



IN GOOD



SPIRITS

With the help of architect Scott Laidlaw of Laidlaw Schultz Architects, a family carves a sanctuary out of a former church.

By Abigail Stone

Photographed by Chad Mellon



Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. That certainly proved to be true in the case of this Laguna Beach home, carved out of a former midcentury church. “As our family grew we craved outdoor space where our kids could run free,” says the homeowner. “It was really the land that called to us.” Framed by the hills, the sprawling property consisted of several acres surrounded by a nature preserve with breathtaking, unobstructed views of the ocean. In fact, the family’s original plan was to raze the church in favor of building their dream home. “While we appreciated it,” the homeowner remembers, “it took some time to get our heads around the idea of making a home out of it.” In fact, she adds, “It was my mother who urged us to work with it. She thought it was wonderful.” But carving a home out of a space designed to hold hundreds is easier said than done. While churches may have the reputation of being sanctuaries, the reality of their cavernous rooms, their dearth of windows and their lack of





Four outdoor showers, including this one outside the master bedroom, facilitate rinsing off after the beach. Opposite page, from top: Ripping up the building's cracked linoleum floors uncovered its cement subflooring, now polished; in the courtyard, a concrete seating area with a fireplace is a cozy spot to gather on chilly evenings.





From left: The kids wing, carved out of the church's former altar, includes this central den, an art room and a guest bedroom suite. The long TV cabinet is a custom piece constructed from Douglas fir. A vintage credenza sits behind a couch by Timothy Oulton. The white Souk rug is from West Elm; the kitchen is separated from the dining area by a long island with a honed granite countertop. The stools were found at HD Buttercup. The backsplash's black brick was discovered at a building supply store.



bedrooms more often than not renders these building cold, dark and distinctly chilly. The prospect of turning it into a warm and welcoming home felt daunting.

Enter Scott Laidlaw of Laidlaw Schultz Architects. Of the 10 architects that the family interviewed, only Laidlaw had a concrete vision for forging a livable space out of the house of worship. It may have helped that his Corona del Mar-based firm is familiar with their vernacular; having built four churches, they understand their unique quirks. "While churches are often located in residential areas, they are allowed concessions as to height and volume and things," Laidlaw explains. "Though it was converted back to residential use, it's still nonconforming in many aspects. So you end up with something that by definition stands out because it doesn't follow the rules of all the buildings around it."

"Scott knew exactly what he wanted to do with it," says the homeowner.

"Everybody else wanted to put the kitchen in the sanctuary," she says, referring to the altar that is the focus of a working church. Instead, upon seeing the space, Laidlaw suggested locating the kids' bedrooms and hangout areas there. His flash of inspiration proved to be the key that unlocked the building's transformation. (It also gifted the siblings with autonomy as they have matured into teenagers for which both parents and children are thankful.)

Instead, Laidlaw situated the kitchen in the section that the family still refers to as the coffee and doughnut room, where it would act as an anchor to one end of the home's central living space. "It had the right scale, the right orientation to the views, as well as access to the courtyard," says Laidlaw. That it had also once housed the church's kitchen was also a point in its favor. "We didn't really play with the mechanical system, the sprinklers and



From top: The master bedroom's headboard was repurposed from a live-edge dining room tabletop divested of its legs, discovered at HD Buttercup. It's hung on a wall painted a custom green blend by Benjamin Moore. The bench is from Four Hands; gray bricks, found at a building supply shop, compose the fireplace wall. A vintage chair and side table sit atop the bedroom's large rug, discovered at Brass Tack in Laguna Beach.

such, at all," Laidlaw recalls. Instead, the renovations focused on carving intimacy out of the large space while also bringing in light. "The main living area was not a see-through space," he explains, "So we definitely wanted to take advantage of that and open up the walls." Now, sliding doors and large windows visually merge the indoors with the exterior. "You can be in the home and still feel like you're outdoors or you can sit outside in the courtyard in the evening and see through to the view while still having protection from the wind and the cold," he says. For the benefit of those who may not be familiar with one of the drawbacks of coastal living he illuminates: "It gets bloody cold at night."

To that end, layering in warmth—in the sense of both welcome and temperature—was essential to the project's success. In the great room, which, in addition to the kitchen, also hosts the formal living room and the dining room, this was accomplished by installing a large fireplace—"Churches don't come with fireplaces," Laidlaw notes—which also provides a focal point for the living room. Around the new hearth cluster a pair of four cushion moss-green chenille couches designed by the homeowner. They're joined by a credenza from West Elm and a pair of armchairs from Cisco Home.

The seating that congregates around the dining table is also the homeowner's handiwork. "I found a couple of the frames on eBay and then I had the rest welded down in Mexico," she says. The live-edge table is an HD Buttercup find. Like the couches and the kitchen's long island, its oversize proportions are in keeping with the room's dimensions, serving to help bring the immense





In the primary suite, Pirch's Victoria + Albert free-standing soaker tub, which sports a faucet designed by the owner and constructed from plumbing parts, overlooks a private yard enclosed by a fence fabricated from Corten steel. The rug was found at The Garage Collective in Laguna Beach.

DESIGN DETAILS

TYPE

Single-family home

LOCATION

Laguna Beach

INTERIOR DESIGN

Design by homeowner

ARCHITECT

Scott Laidlaw,
Laidlaw Schultz Architects
lsarchitects.com

RESOURCES

BENJAMIN MOORE

Custom-blended paint throughout
benjaminmoore.com

CB2

Hallway Buddha sculpture
cb2.com

THE GARAGE COLLECTIVE

Primary bathroom rug
shopgaragecollectivelaguna.com

VICTORIA + ALBERT

Primary bathroom tub
vandabaths.com

WEST ELM

Living room credenza,
kids wing rug
westelm.com

WOLF

Kitchen range
subzero-wolf.com

room down to scale. Colors and materials pulled from nature connect the interior to the outdoors.

Ingenuity and imagination also kept the budget in check, an important consideration in a project that encompasses a building of this size. That meant using simple materials culled from building supply shops in imaginative applications that elevate their humble provenance. "We used very pedestrian and earthy materials," says the homeowner. "Because the scale of the house is so large that it can feel overwhelming, we wanted to ensure it felt casual and approachable." Black bricks serve as the kitchen's backsplash while gray ones were used for the fireplace surround in the master bedroom. "We couldn't go to the fancy tile store, so instead we used bricks and we love them," the homeowner says. Cabinetry was constructed from inexpensive rift white oak with a clear stain. In the kitchen they're crowned by granite countertops, honed to reveal swirling ribbons of rust. "We took a leap of faith," the homeowner recalls. "We just picked something at the slab yard and we got lucky that it worked." Ripping up the structure's linoleum floor revealed unfinished concrete; polishing turned its stains and imperfections into assets. "The whole

concept of the project was repurposing what was already there," the homeowner says. "Some of these natural materials can have their challenges, but the patina adds character and tells a story over time that we love."

The creativity that threads through the house extends to the master bedroom suite that, in contrast to the expected practice, doesn't overlook the home's ocean views. Instead, Laidlaw placed it in the rear of the home. "There really wasn't a place to put it that would be on the view," he says. "In any case, they're early risers who love the morning light." The room's placement washes it with privacy, unique in a home that is otherwise very open and communal. Taking full advantage of this, a deep tub is set into a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooks a secluded garden. Another live-edge table, also from HD Buttercup and divested of its legs, was reimagined to serve as a headboard while a deep-green wall behind the bed helps ground the large room. "It's not always practical," says the homeowner, citing the difficulties—like cleaning—engendered by spire-high ceilings and congregation-size rooms, "but we love it. I pinch myself every day," she says. "We feel so very grateful to live here." ■