

ELLE DECOR

Style



generation next

Talent will out. For some, recognition comes right away. For others, it takes years to make a mark. But truly dedicated artists, the ones with a personal vision and a wealth of imagination, know that the real reward is the work itself. Here's to those who keep design moving ahead.

HIDDEN TREASURE

For designer Steven Johanknecht, the move from hip downtown Manhattan to a secluded Tudor cottage in Los Angeles meant more than just a change of scenery

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A cross-country move is the perfect excuse to start over, leaving all remnants of one's past (furnishings and otherwise) behind. But for those with no style skeletons in their closet, a dramatic relocation can become a treasure hunt of sorts—an opportunity to explore a fresh environment and, in the process, pair newfound objects with long-prized pieces, creating a very personal mix. Which is exactly what designer Steven Johanknecht did when he moved from New York City to Los Angeles.

For nearly two decades Johanknecht, who hails from upstate New York, lived a design-centric life



in Manhattan, creating displays for Bergdorf Goodman, overseeing store design for Barneys New York, and serving as design director for Studio Sofield. He lived in the Brevoort East—a 1960s high-rise popular with art and fashion types—and filled his apartment with the midcentury-modern furniture so coveted at that time.

But Johanknecht was, as he puts it, "always taken with California," and when the opportunity arose to move to San Francisco for a new job, he used it as a two-year test of the West Coast waters before taking the plunge and putting down roots in Los Angeles.

The move proved fortuitous: Commune, the design firm he cofounded in 2004 with Roman Alonso and siblings Pamela and Ramin Shamshiri, is red hot, and the company's serene yet hip sensibility has drawn diverse clients, from Heath Ceramics to fashionista-favorite Opening Ceremony.

It took him a year to find the right home: a small, 1928 Tudor-style cottage, one of four in a hidden enclave in Silver Lake. The cottages, which line a narrow brick path and surround a fountain, are similar to nearby houses believed to have been used by creators of *Snow White* and *the Seven Dwarfs*. Silver

FACING PAGE: Steven Johanknecht, a founder of the design firm Commune, outside his 1928 Tudor-style home in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles. **THIS PAGE:** In the living room, the stainless-steel-and-leather Mies van der Rohe chair is topped with a kilim pillow by Commune; Johanknecht designed the cocktail table, the lamp is vintage, and the fireplace surround is painted in Benjamin Moore's Iron Mountain. See Resources.



Lake has long attracted creative people, including architects John Lautner (whose famous Silvertop house is there) and Richard Neutra, who built several homes and an office in the neighborhood. It continues to draw actors and artists, which was part of the allure for Johanknecht, although he acknowledges wanting a "different living experience, the antithesis of New York."

It's why this particular house appealed to him right off the bat: "It had all the advantages of indoor-outdoor living, a studio where I could paint, and the quirky charm of an English cottage, but colliding with California cool." Little renovation was required. Johanknecht refinished the floors and overhauled the master bath (creating what he calls his "gentleman's bathroom"), but that was it. "This is the kind of house with a lot of original details, such as the wood beams in the kitchen and all the windows, so you can mend things, rather than renovate, and remain true to its idiosyncrasies," he explains.

Some of those eccentricities—specifically, small rooms, angled walls, and low ceilings—meant that



In the dining area, a 1970s light fixture hangs above a walnut table designed by Johanknecht; the lithographs are by David Storey. **PAGE 45** **PAGE FROM TOP:** A ladder-back chair and rosewood chest by George Tanler in the living room; the 1950s painting is Italian, and the original flooring is varnished a glossy ebony. In the den, the cabinet is by George Nelson, the chair is by Garry Knox Bennett, and the kilim is from ABC Carpet & Home. See Resources.



"THE HOUSE HAD ALL THE ADVANTAGES OF INDOOR-OUTDOOR LIVING, AND THE QUIRKY CHARM OF AN ENGLISH COTTAGE," SAYS DESIGNER STEVEN JOHANKNECHT, "ALL COLLIDING WITH CALIFORNIA COOL"

most of the furniture from his modernist New York City apartment would work in this 1,400-square-foot home as well. (The one piece that did not make it—a marble-top dining table—suffered a very West Coast demise when it was shattered by a coconut that fell from a palm tree). But the living room sofa, a Mies van der Rohe chair, several George Nelson pieces, a zebrawood credenza, and a carved "log" chair all found new lives in what he describes as a "storybook cottage situation."

The rest of the furnishings were gathered as the years passed, and Johanknecht continues to develop an appreciation for California craft—for what he calls a "thread of the artisan"—and for layering textures, which, not coincidentally, are trademarks of his firm's design work as well. Furniture by Californians Alma Allen (an artist in Joshua Tree who frequently collaborates with Commune), Garry Knox Bennett, and Arthur Espenet Carpenter found their way into the mix. "The house opened my eyes to other pieces," he says. "The taxidermy over the fireplace made sense, and I realized it could work with midcentury pieces."

This new perspective also allowed him to see items that he already owned in a fresh light, such as



An upholstered daybed in the den is covered in Belgian linen and topped with pillows by Commune and a throw from Mavick's. Artworks include prints by Richard Prince, top center, and Peter Max, right. This sling chair is from NK Shop, the wood sculpture is a flea-market find, and the kilim is from ABC Carpet & Home. See Resources.



a Jacobsen wall sconce—"it's something you'd expect in a Neutra house, but the juxtaposition in a Tudor accentuates its beauty in a different way"—and his beloved Mies van der Rohe white-leather lounge chair. "It isn't in a Saarinen lobby," as might be expected, he explains, "it's next to a fireplace and a fur rug."

These personal treasures now coexist with works of his own design—the living room cocktail table, made of reclaimed wood and polished copper; the blackened-metal fireplace screen in the den; and an oval-shaped dining table made to accommodate that narrow space—all resulting in a home that is truly a narrative of its owner's history, travels, acquisitions, talents, and taste.

"This reflects a journey of collecting things, not an attempt to create a particular style," Johanknecht says. "The house gave me a new appreciation of the things I owned, and it's still evolving. In some ways it's like taking an old coat or a favorite sweater and putting patches on the elbows—it just gets better." ■

154 ELLEDECOR.COM



In the master bedroom, the bed is by George Nelson, and the throw is by Pendleton; the zebra wood credenza is vintage, and the walls are painted in Pratt & Lambert's Seed Pearl. **FACING PAGE FROM TOP:** Midcentury metal chairs and a table by Alma Allen for Commune on the terrace; the sunburst metal sculpture by C. Jéré was found at a flea market, and the bronze bells are by Paolo Soleri. Vintage copper sconces flank a Restoration Hardware medicine cabinet in the master bath; the countertop is by Daltile, the sink is by Kohler, and the fittings are by Waterworks. See Resources.

