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By NORA ROBERTS



MODERN GETS A LIFE

SHARON OVERTON PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL GARLAND PRODUCED BY LAURA HULL

A CALIFORNIA
COUPLE WARMS
UP THEIR COOL
CONTEMPORARY
HOUSE WITH
A SOULFUL
INJECTION OF
COLOR AND
PATTERN.

In this 1949 Los Angeles home, modern architecture mixes with a colorful aesthetic to create bright, whimsical spaces even a 4-year-old could love. The Lego-like pattern of a Tibetan rug is a great place for Reiss Becker to drive his train. A spiraling Italian lamp looks like a child's squiggle.



For many people, modern design is like the college sweetheart who was brilliant in math but never remembered your birthday: Intellectually, it's a turn-on. But emotionally, it's lacking.

With a little encouragement, however, modern design can be as playful, quirky, and soulful as you are. In other words, it can be *fun*.

That's the spirit Ann Blanchard and Sandy Becker brought to their California Moderne home. The couple had been living in an old bungalow that was all about rich color, romantic atmosphere, and ethnic accents. "It was like a Paris apartment owned by people who traveled to North Africa," Ann recalls. Unfortunately, the house was too small for a growing family, and they were ready for a style update.

Ann's first impression of the new house—a geometry equation of straight lines and sharp angles—wasn't favorable. "Honestly, from the outside, it looked like a hospital," she says. But once inside, the couple found themselves drawn to the clean open spaces and dazzling light.

The home's best assets—soaring windows and a stunning view—also present a design dilemma: Do you stay neutral so as not to compete or go bold with furnishings? Ann Blanchard and Sandy Becker chose the latter. A long, low sofa of brown mohair anchors the window wall while an amoeba-shape coffee table and curving chaise longue help offset the sofa's rigid geometry.



Both Ann and Sandy, a television agent and building contractor respectively, grew up in homes that were warm and nurturing—Sandy's modern and Ann's antique-filled. They wanted to provide a similar environment for their kids, Reiss, 4, and Ryland, 8 months. What's more, says Ann, "I wanted to have the sense that the house sort of inspires imagination."

The challenge: Could they honor the calm, expansive feeling of the architecture and still feel free to express their family's colorful, fun-loving personality?

That's where Los Angeles decorator Sasha Emerson came in. Former partner in a popular furniture store called Orange, Emerson has made it her mission to convince people that modern design doesn't have to be cold and uncomfortable. "I view



Sharp lines and strong color make a Chinese wedding chest—a holdover from their previous decorating style—feel at home in this modern setting (left). Red repeats throughout the room—in the David Lloyd painting over the sofa and on an Italian blown-glass lamp (below). Sandy, Reiss, and Ann don retro-patterned shirts (above). Baby Ryland had not yet arrived when this picture was taken.



design as a weird crusade," she says. "I feel that your home is your safe haven. It should reflect who you are and amuse you. It should be comfortable and be a place where you want to raise your children."

Emerson took her design cues from a few colorful, clean-lined pieces Ann and Sandy already owned, plus their growing collection of abstract artwork. In the living room, a painting by Los Angeles artist David Lloyd inspired a palette of greenish gold, orange, blue, and red that appears again in the pixelated pattern of

a Tibetan rug. An Anne Thornycroft painting in the dining room repeats the rug's mosaic motif and suggested the bright orange upholstery on the chairs.

Many people assume that color and pattern must take a back seat in a modern setting. Emerson disagrees. "Just because you're doing something modern doesn't mean you're creating a temple," she says. "If you look back at all the old decorating books from the 1950s and '60s, some of these houses were stark and empty, but a number were fun and bold and comfortable, with

EVEN THE KITCHEN HAS A WHIMSICAL QUALITY. WE THOUGHT, WHY GET RID OF IT?

SANDY BECKER



Ann and Sandy purchased the house from the original owners. Other than adding hardwood floors and improving flow in some rooms, they made few structural changes. The kitchen remains virtually intact, including the original ovens, wall clock, and wire chairs (left). The dining set (below) also belonged to the previous owners. Decorator Sasha Emerson stained it deep brown and upholstered the chairs in a bright orange sweater fabric. She found the bamboo chandelier at a vintage shop.



upholstered pillows strewn on the floor in front of the fireplace. They were meant to be lived in and enjoyed."

That suits the family fine. In the living room, a pair of chocolate brown mohair sofas are impervious to a 4-year-old's sneaker scuffs. Built-in storage is designed into almost every room. "This house is not like a loft that's so cutting edge you have to be an artist to live here," Sandy says. "It's definitely a family home."

To give the home an eclectic, personal feel, Emerson intentionally drew from a range of periods—from a 200-year-old Chinese wedding chest to a 1940s German lawn chair. Unexpected textiles inject color, texture, and pattern into the rooms, and unify disparate elements.

For instance, Emerson found a fuzzy

orange sweater fabric for \$5 a yard and used it to make pillows and upholster the dining chairs. She even fashioned a throw from the leftover yardage. Ann was skeptical when Emerson showed her two antique patchwork pieces she wanted to turn into sofa pillows. "Oh my gosh, they look like Grandma Moses," she laughed. But the pillows are a perfect complement to the living room's richly patterned rug.

Mixing periods and styles is another way to keep a modern scheme from looking like a museum, says Emerson. After all, design doesn't exist in a time warp. "When people say 'modern,' they're often focusing on just contemporary or mid-century. Modernism actually spans from the 1920s to the present."

The family has fallen for their



Emerson specializes in a sort of no-name modern chic. Pedigrees are unimportant as long as the look of the piece is right. In the master bedroom, a blonde wood tripod lamp is a copy of a 1930s Heywood-Wakefield piece (*opposite*). The collection of vases is vintage Italian glass, which was made with contrasting colors on the inside and outside. Starburst mirrors like the one over the bed (*above*) and living room fireplace are a fairly common find from the '60s. In the newly remodeled master bathroom (*above left*), green glassware and ceramics echo the watery colors of a mosaic tile backsplash. Underfoot is a traditional Chinese prayer rug.

THIS HOUSE HAS PERSONALITY. ... WE TREAT IT LIKE A CHARACTER IN OUR FAMILY.

ANN BLANCHARD



The quirky armchair that provides the focal point for Reiss' room—and a frequent spot for bedtime stories—was an only-in-L.A. flea market find. The rocking chair and changing table were both painted white and then distressed to look old, proving the point that contrast keeps things interesting.

modern home—mind and soul. “We have a lot of personality as a couple and as a family,” Ann says. “That comes through in the house in a good way. When we entertain, people feel embraced by the space. That’s a big part of what we wanted.”

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MAKE MODERN FUN

- Display family heirlooms, even if they don’t “fit” with modern furnishings. Put old photos in metal frames or change the hardware on an antique buffet to update the profile.
- Use table lamps and other ambient light sources to create intimacy. Too much overhead and directional lighting can make your home look like a department store.
- Paint at least one wall something other than white, perhaps wheat or pale celery. “Color on walls, however subtle, infuses a room with energy,” says decorator Sasha Emerson.