

Under the Tuscan Sun

Reclaimed materials lend new residence Old World charm

By Nicole P. Smith

Your destination is obscured from view by lush vegetation. To the outside eye, there is nothing but a quiet, pastoral landscape, but as you look closer, an avenue of graceful olive trees invites you. As you reach the end of the path, spread before you is the warm facade of what appears to be a sprawling, centuries-old Tuscan villa. You aren't in Italy, though. You are in an affluent neighborhood in Holmby Hills, Calif., standing in front of a house just more than five years old. This architectural masterpiece—which fools outsiders into believing they have been transported to another time and place—was made possible through the exacting vision of the homeowner, the rigorous efforts of the design team and the talents of the tradesmen who crafted each bit of tile, plaster, stone and wood into an authentic Italian estate.

The design process for this project took approximately two years, a typical time span for a home such as this, says Aaron Brown of Glendora, Calif.-based Aaron Anthony Inc., the general construction company. The homeowner had a definite plan, and



This new home—with natural and reclaimed materials inside and out—welcomes visitors with the warmth of a centuries-old Tuscan villa.



Brian Thomas Jones Photography



Brian Thomas Jones Photography

A spiral staircase provides a striking span between floors.

at a glance

Architect of Record:
Sinclair Associates Architects (West Los Angeles)

Design Architect:
Gregory Zubick & Associates (Los Angeles)

General Contractor:
Aaron Anthony Inc. (Glendora, Calif.)

Interior Designer:
Marla Sher Interior Design (Los Angeles)

Flooring Installer:
Enchanted Woods (Burbank, Calif.)

Structural Engineer:
KNA Engineering (Agoura Hills, Calif.)

Adhesive: Bostik

Finish and Stain: Dura Seal

Wax: Bison Wax

Aniline Dye: W.D. Lockwood

Walnut Herringbone and Plank:
National Hardwood Flooring & Moulding

Walnut Parquet: Heppner Hardwoods

the project evolved as his personal vision became clearer. "This was one of those jobs where things changed every day as we went along. It started out as a \$275- to \$300-per-square-foot home, and we wound up at \$500 a square foot," Brown explains. "The owner wanted an authentic Tuscan home, and as we started building, he wanted more and more authenticity, to the point where we were getting stone and antique French oak floors from Europe."

Architect Rob Sinclair, of West Los Angeles-based Sinclair Associates Architects and the architect of record for the project, drew the initial plans and did all of the space and location planning for the home, taking inspiration from the site itself. "The bottom line is it's all about the sun," Sinclair says. The long entry, which is lined with mature, 100-year-old olive trees, draws visitors in. Although the home is large and sprawling, care was taken to make sure it did not appear imposing. Gregory Zubick

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of Los Angeles-based Gregory Zubick & Associates, the detail architect for the project, elaborates: "Texas limestone, stucco, Santa Barbara sandstone, terra cotta tiles and a variety of bricks were used on the exterior. Since the structure is large, the blend of materials, which utilize a variety of color and texture, helped to achieve a more 'human' scale to the project."

The project looks like a small village of buildings, even though it consists of only the main house and the guest house. Textured materials from a Roman pan terra cotta roof to hand-troweled, integral-colored plaster lend character. Two million dollars was spent on landscaping to bring in mature trees, including olives, Canary Island pines and cypress, and other greenery. Combined, the landscape and the exterior character of the home meld to create the effect of a villa nestled on an Italian hillside.

The interior of the roughly 15,000-square-foot home also echoes another time. Materials were chosen to help give the project an aged patina. "Homes of this scale can become extremely monotonous, so the use of varying colors, materials and textures make touring the home a unique experience," Zubick says. At the same time, the palette of materials for the interior was simple—from plaster for the walls to antique hand-hewn timber for some of the ceilings to antique stone reclaimed from castles in France for some of the floors. Walnut and reclaimed French white oak was installed for the floors in the library, dining room, kitchen, family room, guest bedroom and master suite. All materials were of low-sheen to lend richness to the surfaces, Sinclair says.

Although many of the floors on the main and lower levels were stone or terra cotta, wood flooring was chosen in select rooms to create warmth. "You can't have the inside



Brian Thomas Jones Photography

Distressed herringbone flooring adds warmth and interest to the large master suite.

of your house be all stone. It feels like a mausoleum," Brown says. "The wood is a very rich, warm look." The wood, which was specified by interior designer Marla Sher, is a natural fit with the stone flooring. "It's all just natural materials—either stone or wood," Brown explains, adding that those materials are what was available in Tuscany many years ago.

The wood flooring was installed, sanded and finished by Burbank, Calif.-based Enchanted Woods, which was owned at the time by wood flooring veteran Dennis Prieur (now owner of flooring business Through the Woods in Tampa, Fla.). When Prieur got the call from the homeowner to do the floors in this project, he knew it would be an extraordinary job, but the relationship started slowly. At first, the owner wanted Prieur to put in a bid for the subfloor only. "They had some major subfloor issues. In the master suite, they shot where they wanted the baseboards with a laser level. We had to build the subfloor up to a point where a finished floor was at the proper height for the baseboards," Prieur explains. "We had a vertical

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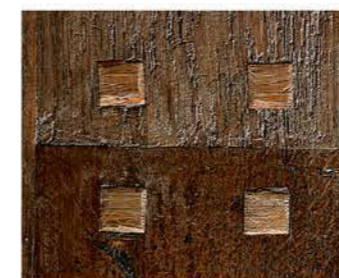
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run-out of over 2 inches in some spots. So, we took 2 by 4s, ripped them on a band saw and table saw, set them up 12 inches on center and then laid our two layers of plywood to that." Having successfully completed the subfloor project, Prieur bid on installing the reclaimed French white oak for the family room and kitchen.

The job, Prieur says, required him to tailor his work to the many antique, imported, handcrafted materials, as well as new materials. "I walked into the house, and there was the vaulted entryway, the long hall that goes the length of the house from left to right ... Let's just say that I was thinking, 'What am I going to do that is going to fit into a house like this?'" Prieur laughs.

Prieur and the Enchanted Woods crews were up to the challenge. The first wood floor laid was the 200- to 300-year-old French white oak in the kitchen and family room. Designer Sher had chosen the wood from a company in Los Angeles called Cavendish Grey that specializes in importing reclaimed stone, tile and wood from Europe. The wood was reclaimed floorboards, and the only milling that had been done was planing the bottoms of the boards. "There was this massive pile of wood in random lengths and completely random widths. They varied from 3 to maybe 12 inches wide," Prieur notes, adding that the boards were top-nailed, had no tongue-and-groove and

in detail



Square plugs, with gently hand-rolled edges, add a rustic yet elegant look to 200-year-old French white oak in the kitchen and family room.



Brian Thomas Jones Photography

Well-worn reclaimed French white oak floorboards look right at home in the kitchen.

were nominally 3/4-inch-thick. "We were thinking, 'How are we going to turn this into a floor?'" he says. Prieur's solution was to lug his 220-volt table saw and joiner to the site and transform the flooring into eight or nine standard widths. The flooring was glued down and was nailed with standard flooring nails, even though there wasn't a tongue and groove.

Once the flooring was installed, the designer wanted to add square plugs. Prieur chiseled out the notches for the 1 1/2-inch-square, 3/4- to 5/8-inch-thick plugs, adding screws in the floor. "The plugs were set higher than the floor so that they didn't sand flat ... it's a pain to do, but I think it looks better than sanding the plugs flush to the floor. It really gave the floor an elegant look," Prieur says. Once the plugs were in place, Prieur and his crews then scraped down some of the darker boards to lighten them. As needed, the edges of the boards were scraped and given a coat of aniline dye to bring the color back. "We basically hand-scraped and rounded the high boards and hand-scraped the plugs so they kind of rolled into the floor," Prieur says. Then, the floor was finished with three coats of a dark wax. "This is not a floor you sand. What you are paying for is the old face, which has a lot of wax on it," Prieur says.

The next thing Prieur and his crew worked on was a spiral staircase in new white oak. Los Angeles-based Taylor Brothers Stair Company installed the stairs, and Prieur's crews sanded and finished them. The finish had to be matched to the antique French white oak in

the family room and kitchen. To do this, Prieur used a two-step staining process consisting of a coat of aniline dye and a coat of antique brown stain. The stairs were then finished with three coats of a low-sheen polyurethane to match the waxed floors. Prieur and his crew also installed and finished a 15-square-foot landing and a curved hallway at the top of the stairs. "Because [the hall] was curved, the individual planks laid there in the oak are all tapered to follow the radius of the curve—they are maybe 3 inches wide on the narrow side and 5 to 6 inches wide on the wide end. It was a time-consuming detail, but it created continuity," Prieur says.

Next, Prieur and the Enchanted Woods crew laid 4-by-24-inch select walnut herringbone in the master suite and a 5-by-30-inch select walnut herringbone in the dining room, where it ran up to an old stone border. The floor was laid before the border, which resulted in more work when the stone installers didn't pay attention to the correct level. "We ended up rolling the edges of our wood a little bit, and I think

Aaron had them remove and replace some of the stone," Prieur says. In other areas of the home where wood ran up against stone, Prieur paid close attention to elevations of the subfloor prior to installation.

The herringbone was distressed in both the dining room and the master suite, as was the walnut plank in a guest bedroom. "We were down on our hands and knees with our hook scrapers, scraping to accentuate the grain," Prieur says. "That went on for a few weeks,

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Brian Thomas Jones Photography

Parquet flooring mirrors the coffered ceiling in the library, while painted borders add the perfect finishing touch.

just due to the large expanse of flooring." After the herringbone floors had been scraped, the sapwood was lightly stained and the floors received three coats of wax. "We did two initial coats of wax, and then they covered the floors," Prieur says. Six months later, when the owners were going to move in, we came back and did one more coat of wax."

The library was the final wood floor done by Prieur, and the one that caused the most frustration from a design standpoint. At first, the designer wanted a multi-species parquet. So, Prieur and the designer brainstormed, and Prieur pulled together some samples of parquets made with two or three species, but the owner didn't like any of them. Then, Prieur and one of his crew members had the idea of dropping the coffered ceiling pattern onto the floor, and that idea worked. Prieur created two parquet patterns of FAS walnut for the rooms that made up the library. Both were milled without a tongue and groove and were surfaced on four sides to 1/8 inch. The boards

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were milled in random length, 3- and 5-inch widths.

The parquet was assembled completely on the job, and the hardest part was the layout. "We used plumb lines from the ceiling to establish the centers of our parquet because we were mirroring the size of the ceiling," Prieur says, noting that he started by plumb-lining the intersections of the beams and then snapped his lines to size up the individual large sections. Once the layout was done, a double border of 5-inch plank was mitered and installed around the entire room, including some of the columns. Then, mitered 5-inch pickets were laid around the large parquet patterns. The flooring was glued down and the pickets were side-nailed. A few 20-gauge brads were used to hold down the floor while the glue set, then the rest of the floor was filled in with 3-inch plank, which was set in mastic. Once sanded, the floors were lightly stained and sealed. Prior to the last coat of finish, an artist painted on the faux border used throughout the library.

Thanks to the harmonious use of materials and a dedicated design team, each room is more stunning than the next. "Every single room is like a jewel box of its own. Not one single room sticks out, because they are all unbelievable—there isn't a boring square inch in the project." Brown says. In the end, the rooms came together perfectly to fulfill the owner's Tuscan vision. ♣