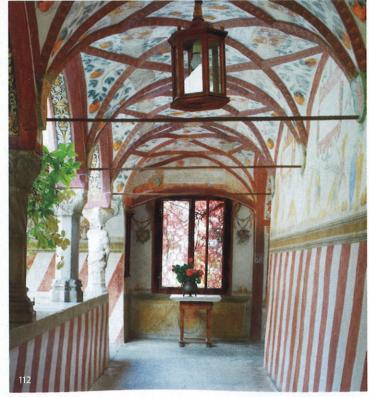




ABOVE: The library of a Santa Monica house designed by Michael S. Smith. RIGHT: The loggia of a 13th-century castle in northern Italy.





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hen the owners of a 1924 Spanish Revival house in Santa Monica, California, decided to remodel their kitchen after 17 years, they got a bit of a shock—it turned out that the house in which they'd raised their family had never been remotely shockproof. "Our children were grown, so we thought we might refashion the kitchen," explains the woman of the house. "Once we started, we found out the whole place was made of hollow clay tile; there was no rebar. The house we adored was certain to collapse in the next earthquake."

Thus began "quite a journey," she says, but one in which the couple—he works in the movie industry, she raises money for public education—decided to revel. "The day we found out we had to tear the whole thing down, we actually got really excited. It meant that we would have the opportunity to work with Michael and Oscar on a top-to-bottom project."

Michael is designer Michael S. Smith, who had decorated the original house, as well as two vacation places for the couple—and who is, she says, "like family at this point." Oscar is architect Oscar Shamamian of the New York firm Ferguson & Shamamian, who frequently collaborates with Smith and built the couple's house on Martha's Vineyard, which they cherish.

What all three parties agreed on was that they wanted to honor the Mediterranean roots of the original house. "My husband and I are both from the East Coast," she explains. "But from the moment I arrived in Los Angeles 30 years ago, I found something so warm and embracing about the city's Spanish architecture."

As luck would have it, just before they realized they'd have to rebuild the house, the couple had visited Spain for the first time. "I loved it—I loved the vibe, the music, the food, the colors, everything," she recalls. "We went to Madrid and then took a train to Seville and Córdoba. When I got back, I was more energized than ever."

Around the same time, Duarte Pinto Coelho, born in Portugal and widely heralded as Spain's first "real"















interior designer, passed away. When Christie's announced it would hold an auction of the contents of Pinto Coelho's influential houses in Madrid and Trujillo, Smith made a beeline to the sale. "The auction triggered a lot," Smith says. "I'd long been a fan of his houses, especially the one in Trujillo, which is where the conquistadors were from. The idea was that you have this Spanish Revival house in this Spanish Colonial place, so you buy stuff from the source, bring it back, and make it even more romantic. It's a very nice narrative."

Among the pieces Smith bought at the auction are six full-length 17th-century portraits of Roman generals that he removed from their frames and set into panels in the dining room. The parcel-gilt and walnut dining-room chairs are more comfortable copies of a set from the sale (the originals serve as occasional chairs in the hallways). And two stunning late-17th-century ormolu-mounted tortoiseshell and ebony cabinets on stands grace the living room.

Other references to Pinto Coelho's houses include the profusion of blue-and-white porcelain, the healthy scattering of Indian inlaid tables, the Spanish tiles in the kitchen and powder room, and the encrusted, gilded mirrors. All have long been staples of Smith's own look, and, he says, are entirely in keeping with California's Spanish history: "Every child, myself included, was required to build Spanish mission houses out of sugar cubes in fourth-grade art class."

When the owners asked Smith and Shamamian to rebuild the house, Smith reports that both men were delighted. "It's this really great style with a real tradition, and we wanted to take another look at it," he says. "People don't build this kind of house anymore. I think it's because they're not grand or fancy enough, and the rooms are generally smaller and not as open and bright."

But that kind of intimacy is exactly what their client wanted. "Maybe it's my age, but I just don't want to live in giant spaces anymore," the wife says. "I love the coziness and smaller scale of the rooms," adding that it allows the layered detail and texture provided by the two designers (including the tooled-leather walls in the study) to be more fully appreciated.

Even after the house was completed, the Spanish connections and coincidences kept mounting. In 2013, Smith's longtime partner, James Costos, was appointed by President Obama to be America's ambassador to Spain. "It was an amazing coincidence," says the homeowner. "That wasn't even on the table when we were working on the house." But, she adds, since it was indeed finished, she and her husband were thrilled to host Costos's send-off party—in a thoroughly fitting setting.

