



# At Play on the Baja Coast

An Organic Weekend Retreat in Cabo San Lucas Gets a Breath of Fresh Air

Interior Design by SPI/Text by Susan Sheehan  
After Photography by Michael Calderwood



LEFT: Friends since college and partners in the Santa Monica, California, design firm SPI, Alison Palevsky, left, and Sarah Shetter recently renovated the Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, weekend house (above) Palevsky shares with her husband, Alexander.



AFTER



BEFORE

ABOVE AND TOP: The designers had floor-to-ceiling windows installed "to create a seamless transition between the living and pool areas," says Shetter. Existing concrete banquettes were extended to increase the seating area. Donghia print pillow fabric.

Blessed are the interior designers, for they shall look at houses that seem daunting to the rest of us and transform these fixer-uppers into beautiful homes.

In 2004 Sarah Shetter and Alison Palevsky, who met in 1994 as first-year students at the University of Southern California, set up shop as SPI—pronounced "spy"—in Santa Monica. That year Alison Palevsky heard that a four-bedroom, white-stucco labyrinth-style house in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, was for sale. She and her husband, Alexander, an automotive journalist known as Sasha, bought it as a weekend and holiday house. Then

she and Shetter began waving their magic wand of Before and After.

The house, named Casa Tortuga by a previous owner, sits on ocean rock. It has a 180-degree view of Cabo's famed stone arches that mark the confluence of the Sea of Cortez and the Pacific Ocean. "The site alone was worth the purchase price," according to Palevsky.

In the pair's opinion, one of the house's principal drawbacks was the intrusion of rocks into the house, apparently part of the original concept. "There were boulders in the living area next to a built-in concrete sofa, rocks in the master bedroom behind the built-in concrete headboard, a pile of rocks in



The pair sited the new dining area to take advantage of the ocean views, while still retaining enough space to seat 10 comfortably for dinner. Palevsky describes the chairs that she and Shetter designed as “a cross between formal dining chairs and lounge chairs.”

the master bathroom and still more rocks next to the hot tub and in the swimming pool,” Shetter says. “It was perhaps a nice concept, but it wasn’t well executed.” They set about getting rid of the unwanted rocks. “We lived with the roar of sandblasters for several months,” Palevsky remembers.

As a result of the elimination of rocks outdoors, the original hot tub was expanded, updated and reshaped—it is now a rectangle, surfaced in ocean-blue mosaic tile with an infinity edge, that accommodates 15; the pool was enlarged and enhanced in similar fashion. Where the intrusive rocks couldn’t be sandblasted—in the master bedroom, for example—they were plastered over.

The white plaster wall behind the headboard in the master bedroom became a more contemporary-looking surface, and one that was ideal for showcasing art. “We’d rather see our clients spend money on art than window treatments, if they have to choose,” Shetter says. The Palevskys selected five black-and-white photographs of insects by the Brazilian photographer Fernando Laszlo for their bedroom because they’re stunning and

**RIGHT:** More room for entertaining was gained when the upper terrace was leveled. A traditional palapa shelters a dining area from the intense Mexican sun.





AFTER



BEFORE

ABOVE: Previously a living room, the third floor was reconfigured to comprise a guest suite, a media room, a guest room and a bath. TOP: Pocket doors separate the guest suite, left, from the media room. RIGHT: A stair leads to the second-floor master suite.





BEFORE

also, as Alison Palevsky says, "because Mexico is a place with so many strange bugs."

Casa Tortuga was originally a casual beach house, lacking in such amenities as closets. The designers reconfigured the master bedroom, adding a walk-in closet and expanding the master bath. The latter was gutted, its floor was resurfaced in limestone, a skylight was installed, and SPI designed a pair of round above-counter sinks and a two-person travertine tub, which was carved in France, for the room.

LEFT AND THIS IMAGE: For the first floor's guest room, a closet with custom-made mahogany doors replaced the original one. A shallow shelf was transformed into a built-in desk, above which hangs a 1959 photograph by Willy Ronis. Bolster fabric from Larsen.

AFTER



BEFORE



AFTER

FAR LEFT AND LEFT: "One of the most challenging spaces was the master bath," Shetter remarks. Exposed rock was sandblasted away, a limestone floor was laid, and the stair to the steam shower was relocated, as was the vanity. Waterworks soap dish.

"We've completed a dozen projects since SPI started in 2004," Palevsky says. "We've done offices and residences in New York and California. The biggest difference between Casa Tortuga and our other projects is that we were able to experiment a bit more than usual here. I think a lot of people might have passed on having a three-ton tub craned in through a skylight." Shetter remarks, "Sasha let us take risks when we felt they were worthwhile."

The original house had been built in two stages. The first two floors were completed in 1992; a third story was built about 10 years later. "The third floor wasn't a success," Shetter observes. They eliminated a large living room there and replaced it with a media room, a guest suite with a sleeper sofa, a guest room and a bath. "We wanted the house to accommodate at least 10 people," Palevsky says. "And while Cabo isn't a place to which people generally come to work, they can check their e-mail and play their iTunes."

The uneven upper terrace was leveled, resurfaced and par-

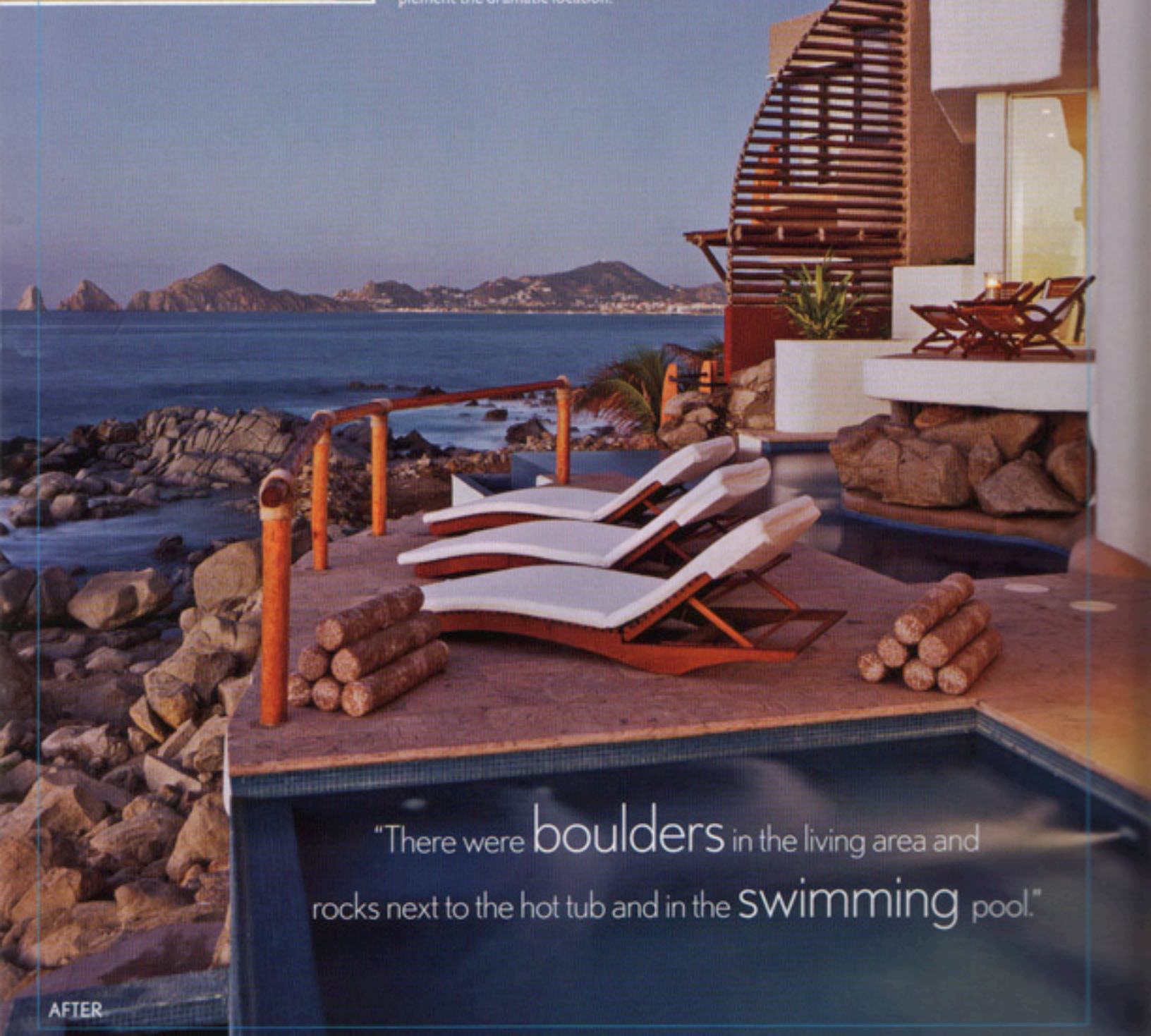
*continued on page 222*



ABOVE: "We designed a floating bed made of local wood, with billowing mosquito netting, to enhance the exotic ambience of the new third-floor guest room," says Palevsky. LEFT: Palevsky and Shetter, relaxing by the enlarged hot tub, gave it an infinity edge.



INSET AND THIS PAGE: Overlooking the confluence of the Sea of Cortez and the Pacific Ocean, the main terrace, with its panoramic views, is adjacent to the living and dining areas. Thierry Paquet planned the landscaping to complement the dramatic location.



"There were boulders in the living area and rocks next to the hot tub and in the swimming pool."

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

*continued from page 171*

"It's just a happy accident, really, that the father fell in love with the line and wanted to use it throughout the apartment," Huniford says. In fact, Sills and Huniford went into the business of furniture design after receiving many calls about their handsome, streamlined chairs, tables, sofas and lamps. "People wanted to buy just a piece or two from us, and we weren't set up to do that," says Huniford, "until one day we thought, Why not set ourselves up to do that?"

The designers accessorized the interior with a light touch: "Most of the decorative objects are Asian," Sills explains.

The designers were ever-conscious of the apartment's location as part of a hotel structure (and infrastructure).

"Chinese bronzes, Thai drums and the like—they lend character without being insistent." The daughter did not want to use precious things, "because it was going to be a very used apartment—everything was to be durable, simple, strong," adds Sills.

Always mindful of the different constellations of people who might be using the pied-à-terre, Sills and Huniford made one bedroom the master, using a single large bed, and designed the second one to accommodate two full-size beds. This way, a patchwork of people can visit, at either the same or separate times. The bedrooms, which are also furnished with Dwellings pieces, have televisions concealed in cabinets, sleek, practical bedside tables, and (in the master) a desk with the designers' stylish klismos chair. The palettes in these two rooms are tranquil and understated. In the adjoining baths, Sills and Huniford used crisp custom cabinetry, cool white marble and three kinds of lighting: overhead, sconce and undercabinet.

"The lighting is the apartment in a nutshell," says Huniford. "Different moods, different uses, different people—all can find a way to be comfortable, and at peace, in a single family's shared home away from home." □

## TURKISH REVIVAL

*continued from page 188*

grayish cast. "I kept it in a lighter spirit," says Ther. This lighthearted palette may be one reason that, while there are important pieces on display, the interior never seems ponderous. "It's a wooden house. It shouldn't be too heavy," Ther explains. To this end, she banished some of Koç's collections, like his Italian walnut furniture, while favoring others, in particular those from the Far East. The space known as the Chinese room—which is devoted, in large part, to a display of terra-cotta and ceramic figures and vessels—might have been dreary, given the many monochromatic, if exquisite, wares, so Ther amped up the room's color, layering in strong, primary hues via brightly patterned carpets and cushions of varying shades of red.

The library, on the same floor, is almost leached of color, a symphony of whites and grays. The room is anchored by a display shelf—complete with marbleized columns—at one time used in a French pharmacy and found in the Provençal town of Uzès. The apothecary jars that must have once crowded its shelves have given way to ancient, leather-bound volumes and Roman busts. A glass-encased model of an 18th-century buggy—purchased at the New York Armory Show—is quintessentially Koç. He has a great enthusiasm for conveyances of

The hall's restored double staircase, with its carved wood balustrade, is a showstopper.

all kinds; there are diminutive versions of ships and other means of transport in almost every room.

Not all of these models are as exquisite as, say, the antique schooner that hangs over Koç's bed in the master bedroom. "He clutters too much," Ther complains. "I go crazy!" There are other objects of contention, including a model of a yellow Australian taxi that Ther relegates to a closet each time she visits. It's never out of sight for long. "We don't agree fully," Koç says with a smile. "Barbara hates clutter. When she's here, I take some of it away. But after she goes, I put it back out again." □

## ON THE BAJA COAST

*continued from page 219*

tially covered with a *palapa*, and a fully equipped outdoor bar was put in, complete with a commercial-grade barbecue, sink, ice maker, mini-refrigerator and state-of-the-art sound system, as well as a fire pit. In the evening, guests like to dine at a 10-foot-long mesquite-wood table under the *palapa*. "It's the best place to enjoy the view and the stars," Palevsky says.

When the couple purchased Casa Tortuga, the dining area still had a glass-and-iron table. SPI designed an oak table with a white Corian insert that matches the kitchen countertops. Ten woven-leather-and-wood dining chairs encircle it. The kitchen was opened to the dining area and completely renovated. With the living area rocks exorcised, the built-in circular sofa was reshaped and extended. The original wood-framed windows in both the dining and living areas were replaced with

"The site alone was worth the purchase price," according to Palevsky.

white aluminum-framed floor-to-ceiling doors and windows that create a seamless connection between the indoors and the pool area. A new skylight gives the living area more natural light.

Throughout the house, hollow-core white-painted doors were replaced by mahogany doors stained espresso; clunky-looking ceiling fans made way for sleek rattan ones; and six-inch recessed can lights were superseded by four-inch versions. The pair designed sconces for the baths consisting of Lucite bases and glass hurricane covers, with an electrified candle at the center of each. In the baths, three- and four-foot-high wax pillar candles cast romantic shadows on the walls.

The Palevskys and Sarah Shetter were at Casa Tortuga over Christmas and New Year's with assorted family members and friends, including a woman from Italy, who prepared and served a five-course pasta dinner. "The holidays were my first time here when I wasn't working, and it was great," Shetter says. "I got to appreciate the house as a visitor, see the way it was used when it was filled with people and enjoy the ocean without the background noises of 15 subcontractors." □