesting challenge.

We needed to provide lateral support while taking up the least amount of space between windows. I wanted continuous windows on as many walls as possible. Traditional shear walls would have taken too much space. Here in Southern California, code dictates that a shear wall's width must equal half its height, and 5 ft. of shear panel on each wall would have ruined the effect. Our solution was to use tubular-steel columns. Instead of anchoring them to the tops of the concrete walls, we set the columns deep into the formwork and poured the concrete around them, like giant anchor bolts. As a result, the wall structure is uninterrupted from the foundation to the roof, and we were able to squeeze in the maximum amount of glass.

All those windows in the master bedroom led us to call it our treehouse. The trees in the

back and side yards give the room privacy, while windows on all four sides let in lots of bright morning light.

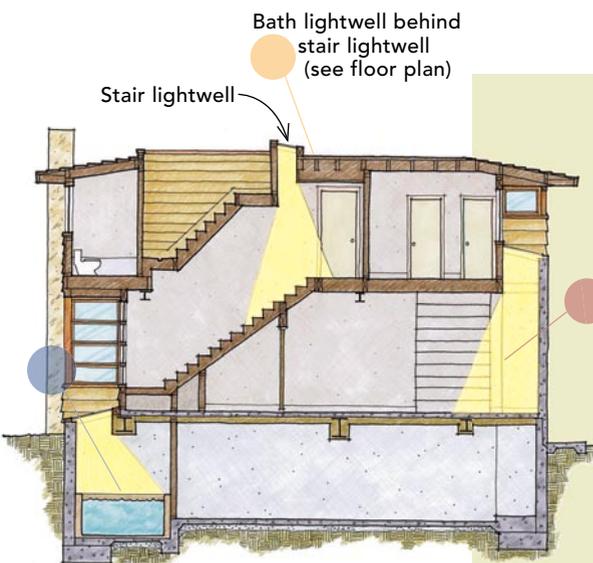
Special treatment, top and bottom

Making the house two stories tall has other advantages. The house sits on a palm-tree-lined street in southern California that leads to the Pacific Ocean, so a rooftop hideout was a must. It's our favorite place to relax at the end of the day.

If the top of the house offers pure enjoyment, the bottom of the house is a hardworking space. Most houses in the neighborhood have single-car garage doors. We wanted to blend in as much as we could with a concrete house in a traditional neighborhood, but we needed to park three cars. We converted the space under the house into a multicar garage accessed by a 10-ft.-wide driveway. The garage gains natural light via a large lightwell. Lest you think this level is entirely utilitarian, it also houses a large wine cellar and a workout area with a continuous lap pool. □

Laura Du Charme Conboy, AIA, has an architectural firm in La Jolla, Calif. Photos by Roe A. Osborn, except where noted.

LIGHTING THE HOUSE FROM THE TOP DOWN In California, sunlight is every resident's birthright, so I made sure that the house had plenty of windows. In the places where we couldn't have windows, I designed lightwells that funnel light from above.



South-facing elevation



In the master bath, a lightwell adjacent to the staircase lightwell illuminates and expands this interior space. Photo taken at H on floor plan.



Punctuated by steel beams, the library lightwell allows a hidden source of natural sunlight to wash down and expose the texture of the concrete wall. Photo taken at I on floor plan.



The lightwell over the lap pool provides light in the garage exercise room. The sunlight shining on the pool makes me feel as if I'm outside. Photo taken at J on floor plan.

