THE FACADE
Bel-Air, California
Architecture and landscape by KAA Design Group
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This 1920s-era Bel-Air mansion is the answer to a presidential trivia question, one involving John F. Kennedy and where and with whom he spent a night. The story goes that in 1953, then-Senator Kennedy and Jacqueline, before returning East from their honeymoon at the San Ysidro Ranch in Southern California, accepted an invitation from their friend Andy Williams to visit this residence, the singer's home at the time. "This is the first place that the Kennedys stayed following their honeymoon," notes Joan Behnke, one of the designers who worked on the residence's recent renovation. "The house has a lot of history, and we wanted to honor that."

Fifty years ago, when the Kennedys or any other guests approached the house, they would have done so from Sunset Boulevard, motoring uphill along a long, winding driveway. Eventually, however, when Sunset became one of the busiest thoroughfares in the Los Angeles area, the home's owners moved the entrance to a street that was around the corner and up the hill, where a side gate provided the main access to the property. "That diminished the experience of entering a grand estate and made it difficult for people to find the front door," says architect Alex Anamos of KAA Design Group in Los Angeles, another member of the renovation team.

Anamos and KAA landscape design director Damon Hein completely altered the motorcourt, adding Italian porphyry cobblestone to evoke a Tuscan villa and a delicate iron archway on the perimeter of the circular driveway to help direct visitors toward the front door. The designers also set the front gate, which is based on a 17th-century Italian design, 28 feet back from the street, creating a heightened sense of drama for guests as they approach the house.

The current owners, who have lived here for 10 years, also wanted to invigorate the home's bland white facade and white trim—the result of a regrettable 1980s renovation. Behnke, who has restored numerous Southern California homes, recommended an antique terra-cotta tone with dark green trim. "I brought an understanding of historic properties and how to practice restraint when it comes to details," Behnke says. "It was important that this didn't look like a flashy, brand-new house."

Hein retained the property's existing terraces, pruned the overgrown brush, planted cypress trees to reinforce the Italian villa theme, and repositioned several olive trees to better frame the house. The wishing well that sits at the center of the motorcourt predates the renovation, though designers added a number of water features, including wall fountains, on each of the levels formed by the terraces. "The gentle sound of the water masks the noise from the street," says Hein. "When we first saw the house, it had lost its character," he adds. "It needed to find its soul again."