

HOMES

Inside These Editors' 2,700-Square-Foot Palm Springs Getaway

A pair of WL editors take on a quick reno of a 1940s Palm Springs hacienda—and all of the resulting challenges along with it.

By Neal McLennan / January 8, 2019



My chest tightened and my heart skipped a beat as I gingerly moved my way around a debris-strewn floor in the dark, my iPhone's flashlight illuminating heaps of dust and piles of construction garbage. Windows sagged in their frames and the floor felt spongy

underfoot in what appeared to be a decrepit old house. “What in God’s name have you done?” I croaked to my wife, who was 2,000 miles away on the other end of the phone. “Trust me,” she said. “We just bought our dream home!”

The fixer-upper in question is a 1945 Spanish Colonial in the Mesa, a leafy mountainside neighbourhood of Palm Springs. Prior to my introduction to it, my wife (*WL* contributing editor Amanda Ross) and I had previously owned a mid-century house on the other side of Palm Springs. We had sold it a couple of years prior and had been on the hunt for the perfect replacement ever since. While we had loved our foray into modern architecture, we quickly felt the limitations of what had been originally designed as a tiny tract home. Its floor plan had been conceived by famed mid-century architect William Krisel, we would tell ourselves, but the reality is that our small house was just one of a number of stock designs that developers replicated throughout the city in the 1950s and '60s. Houses identical to ours were everywhere—some fixed up, others waiting for keen design types to alight upon them. But the ease and clean lines that had initially drawn us to it were in the throes of what felt like an overwhelming kitsch suddenly overtaking the desert city. Houses everywhere were festooned with hanging chairs, blue shag rugs and stylized paintings that were supposed to evoke the swinging aspect of the postwar years. It started to feel like a formula and, relentless house-porn addicts that we are, we decided to put our stamp on something entirely different.



Our search took two years with a realtor who had been given a clear list: something with architectural history, or a “story,” something we could make our own (i.e., a fixer-upper) and something with a certain charm that only we would know when we saw it. We homed in on the Mesa, since it’s nestled right up to the San Jacinto Mountains and is the oldest neighbourhood in town. That meant an eclectic mix filled with mid-centuries, 1980s drug lord-style houses, Barry Manilow’s compound on one end, Suzanne Somers’s on the other and designer Trina Turk’s abode smack in the middle. The ‘hood’s wending roads were a welcome antidote to the grid system that dominates the rest of town, and it’s one of the few areas that offer staggering views of the Coachella Valley.

After an unfortunate bidding war (evidently, this was also someone else's dream house), we emerged the proud owners of TV actor Robert Stack's house, a charming decades-old Spanish hacienda with a wing of bedrooms accessed by a long glass-walled breezeway, an outdoor courtyard with a fireplace and lemon and lime trees. Which all seemed charming, with Amanda's enthusiastic descriptions of a modern Moroccan retreat, until I arrived down a few weeks later to take stock of what she had signed on for while I was staying up in Canada. A rabbit warren of rooms would become a giant great room, she said on the other end of the line. The blazing-hot breezeway would no longer feel like a terrarium once we addressed the glass, and the mishmash of mixed materials everywhere would soon be transformed into a black-and-white oasis —she practically screamed with excitement: "Marrakech oasis" I tapped the single-pane original wrought iron casement windows and fretted about their energy efficiency. "Well, yeah, that's going to be a problem," she said breezily.



We were lucky that Amanda's father, Bill Ross, is an architect and her sister, Jocelyn Ross, an architectural designer; both were

immediately pressed into service with the promise of an unlimited supply of eventual desert getaways as their remuneration. We retained a local contractor, who took a look at Bill and Jocelyn's drawings and declared we'd be in our new home for Christmas—a mere four months away. "Don't worry," he said. "I got this." A cocktail napkin sketch materialized into a bona fide blueprint, surveys were commissioned, a demo permit procured, and we were off to the races with a full vision articulated by Jocelyn that wove together a palette of natural wood and stone, charcoal tones and layers of texture and fringe.

That old saying about the best-laid plans? Well, it applies here. All the things that had been easy in our formulaic mid-century home now became a challenge in this unscripted, sprawling space. Three-foot-thick adobe walls may be great for energy efficiency, but they're also great at getting in the way of new wiring or piping or, frankly, anything except costly demo charges. The triple threat of unsexy expenses—plumbing, electrical and air conditioning—reared its head too many times to count, and I started to avoid the contractor's calls in the hopes that the relentless problems would solve themselves. If I just willed them away, would they go away? I may have said, "You got us into this!" on more than one occasion, but Amanda chalked up my balking to my usual reticence. Money was spent, nerves frayed, and more words were exchanged.



We kept making site visits, but it was clear progress wasn't being made. "Don't worry—the guts of the house take the longest," the contractor would assure us. Finally, a check-in three weeks before Christmas brought things to a head: the 13-foot waterfall quartz countertop—conceived by Jocelyn as the centrepiece to her design of the open-concept kitchen—had been installed with two mismatching pieces that were not only different colours but also different thicknesses, resulting in a sizable lip at the transition. To boot, workers had covered it up in the hopes that we wouldn't see it. More digging around and it was revealed that the feature wall of natural stone Moroccan-style tile had been installed with such shakiness that it appeared to have been done in the middle of one of SoCal's more considerable earthquakes. We staggered backwards to assess: Christmas habitation was a pipe dream, we were savagely over budget and our contractor was not even remotely up to the task. I looked to Amanda for a reassuring "Trust me." Instead, she said quickly, "I think we should dump it."





Thankfully, Jocelyn flew down for an emergency assessment. Yes, the counter had to be ripped out, as did the tile, but through the mess of the site she was able to see what had been accomplished. She put together a game plan for getting us out of this morass. Step one: fire the contractor and hire a new one. Step two: Amanda and Calgary-based Jocelyn would take turns buzzing the site almost weekly to monitor progress. And with that, the house slowly started to emerge from its shell. The black and white Moroccan-patterned tile soon transformed the various spaces with a drama I hadn't envisioned; the studs were closed up and the walls texturized to match the existing original surfaces; the bathroom fixtures were all plumbed to perfection in sparkly modern glamour. Ultimately, a



cadre of princely trades became our salvation in making sure the job got back on track—a concrete mason named Jaime Meza laboured through the summer heat shoring up the outside stairs and a master tiler named Ken Russell, who tiled them and also took some tile purchased at a Scottsdale big box store and worked some magic on the fireplace in the master bedroom. And with that, our nightmare finally turned into a dream.