

DESIGN



GREY CRAWFORD

COMBINING STYLES: The raised dining area allows the floor plan to remain open but the rooms to feel distinct. Owner Darryl Wilson based the new living room floor on the original fireplace, and he mixed Brazilian furniture with Scandinavian classics. One exception: the Paul McCobb dining table surrounded by chairs in pink silk.

HOME OF THE TIMES

Thinking around the box

A 1948 home by Greta Magnusson Grossman gets an update that stays within the designer's comfort zone.

DAVID A. KEEPS

The 1948 home that Greta Magnusson Grossman built in Beverly Hills has a low facade punctuated by unadorned windows. In David Gebhard and Robert Winter's "A Guide to Architecture in Los Angeles and Southern California," it is described as "a simple Modern brown box sheathed in vertical board-and-batten."

Once inside, however, visitors feel as if they're floating over the steeply sloped lot. Sunlight spills into the living room through glass walls, as though the back of the home had been cut away for viewing, like a dollhouse. Quietly dramatic, the house exemplifies the best attributes of the woman who created it — an under-appreciated architect and furniture designer whose work from World War II to the mid-1960s still fascinates today.

A Swedish émigré, Grossman designed residences that bridged the International Style of L.A. transplants Rudolph M. Schindler and Richard Neutra and the open-plan housing of such Case Study architects as Pierre Koenig and Craig Ellwood, says Gerard O'Brien, owner of the L.A. vintage furniture gallery Reform.

"She embraced the indoor-outdoor lifestyle of Los Angeles and brought a Scandinavian sophistication of line, proportion and materials into California modernism," he says.

After settling in L.A. in 1941, Grossman became a star at Barker Bros. department store, designing furniture as well as decorating interiors for customers. Though her furnishings often sat alongside work by the likes of Charles and Ray Eames in modern homes, Grossman never achieved the kind of fame her contemporaries did.

At a time when female architects and furniture designers were a rarity, O'Brien says, "Grossman wore all those hats, and her home, which probably cost around \$10,000 back then, was built as a showplace, to demonstrate what she was capable of."

Little exceeded her reach. She often chose to build on steep lots that required houses on stilts or cantilevered off a cliff, says Evan Snyderman, owner of R 20th Century gallery in New York and curator of a Grossman retrospective planned for Stockholm's Arkitekturmuseet in 2010.

"Her houses had the aesthetic of postwar glass-and-steel buildings but had the warmth of being handmade with wood," Snyderman says. "She was all about creating comfort within a modernist sensibility."

For two decades, Grossman pursued what Snyderman calls "warm Scandinavian minimalism," partnering with more than a dozen Southern California furniture manufacturers.

"She is renowned for her versatility, designing on all scales, from lighting to furniture," says Barbara Pflaumer, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, whose permanent collection includes a 1952 Grossman desk and a late 1940s floor lamp.

By the mid-1960s, however, Grossman had retired to San Diego and become a painter. Her furniture, never produced in large numbers, found favor during the recent midcentury modern revival. Rare pieces easily



ANNE CUSACK Los Angeles Times

EXPANDED: A two-story, glass-walled addition, above, is part of the reconfiguration of the home, which floats over a steep slope. A water feature installed in the overhang above the lap pool imitates falling rain. Grossman's "ironing board" table, right, sits beside a new staircase leading to an office and media room.

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See more of the house

Tour the kitchen, bedroom, guest quarters and more in the expanded photo gallery posted with this article.



ANNE CUSACK Los Angeles Times

fetches five figures at auction.

"I knew of her furniture and lighting because I am an avid collector of 20th century design," says Darryl Wilson, the designer who purchased Grossman's home for \$1.6 million nearly three years ago. "I was not familiar with her architecture."

Wilson spent just as much bringing the home back to life. A detached carport seemed outdated, porches were antiquated, deck railings blocked views from the house, and water and termites had done their damage.

"We had to take it down to the studs," says Wilson, who was advised to demolish the house even though it's one of the few documented Grossman residences still standing.

Instead, Wilson and architect Tony Unruh reconciled the house's past with its future, nearly doubling the original 1,500 square feet and modernizing it in a way that Grossman herself might have done.

Upstairs on the home's main level, a porch was unified with the living room, a deck off the dining area was enclosed, and the whole area was lined with steel-framed picture windows

based on Grossman's design. Beyond the expanded dining area, the master bedroom was rebuilt, its new sloped ceiling echoing the home's roofline. Outside the master bedroom, Unruh added a deck topped by a sunshade made of slatted steel and outdoor medium-density fiberboard, or MDF.

Beneath the bedroom, what had been a shaded deck was enclosed and turned into a suite that includes a home office and media room.

"I have worked on several modernist houses," Unruh says, "and my approach is, 'How can I update their work and keep it in the spirit of the original design?' In this case, Darryl took an approach that was reminiscent of the era but more in keeping with current trends."

With blueprints and vintage photographs as inspiration, Wilson tried to replicate the warmth of Grossman's original. He replaced the slate floors with stone that coordinates with the original fireplace, and he upgraded floors and paneled walls from redwood to African mahogany. He had cabinet pulls made to replace Grossman's wooden-ball knobs in the galley

kitchen, which was enlarged and equipped with Gaggenau appliances.

"I have to believe that if Greta were alive, she'd want a dishwasher and microwave," Wilson says.

His appreciation for design drama and expensive materials, such as hammered limestone and cast bronze, adds a dose of luxury to the modest house that Grossman built. Even the humble wooden facade is now clad in maintenance-free copper sheets.

When it came to furnishings, however, Wilson was stumped.

"It wasn't a traditional post-and-beam with terrazzo floors and flat ceiling," he says. "It was rustic and modern with an interesting marriage of clean lines and organic materials."

Paying homage to Grossman, Wilson bought four of the designer's key pieces. The first is a wood coffee table nicknamed the "ironing board" for its curved architectural supports. A walnut dining table with a black Formica inset is used as a desk in the living room, complemented with a Grossman side chair and "cobra" lamp.

As a counterpoint to these pieces, vintage furniture by Brazilian mod-

ernists Sergio Rodrigues, Jorge Zalszupin and Oscar Niemeyer also fill the home. Jeremy Petty, owner of the No-Ho Modern furniture gallery, suggested that a combination of Scandinavian and Brazilian furnishings would be true to the modernist house.

"Midcentury fans kind of get it wrong when things are too clean and matchy-matchy," Petty says. "I don't think that's how Charles and Ray Eames and Greta Grossman decorated their homes."

Wilson may have splurged on vintage pieces, but the white Richard Schultz chaises and side tables beside the pool sit underneath apple-green market umbrellas from Pottery Barn.

"If it's the right shape, material and color," Wilson says, "good design isn't about labels or price."

That sentiment certainly applies to two outdoor tables that appear to be Eero Saarinen's trumpet-base dinette-set classics. Instead, rather fittingly for a home built by a Stockholm transplant, they come from a Swedish source we've all heard of: IKEA.

Resources

Darryl Wilson relied on a range of expertise and materials to complete his update of the 1948 home.

Architect: Unruh Boyer Architecture and Design, 2311 Hyperion Ave., Los Angeles; (323) 662-3111; www.unruhboyer.com.

Stone floor: West Los Angeles Building Materials, 2431 Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles; (310) 478-7276; www.wlabm.com.

Paneling: Mark Cowan Construction; (818) 352-3786.

Windows: Marin Glass, 6023 Washington Blvd., Culver City; (310) 837-2236.

Custom cabinetry: Charles Gemeiner Cabinets, 3201 Exposition Place Unit B, Los Angeles; (323) 299-8696.

Pool water feature: Fountain Supply, 26455 Summit Circle, Santa Clarita; (800) 786-6604, www.fountainssupply.com.

Exterior copper cladding: Secure Roof, 5341 Derry Ave. Suite F, Agoura Hills; (818) 889-5195.

Hardware: Sun Valley bronze door hardware purchased from Carter Hardware, 153 N. Robertson Blvd., Beverly Hills; (310) 657-1940.

Grossman history: "The Furniture and Lighting of Greta Magnusson Grossman," \$40, from www.r20thcentury.com/bookstore. "Drawing Papers 81," \$12, from www.drawingcenter.org/pub_books.cfm.

— DAVID A. KEEPS

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