

FEBRUARY 2010

# House Beautiful

## Makeovers

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FEBRUARY 2010

## REIMAGINING A NEW HOUSE

**THE CHALLENGE**  
*How do you wrangle a home out of a 23-foot-tall living room and too many architectural gimmicks?*

**THE STRATEGY**  
*Bring down the scale and focus on comfort, for a look "as undecorated as it is possible for a decorator to do."*



*Interior design by  
MADELINE STUART*

*Interview by  
DOUGLAS BRENNER*

*Photographs by  
VICTORIA PEARSON*



To scale down the two-story living room of this Los Angeles house, Madeline Stuart suspended an iron chandelier above a custom-upholstered sofa and chairs, a pair of 19th-century English stools, a 1930s French fauteuil, and a Chinese table. The graphic pattern of a vintage Moroccan rug balances the calm of the high-rise tapered fireplace. **OPPOSITE:** Stuart's makeover includes the front garden, created with Lance Lortscher of New View Landscape.



**Q** DOUGLAS BRENNER:  
That fantastic chandelier  
looks like it's about to put  
its elbows on the table.

**A** MADELINE STUART:  
It's all elbows! It's got a  
quirky personality that's  
sort of alive and friendly.  
No matter how you set the  
table, this is a chandelier  
that says, 'I'm not taking  
myself too seriously. You  
shouldn't either!' >>

A David Hockney print glows between vintage parchment lamps. Subtle wall color—Donald Kaufman Color DKC-13—sets off the deep tones of a 19th-century Spanish walnut credenza and Madeline Stuart chairs in Ashbury Hides leather. The antique Spanish chandelier hangs above a table set with Poc A Poc china, BollenGlass stemware, and Christofle flatware. Tage Andersen's Champagne Vases flank a bronze Handkerchief planter from Inner Gardens.





**This house was such a chaotic mishmash before you redid it. I'd call it Manicterranean. The Villa Malcontenta! Why did your client buy it?**

He's a fanatical golfer, and it backs onto a revered country club. For him, it was worth anything to overlook the golf course. So he ended up buying the ugliest house I've ever seen, a horribly scaled 1980s spec with all the wrong windows and these bad cast-concrete moldings—it cost money to stick on that junk! He phoned from New York to ask if I'd go take a look. He said, 'Um, we should probably redo the floors.' I usually collaborate with clients in an all-embracing give-and-take, but he's a very busy man who had no time to be directly involved. When I called him back, I said, 'We've never met, but you'll just have to trust me as if I were a doctor. Your house may be a terminal case.' He laughed. 'So we're going to have to redo the bathroom?' 'Yep.' He didn't know then that we would demo almost every square inch of the house down to the studs.

**It must be hard to custom-tailor a makeover for someone who isn't around to say whether it fits. How did you visualize what he needed?**

This is a man who just wants to sit and relax with his two teenage daughters, with friends, by himself. This isn't someone who's going to be impressed by silk velvet on a sofa. He's not going to say, 'This is a Regency piece inspired by blah blah.' He wants a good lamp to read by. So it was basically making decisions based on comfort, based on a palette that wasn't too challenging, but also not model-home bland. The look is as uncontrived, as unself-conscious, as undecorated as it is possible for a decorator to do. My client had come from a dark Tudor house filled with English antiques and florals. He actually said, 'No antiques.' We designed a lot of furniture for this place, but we also found old pieces that have personality and depth, so it doesn't look as though we played it safe by phoning things in from a design center.

**What was your biggest challenge?**

Unless you're in a great house with huge spaces, like a palazzo or an English country estate, a living room with a 23-foot-high ceiling, which this place has, is not a good idea. You might as well be sitting at the bottom of a well. It's hard to be at ease in a room that makes you feel puny and insignificant. So the first order of business was to create human scale by bringing everything down. The chandelier is hung low, and we replaced the original pretentious mantel with a plaster fireplace that speaks to the proportions of the furnishings. Instead of overbearing pieces that try to compete with a tall space, these make you feel cozy within it.

Stuart concocted the "modern Provincial" kitchen with her minimalist update of traditional grooved cabinetry, in a soft custom green, with limestone countertops: "This kitchen needed to be somewhat masculine, but still warm and inviting." She created a micro-mosaic backsplash for textural interest. The pendants are 1950s Italian. Wolf range.

**Your light fixtures all have so much character. Are most of them vintage?**

Yes. They couldn't look too modern, but they couldn't look too Rudy Valentino, either. I love that the Spanish chandelier in the dining room is kind of wonky. It's not trying to be fancy.

**At first glance, the palette is as understated as the detailing. But then you realize it's got everything in it. There's earth, there's sky, there's greenery—though not in a hokey, programmatic way.**

It's a very rich and saturated palette. It's just not a vibrant one.

**How did you cook up that fantastic green in the kitchen?**

The views. The house is surrounded by greens of a different shade. Some of them are muddled and some of them are clearer. The kitchen, to me, strikes a perfect balance between a muddy green and a clear green. And the light that pours in just brings it alive in a stunning way.

**Where did this dark, introverted screening room come from?**

I know—it's so Hollywood to have a screening room. We kept asking the client, 'Would you like this to also serve as a den or office?' He said, 'No, the only thing I want to do here is immerse myself in a baseball game or a movie. I want all the seats facing the screen.' So that room is dark. It's a padded cell. It's also for his daughters, who I think have *Twilight* on a loop in there when they hunker down with friends. The family room and master bedrooms both originally had fireplaces with TVs over them—a contrivance I loathe. Either have a fire or have a television! Anyway, the TV is always set at the wrong height, so you're craning your neck.

**The 'Bachelor Father' masculinity of the screening room and master bedroom makes sense. But have you made his daughters feel at home?**

They are charming, lovely teenage girls. We wanted their bedrooms and the sitting room they share to be feminine and a bit playful without looking either childish or too sophisticated. They're not 15 going on 25, as so many young girls are these days. I think we hit a note somewhere in the middle. And though there's no question that the master bedroom is a man's room, anyone should feel comfortable with its beautifully textured understatement.

**Has your client expressed any regrets?**

He has said, 'And you thought I made a mistake buying this house!' I told him, 'A mistake would have been buying it and then saying, Hey, can we just paint and add curtains?'

PRODUCED BY ROBERT RUFINO







In true cinematic style, all of the screening room's seating faces the show. First-row chairs in Ralph Lauren's Nigel velvet are cozied up with Indian throws and Fortuny-silk pillows. A Viennese Secessionist table holds the popcorn bowl within reach of a sofa covered in a Rogers & Goffigon mohair velvet. The muted stripes of wool carpeting from Decorative Carpets echo those of the Jasper strié linen on the walls and Roman shade.





1. In the dining room, the soft hues of an Oushak carpet and Farrow & Ball Light Blue on the ceiling. 2. The total exterior redo included everything from front gate to balcony and roof. 3. Shades in Jim Thompson's Vesta in Bright Berry and a Missoni Home rug add fun to the daughters' sitting room. 4. Stuart inserted this steel-and-glass door to frame a spectacular vista. 5. "Sybaritic and a bit sexy," the master bath partners a curvy leather stool with a Danish Baroque chest and Kohler's Tea for Two tub. 6. The new pergola. 7. Subtle greenish-gray and sage accents link the family room to the adjacent kitchen. OPPOSITE: A teenage girl's room uses her favorite palette—purple, brown, and cream—on a Madeline Stuart metal-frame bed. Syrian chests inlaid with mother-of-pearl shimmer against a wall in Pratt & Lambert Lamswool. Throw from Anthropologie.



YOU'VE SEEN THE "after"—  
TO SEE THE "before" PICTURES  
OF THIS HOUSE, GO TO  
[HOUSEBEAUTIFUL.COM](http://HOUSEBEAUTIFUL.COM)



“Most people don’t want to wake up in a bedroom that’s so *decorated*, they’re self-conscious: ‘Oh my God, where’s my dressing gown and ascot?’”

MADELINE STUART



Quietly suave, the grass cloth-lined master bedroom has a bed frame in a Raoul Textiles tweed with nail-head trim. At its foot: an Hermès mohair throw and a bespoke leather chest, discreetly wired, “should, someday, he want a TV to pop out of it.” On either side sit Stuart tables, for avid readers. The bolster pillow is in Fortuny’s Maori. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES