

## DESIGN

## HOME OF THE TIMES

## Screen star's second life

DEBRA PRINZING

Mae Brunken wanted a home with a past. And in a plot with an only-in-Hollywood ending, the interior designer and set decorator found her perfect piece — one with a film noir pedigree. Perched high in the hills of Hollywood, her 1927 Spanish Colonial Revival appeared prominently in "Double Indemnity," starring Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray and Edward G. Robinson.

A black-and-white still from the Billy Wilder-directed classic hung in the house when Brunken first visited in 2000. As Phyllis Dietrichson (Stanwyck, who earned one of the film's seven Oscar nominations) stands in her foyer with co-narrator Walter Neff (MacMurray), the curved staircase is as much a star with its graceful iron scrollwork, terra cotta steps and Monterey tile risers.

"It was one of those California Spanish houses everyone was nuts about 10 or 15 years ago," Neff says in the 1944 film. "This one must have cost somebody 30,000 bucks. That is, if he ever finished paying for it."

Brunken asked for the Paramount Pictures still to be included in the sale, and though the film connection wasn't her only reason for purchasing the 3,200-square-foot house, she saw the opportunity to create another space around a character and what that character would love. "This time, the character is a glamorous movie star of the 1930s and '40s."

"I wanted to restore the house and have fun furnishing it as a part of the Hollywood era," she says.

In blending two styles — Deco interiors and Spanish architecture — Brunken chose not to interpret either genre too purely. Instead, the principal of Mae Brunken Design used red Art Deco colors and glossy furnishings to brighten the home's traditional terra cotta tile floors, stark white stucco walls and exposed beams.

"I didn't want a dark and heavy palette or for the interior to be too predictable," she says. "I like my environments to be modern-day and a little playful. I love fresh and happy color. I want to mix different periods and allow the pieces to play together."

When her friend Thomas Boghosian, a retired California Institute of the Arts film historian, saw the house, he suggested that Brunken use a "Double Indemnity" poster as a decorating motif. He saw big property as a rare example of motion picture art direction because both exterior and interior were used.

"At the time, most films were shot on the studio back lots," Boghosian says. "I could not believe until I went inside — and then went back to the film — that they actually copied the interior of the home exactly. Of course, since Mae lived in the home of such a famous film noir title, I thought posters with female figures would work perfect inside it."

Boghosian has since helped Brunken acquire an impressive collection of vintage posters with titles such as "Night in New Orleans," "Where the Sidewalk Ends" and "Night in Algiers." The two-story foyer, an octagonal turret where an original wrought-iron lantern still hangs, doubles as a mini gallery containing some of Brunken's largest posters.

"I love the graphics," she says. "This house has a lot of big walls, and the posters help to warm it up."

The space is central to the home's design, with two wings extending from it at 90-degree angles. Brunken turned the all-white ceiling into a work of art, stripping the beams to expose dark wood, painting the plaster a terra cotta hue and stenciled scrolls in a Deco-inspired pattern of gold leaf and moss green.

For the foyer floor, she designed a bull's-eye rug. "I was inspired by the movie posters to do something as a piece of pop art," she says of the concentric circles in cabernet, eggplant, gold, cream and turquoise. Decored the "Double Indemnity" stained, patent leather and gilded finishes. Pieces are vintage, reproduction and custom, selected for their unexpected qualities, "so that everywhere you look there is something that draws your eye around the room," the designer says.

The poster palette — think gold, turquoise and red, for starters — spill onto some of the walls, including the multi-pink dining room with gold-leaf ceiling, the pale aqua library with gold-leaf stenciling and a flamingo-patterned bedroom with views of the Hollywood sign.

The master suite is decorated in platinum lavender, with a custom velvet headboard, a pale pink bench with Lucite legs and antique mirrored side tables. The vintage wall sconces cast a soft glow around the room.

After the calm elegance of this space, the recent master bathroom gives an energetic jolt. Original black and yellow tiles cover the walls, and the floor is paved in a mustard honey-comb tile. Small movie posters, called "window cards," are artfully arranged on the wall, but it's the burnished palette that makes Brunken smile.



Photograph by B. BRAND/DEARBARNER, Los Angeles Times

**PLAYFUL:** "I wanted to restore the house and have fun furnishing it as a part of the Hollywood era," says Mae Brunken, whose house was featured prominently in 1944's "Double Indemnity." In blending Art Deco interiors and Spanish architecture, she chose not to interpret either genre too purely.



Down the hall, a guest bath is equally stunning and perhaps more soothing with teal and black Art Deco tiles.

"Some of the bathroom fixtures, like the wall-mounted soap dishes and towel bars, had to be replaced, but I found matches at Lisa's Antique Hand-

ware," she says of the L.A. store. The designer is no stranger to high-tech, spa-like bathrooms, because that's what many of her design clients request. "But I don't find my bathrooms inconvenient in any way. They may be a little more simplistic than modern bathrooms, but they still look great."

Only the kitchen, which had under-

gone an unfortunate 1970s modernization effort, called for major renovation.

Brunken found a 1936 O'Keefe & Merritt stove to replace a generic cooking, removed layers of vinyl floor to reveal the original oak underneath, replaced old metal windows and eliminated a butler's pantry to create a

## Tips from a poster sleuth

Film noir historian Thomas Boghosian has been collecting movie posters since the early 1970s, when he would discover boxes of them in used book stores on Hollywood Boulevard. "At the moment, posters are highly collectible," he says. "Famous titles such as 'Sunset Boulevard' or 'Wizet of Oz' are difficult to find or very expensive."

You can search online sources for vintage posters, but Boghosian prefers the garage sale and flea market approach.

"A good example is an intact window card that I found from 1931 that was used for target practice in someone's garage," he says. "Also, I bought a Betty Davis poster, which was used as backing for a floral print and discovered when someone's grandmother passed away and they took the picture out of the frame."

Boghosian shares these tips for acquiring your own vintage posters: **Source:** Two major companies, Stone Litho and Tooker Litho, produced posters in the 1930s, '40s and '50s. Look for either name printed in the margin of the poster. All original posters also should have "National Screen Service Corp." printed on them.

**Date:** Look for the date of the poster in the lower right. The production number should appear near to the date.

**Size:** You can determine authenticity by the poster's size. Original posters were produced as a one-sheet (27 by 42 inches), an insert (14 by 36 inches) or a window card (14 by 22 inches).

**Price:** Poster value is determined by condition — whether it was altered or trimmed. "Lots of early collectors did not want to customize frames, so they would trim the borders of a poster," Boghosian says.

DEBRA PRINZING

**LUCITE BREAKS:** A vintage poster adorns the breakfast nook.

seating area. Even here, the designer was unimpaired, pairing a 42-inch round table of her own design with Eames-inspired Lucite chairs. A reproduction shell lamp adds shimmer overhead, a contrast to warehouse-style fixtures above the kitchen sink. The blue, terra cotta and gold tile backsplash and counters, the bungalow-style cabinetry and a farmhouse sink seem vintage enough to fit right for the house's age.

Brunken's imaginary starter would have felt right at home in the sunken living room, designed in a yummy school-aid-pink scheme. High, arched windows and French doors open onto a Mediterranean-inspired courtyard garden redesigned by Lisa Mosley. The new alfresco entertaining space is a vast improvement, Brunken says, over the 12-person Jacuzzi with rust-colored tile that once occupied the space.

The living room brown silk drapes have pink inserts, two drum-backed armchairs that the designer brought from a prior home are now clad in pink velvet with brown piping for a 1940s vibe. The designer also repupstered a sofa in rich brown mohair and created a white leather ottoman with antique gold studs. A rug with an interlocking key motif in pink and dark maroon, and a reproduction mirror-front armchair with an overlay of circles, are nods to the Art Deco era. This is where Brunken, now a film noir buff, invites friends to watch movies on a screen tucked inside the armchair.

"Set decorating has changed my approach to interiors of an actual home," she says. "Because when I'm doing a set, I'm creating the character, who she would have and what her lifestyle is."

For this modern-day woman, it's a home of glamour and elegance that evokes Rita Hayworth or Ava Gardner would envy.

home@latimes.com

## HOME

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2009 • LATIMES.COM/HOME



**MESMERIZING:** Mae Brunken's bull's-eye rug adds a whimsical touch to the foyer of her 1927 Hollywood Hills home.

Photograph by B. BRAND/DEARBARNER, Los Angeles Times



## 'DOUBLE' VISION

If you feel like you've seen that foyer before, you probably have. Barbara Stanwyck strolled down those tiled steps toward a bewitched Fred MacMurray in "Double Indemnity," the 1944 Billy Wilder film noir classic. More than five decades later, an interior designer and set decorator has made it her period piece, a Deco-flavored twist to the home's Spanish Colonial Revival history. An unlikely combination of styles? That's the owner's point — to create a Hollywood scene all her own. **PAGE E8**

## PARENTING ON THE EDGE

## Much to talk about

MADELEINE BRAND

Why am I throwing yet another (to)log on the loveless inferno of mommy blogs out there? There must be at least a gazillion of them, to use my own word for anything larger than 10. And yet there seems to be an unquenchable desire to talk about parenting as if we're the first to experience it. Turning "parents" into a grand word has been alive to our parents, which says a lot about where we are.

I used to host a radio show on NPR called "Day to Day." Whenever we did a story on parenting, the response was big. I thought, "Wow, this is really connecting with our listeners; wouldn't it be great to do a whole show or series of podcasts on this topic?" But being a mom with a full-time job, I couldn't really find the time.

Boom. I had all the time in the world: NPR canceled the show, and I lost my job. So I dove into NPR's award-winning City studios to my closet, which my husband gallantly soundproofed. I bought some audio equipment, and "Parenting on the Edge" was born.

Now I'll be here, writing and podcasting regularly for Home and latimes.com. And with "Where the Wild Things Are" making its premiere in movie theaters this weekend, "Parenting on the Edge" turns to the topic of children's books, specifically bad children's books that have become classics (subtitle II: "Why I Despise 'The Giving Tree'").

If you're like me, you have certain picture books that you read over and over to your children. Maybe they were books you loved as a child. Some of those books, however, don't seem so great now.

"The Rainbow Fish" really gets me. This is a story about a fish with beautiful scales who realizes that the only way he'll have friends is if he gives away his prized scales to the fish who don't have them. At first I thought, that's great. It's about sharing, about not being vain and selfish.

But then I thought, what's wrong with keeping your beautiful scales? Why do you have to share everything? More important, the book seems to be saying, "Don't be unique." Don't be special. Don't be different.

"The Rainbow Fish" is mild, though, compared with some other classics. In this week's podcast, I discuss them with children's book author Laurel Snyder, who conducted a survey on her blog about her three most-hated picture books: "The Runaway Bunny," "Love You Forever" and "The

(See Brand, Page E8)

## MAN OF THE HOUSE

PAGE E4

## HOT PROPERTY

PAGE E7

CAROLYN COLE, Los Angeles Times