

**T**his is a project that began 13 or 14 years ago when Alex and I first started dating," Nora Chaves recalled. "We would talk about our dream house and the elements we wanted in it even then."

Their dreams were realized in 2008 when project designer Patrick Cunningham of C & C Partners Design/Build, a full-service contracting and design firm in El Segundo, completed their four-bedroom, five-and-a-half bath home on the north end of the Strand in Manhattan Beach. Alex Chaves, a real estate professional, met with several different architects before hiring Patrick and his company to build a new, custom home for the couple and their tiny daughter Sophia.

"I had heard of Patrick, and later we got a direct mail brochure about the company," Alex explained. "Nora and I looked at a lot of different houses in the neighborhood, and we saw six that we liked that were all designed by C & C Partners. I contacted all of their references, and everyone I spoke to was very enthusiastic about their work. When we first met with Patrick, we talked about a slight

shade, frequently seen on Umbrian hillside villas. It is trimmed in Mexican cantera stone, which is often used in churches all over Latin America.

You enter the Chaves' home through a flagstone courtyard. Alex wanted the house to have a grand entrance, and Cunningham designed the entry as both an overture to the house and an outdoor living space. Its walls, like many houses in Mexico, are draped in brightly blossoming vines of bougainvillea. An antique stone fountain, a piece of architectural salvage, trickles softly. There is an outdoor kitchen with a granite-topped bar and a dramatic fire pit. The tile painting, entitled "Tuscan Afternoon," was recently installed.

"We really *live* out here," said Nora. "This is where we spend most of our time when it's too windy on the other side of the house. We barbeque for dinner out here three nights a week, and we love to have guests out here."

The words "Casa des Suenas" are inscribed in bas-relief above the massive wooden door below another bas-relief marquee plaque. It is one of the many architectural details that Cunningham layered onto

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remodel of our existing house and maybe adding a small guest room over the garage."

As they discussed the possibilities, the project expanded until Cunningham was commissioned to completely demolish the Chaves' existing house, a small quaint beach bungalow, and build the house of their dreams from the ground up. "Alex made it very clear to me that he wanted *options*," said Patrick. "I would present him with choices, and he made his decisions."

Alex and Nora had traveled to Italy and felt a deep affinity for Tuscany: its architecture, its colors, its relaxed elegance. They wanted their new home to reflect that affinity and to honor their Latin heritage as well. Cunningham embraced their vision, and over a period of 18 months, he designed and built the house they now call "Casa des Suenas," or the "house of dreams."

"We wanted to re-create the look and feel of *generational architecture*," said Cunningham. "In Italy, you will see houses that are hundreds of years old, which each successive generation of the family has added on to over the years - so that parts of the house will be stucco, some parts will be stone, new wings got added on, the roofline is uneven. That is what's charming about traditional Tuscan country houses. We tried to bring some of that feeling into a modern California beach house, and we added a few traditional hacienda elements as well."

The 4,000-square-foot house has thick walls in a mellow olive

his design to set the Chaves' house apart from more typical, modern Mediterranean design. "We were researching different architectural styles that we liked and looked at different designs. We found this one and had it custom carved in high relief," Patrick explained.

Inside, the floors are Italian travertine marble on the first floor; upstairs, the floors are hardwood in a herringbone "Versailles" pattern. The painting in the foyer is from Cuba and called "La Familia." It sets the tone for the Chaves home: warm and convivial, rich in Latin culture and color, and devoted to the idea of family.

The living room, dining room, kitchen and breakfast area all flow together seamlessly, sharing walls of Venetian plaster and coved ceilings. Cunningham added several inset niches to his design, in which the Chaves family displays objects that are dear to them, including a Spanish baroque wooden cross and a Lladro porcelain figure of a mother and child that Alex bought to represent Nora and Sophia.

Deeply inset crenellated windows open to a commanding view of the Strand, the sea, Manhattan Beach pier and Catalina beyond. There is a massive limestone fireplace in the living room, one of five Cunningham placed throughout the Chaves residence. "It is never *cold* in this house," he said proudly.

"I like to look at the water, but I don't swim in it a lot," admitted Alex. "I like the sense of community living here brings. I like people, and when you live on the Strand, you get to see your neighbors all the ►



time, and you get to know them because you get to see them out playing with their kids, riding their bikes or walking their dogs. We got to watch athletes training for the Olympics on the volleyball courts right outside our windows, and we watch the Lakers run by when they are training. You really feel a part of this community in a warm and wonderful way."

Alex explained further, "If you stand in front of any door in the house, they all line up perfectly so you can see the ocean. We wanted the design to have that sense of openness and clarity."

The Chaves' kitchen was created by Felix Moran of California Select Kitchens. All of the cabinetry is hand-carved, hand-finished alder wood, stained dark. "Felix is a true artist," said Nora admiringly. "His work is so painstaking and so beautiful." The kitchen is equipped with commercial-grade appliances and fixtures, including a Sub-Zero refrigerator and a Viking range with three ovens. The beautiful cabinetry, *verde* granite counter tops and warm yellow walls keep the space from looking or feeling like a restaurant or hotel kitchen; it's an extension of the family's entertainment space.

A Sensurround system fills every room with music. Nora and Alex had no interest in creating a trophy home or a designer's showcase. They consulted interior designers but ultimately chose most of the furniture and accessories themselves. "We wanted it to look nice," said Alex, "but we didn't want anything we couldn't use. We're very family-oriented, and we didn't want to worry about kids getting anything dirty. We wanted it to be warm."

With this in mind, they selected fabrics that were richly textured: chenille, tapestry and leather in warm shades of olive, brown and umber that harmonize with the Tuscan design of the house. In the dining room, beneath a barrel ceiling inspired by the traditional design of Italian wine cellars, family and friends can gather around a sturdy table, reminiscent of an Italian country house, from Denee's in Redondo Beach. Seated in chairs upholstered in dark brown leather and rich tapestry, guests feel transported to Italy when the doors are open and the Umbrian scents of cypress and lavender waft in from the courtyard. ▶

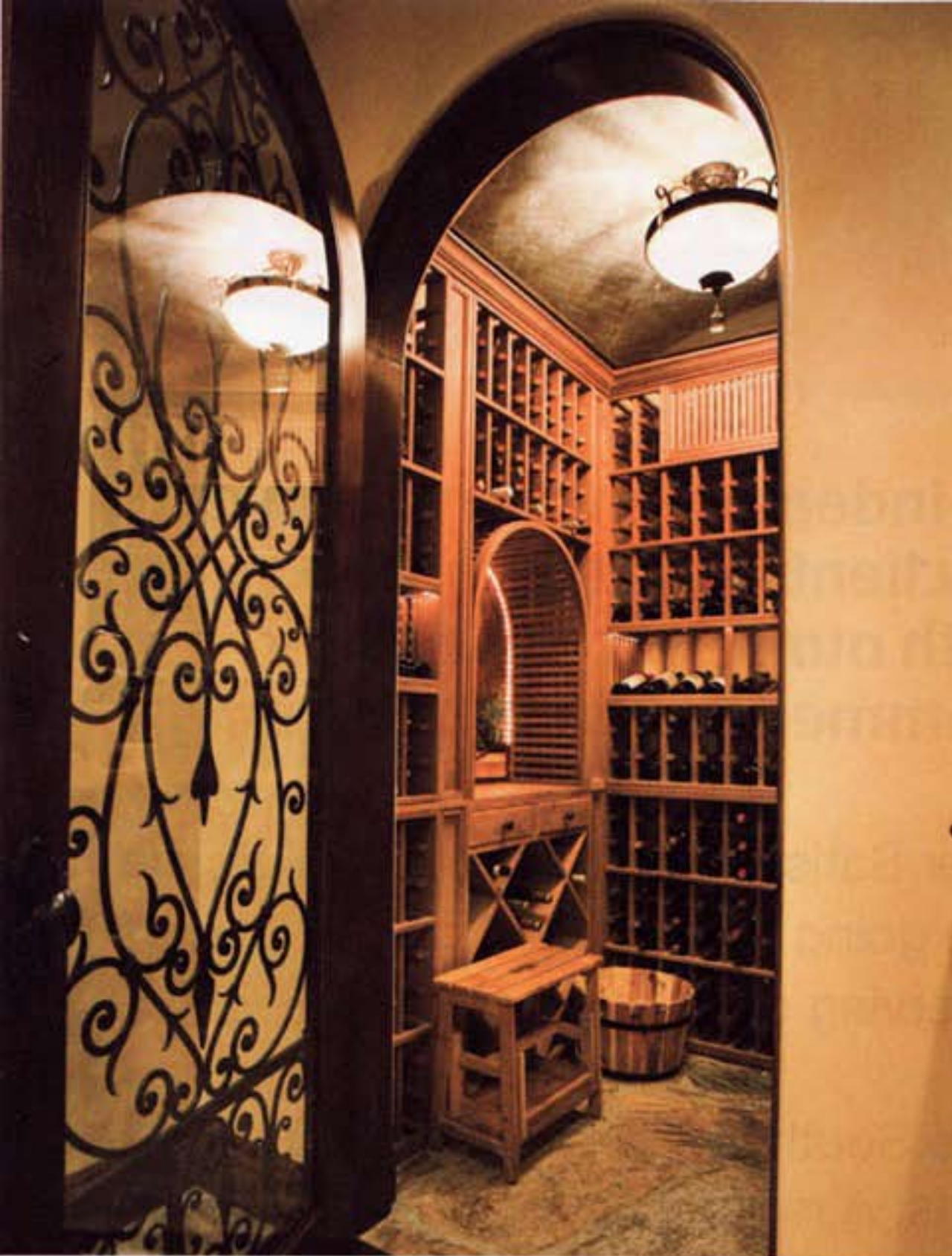
*UNDER THE  
MANHATTAN  
SUN*

*The Strand Home of Nora and Alex Chaves*

WRITTEN BY: LYNN MORGAN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: SHANE O'DONNELL







Downstairs facing the Strand is the flagstone entertainment room Alex playfully described as the “man cave.” He laughed, “It took a year just to find the right poker table!” In addition to the game table, it is also fully equipped with a flat screen TV, a bar topped with polished, gold-flecked black granite and a copper sink. Wrought iron and glass doors lead to an 800-bottle, working wine cellar.

“We designed *everything* around the wine cellar!” said Cunningham. Inside the well-stocked cellar is a mural Nora commissioned as a Valentine’s Day gift to Alex.

Cunningham situated the family’s main living spaces on the second and third floors to guarantee a measure of privacy in this very public location. Upstairs on the top floor, he created very different private suites for the family. The master bedroom features a deep soaking tub, framed in an opulent, pale onyx surround, made of a single piece of hard stone. The shower stall is also carved from a single piece of onyx. One of their main problems with the original house was a lack of storage space. Here Cunningham has created a well-appointed walk-in closet for the couple to share, a rare luxury in South Bay spaces.

The baby’s room is painted in a tender shade of mauve that Nora described as “blush.” Once again the cabinetry was carved in a wave motif and stained a warm Tuscan olive by Felix Moran. Little Sophia still sleeps in a crib; when she’s a little older her parents have already planned to commission a painting of a magical castle by the sea for her bedroom wall.

The 300-square-foot guest suite Cunningham designed above the garage and courtyard is quite different from the rest of the Chaves house. Nora and Alex wanted it to look like “a boutique beach hotel like Shutters.” Woven glass tile around the fireplace reflects different colors as the light hits it. The limestone floor is so authentic you can see the fossilized remains of sea creatures embedded in it. Double-pane windows maintain a surprisingly serene environment: no noise from the street or the ocean enters the room unless the windows are open. The bed was custom-built by Waterleaf in Manhattan Beach, as was the simple, oatmeal-colored bench at its foot.

The Strand, with its endless neighborhood parade, the sand and the water, and the changing light, is as much a part of the Chaves house as its thick plaster walls and arched windows. The views are breathtaking from every room, and Alex and Nora never tire of the changing moods of the ocean: the winds, the fog and the pounding waves.

“I love the movement of the water, the light and the way it sparkles on the waves,” shared Alex. “It’s like witnessing a miracle.”

Both Alex and Nora are content with the house Cunningham built for them, and the two families remain close. But the project is not yet complete: they intend to make changes as their family matures and grows, and they plan to collect more art and perhaps add more furniture. Alex noted, “It will be a work in progress forever.” ■



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