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Creatively melding contemporary design, Asian influences and a casual coastal vibe, Manhattan Beach's Thue family and their inspired design team fashioned their ideal modern beach home.

SEAMLESS FUSION



WRITTEN BY: LYNN MORGAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: BO BRIDGES AND ERIC STAUDENMAIER

The clients wanted something exotic. But not too exotic. "They showed us some pictures of Balinese huts with thatched roofs that they liked," recalls architect Chris Kempel, AIA, of Rockefeller Partners in El Segundo. "We knew they didn't want that *literally*, so we talked about the different aspects of the photos that they liked and what was it about them that they found so appealing, and then we settled on things like the big windows and the use of woven bamboo."

Alana Homesley of Alana Homesley Interior Design concurs. "I wanted to give the house an Asian/exotic theme, but nothing overwhelming or obvious. I didn't want to turn it into Trader Vic's."

The Manhattan Beach house, begun in 2006 and completed two years later, was the second project client Jeff Thue had commissioned from Rockefeller Partners. Alana had worked for the firm as a student, so there was a high level of trust, understanding and familiarity among all the principals. They could communicate through a form of creative shorthand that made the project flow smoothly from the initial demolition through the designer's final touches. "He trusted us as professionals, as architects, and as artists to act in his best interests," says Chris.

It was a challenging project: brand-new construction on a narrow, beach-adjacent walk street. The lot was small, but offered the potential for breathtaking ocean and sunset views. It fell to architect Chris to create a sophisticated 3800-square-foot home for a young family on a 30x90 lot. His design was executed by contractor Jeff Wilson of Wilson Construction in Manhattan Beach.

"It's definitely an exercise in efficiency and space planning," says Chris. "We like to think of it as being organized like a ship: a place for everything and everything in its place."

The clients wanted a Modernist design: clean and simple, minimal materials, and they also wanted the classic, California beach aesthetic, with abundant decks and expanses of glass.

Chris organized the house around a tiny Zen garden in a center courtyard, created by landscape architect John Feldman of Eco-centrix in Venice.

"It's a challenge trying to capture the magnificent ocean views while at the same time remaining sensitive to your neighbor's views as well. We were very careful about the placement of windows," Chris explains.









To that end, his design is three stories: the ground level is all concrete, formed on-site and given a smooth, polished finish. It creates a sense of permanence and privacy on a street that is used for public access to the beach. The middle and top levels are skinned in plaster, a lighter and less impervious material. The color is neutral and low-maintenance. Because of the destructive conditions of living so close to the ocean — wind, salt and fog are all damaging to many building materials — Chris wanted to utilize materials that were beautiful and sturdy, capable of withstanding years of exposure to the elements, while at the same time, taking advantage of them.” The ocean is the greatest air conditioning unit ever invented,” says the architect. “We installed insulated glass windows: they not only keep the heat out in the summer and the chill out in the winter, but they also muffle sound so neighbors don’t have to listen to each others’ iPods.”

The exterior wood is stained cedar, except for the mahogany door and window frames. “Wood takes a beating at the beach,” says Chris. “But the owners wanted the house to be as warm as possible, both visually and psychologically. It’s very welcoming.”

The wood is balanced by a metal roof, metal joists at the over-hanging eaves and metal fascia on the undersides of the roof. “Because the houses are so close together, the city of Manhattan Beach wants no combustible materials used within three feet of the property line.”

Wood also plays a vital role in Alana’s interior design. “I used a lot of exotic finishes,” she explains. “The kitchen is zebrawood, with Russo Laguna red marble counter tops. There is a lot of teak and walnut, too. I wanted everything to be richly textured, both visually and to the touch.”

She introduced her subtly exotic flavor by placing a 500-pound carved stone elephant



from Charles Jacobsen in the entryway. "They're based in Los Angeles, and they specialize in Chinese, Japanese and Indian antiques," Alana explains. She made several purchases there for this project.

The main staircase is the most important element of Chris' design. The cantilevered steps seem to float independently, and the adjoining wood screen "has its own rhythm and detail," he says. It is a unifying element, extending from the basement to the top floor. "It's almost a piece of furniture," says the architect. "It had to be crafted perfectly: the choice of material, the joinery. It is the heart, the backbone of the organization of the house." At the third level, Chris added a glass rail to make sure the stairs and screen were not obscured and to bring attention back to them.

For the living room, Alana selected a freestanding sofa from Holly Hunt called the Opium Sofa. She custom-designed the long, teak sofa with built-in side tables herself and had it fabricated by Sergio Raynal Fine Custom Woodworking in Sherman Oaks. They also built the buffet Alana designed for the Thue's dining room and the beach room day bed and side tables

The Chinese cabinet that serves as a bar is another antique piece from Charles Jacobsen. A coffee table of solid teak and a pair of braided leather ottomans rest on a natural rug woven of cotton and straw to add texture to the overall design.

"The screen that covers the TV in the living room is actually made of antique Chinese window panels," Alana explains. "I worked with the contractor to back them with antique mirrors, and he built a folding frame for them. It reflects the ocean, and because it's an antique mirror, it's very soft focus and subtle."

The dining room table is by Hudson Furniture in New York. Its planked top is made of different species of walnut, varying in color and grain, and the butterfly joints lend it a Japanese flavor. Alana selected the chairs from Jiun Ho in San Francisco, attracted by their "clean lines and simple elegance." She customized them with leather seats in a soft olive green.

The floor of the beach room is concrete, with a contemporary rug from Mansour Modern on Melrose Avenue. Alana custom-designed the day bed, slip covered in cotton for easy cleaning. "We didn't want anything too precious," she explains. "This is a family home. This is a family room for playing, lounging, watching movies. I put in a lot of cabinets for toy storage! It doubles as a guest room; the day bed is big enough to sleep on."

The ironwood deck on the third level is a more adult play space. Featuring an outdoor fireplace, it is an idyllic spot to sip a cocktail and watch the whitecaps below.





CHRIS KEMPEL



ALANA HOMESLEY

Because of its beachside location, light becomes an inherent part of the home's design, with the natural light enhanced by the artful manipulation of Dave McCarroll of KGM Lighting Design in Los Angeles. "Lighting is very important," says Chris. "In its most simplistic sense, it can really affect your mood and your feelings. At night, this house becomes its own lantern, thanks to Dave's careful deployment of a few lights."

And after dark, the owners can retreat to the master bedroom, a simple yet seductive space. "I wanted it to be completely restful," says Alana. "It is small, so it has only what's essential: it's very personal and private."

She custom-designed the teak niche behind the platform bed which she dressed extravagantly in high-thread-count Frette linens, a plush comforter and mounds of pillows. "I wanted it to be very inviting," she says. "It's a great place to wake up, look out at the ocean and begin your day."

The architect and designer were in perfect accord in their goals for the project. "I've always worked for, and with, architects," Alana says. "I have a deep appreciation for architecture, so I am careful to balance the needs of the client with the intention of the design. Ultimately, you want people to respond to it as a whole: 'what a beautiful space.'"

Chris agrees. "I find it shocking and disheartening when a house has a certain character, and when I walk in the door, I see a disconnect between the interior design and the architecture. We worked very closely with Alana to come up with an interior design palette and style that's complementary to the architectural design."

Their collaboration produced a seamless fusion of interior and exterior design, and a home that combines many elements: the casual California beachside ambiance, the sophistication of a widely-traveled client, a family home that is also a sexy, grown-up entertainment space. By designing with the client's lifestyle and needs firmly in mind, they avoided the common pitfall of Modernist design: coldness. "There must be evidence of humanity in your design," Chris insists. "You want the space to be sensitive to the human scale. It's not about creating an art gallery or an exhibition space; it's all about the comfort of the people living in it."

The house is perfectly at one with its location, as the architects intended.

"We like designing homes that fit in at the beach." ■

COLLABORATORS:

Chris Kempel, AIA
Rockefeller Partners
310-335-6000
rockefeller-pa.com

Alana Homesley
AH Interior Design
818-216-1561

Wilson Construction
310-214-7277

KGM Architectural Lighting
310-552-2191
kgmlighting.com

