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The长长的 corridor, with its richly detailed wood paneling and grandiose floral murals, is a testament to the grandeur of the 1920s-era Peninsula House designed by Phineas Banning. "It has a very grand feel to it," says interior designer Joan Bausch. The house, located on a hilltop in Beverly Hills, is filled with antiques from around the world, including a 19th-century French boudoir chair upholstered in red silk, which sits below an 18th-century mantel. "It's a place where you can lose yourself," Bausch says. "The light streaming in from the windows creates a sense of tranquility."
She knew she was losing her looks.

Still a pedigreed Pasadera grande dame with great bones and enviable position, her rivals down the arroyo were looking fresher, better maintained. It was time for major work. Luckily "she" was a house owned by Tom and Erika Girardi, who sought out interior designers Joan Behnke, architect Peter Kudrave and landscape architect Robert Thaddeus for the makeover.

Even so, renovations and redecorations are like business deals—they rarely go as planned. Pitfalls and setbacks can be viewed either as dead ends or opportunities, and the latter was luckily the case with this historic property. The house was designed in the 1920s by Myron Hunt—who, along with Elmer Grey, designed the nearby residence of Henry E. Huntington, now the Huntington Library—
and the grounds by the Olmsted Brothers, whose commissions included Central Park, Arizala National Park and the White House grounds. "The house has had several lives," says Behnke, whose design work on the Mansion at MGM Grand, a 29-unit deluxe villa-style hotel in Las Vegas modeled on an 18th-century Tuscan villa, prompted the Girardis to seek her out. Unfortunately, those lives had denuded the house of many original elements and details, replacing them with generic fixtures and furnishings. "The house felt very corporate," says Behnke. "All the bathrooms were done with granite—the same granite."

"Erika Girardi, a Southerner with a love of old houses, because as Behnke says, "the muse and force" behind the residential renaissance. However, despite a mutual adoration and appreciation between the homeowner and designer for architectural masterpieces, the renovation and redecoration process was no quick-and-easy endeavor. "I call this my backward project," Behnke says.
Essentially a three-phase endeavor, work began on the first floor in 2000, necessitating that the Girards move out. Fourteen months later, project complete, they returned and prepared the floor for a long-planned and anticipated party for the National Association of Trial Lawyers (Toon Girard, a prominent Los Angeles attorney, has the sobriquet “King of the class-action lawsuits” and was a principal litigant in the case upon which the movie Erin Brockovich was based). Then, approximately four months later, they moved back out, and 16 months of work commenced on the upper floor. In 2004, with both phases finished, the Girards were re-encouraged and ready for phase three, the grounds, to get going. This final phase was finished in July 2006. Timelines, however, aren’t stories and often conceal the reason why a project took, well, however long it took—in this case, six years.

One exploration was the kernel of trust between Behnke and the Girards, which germinated during Behnke’s initial presentation and flowered after phase one. “I understood immediately that Erika wanted to restore the beauty and glamour of the house,” says Behnke. Additionally, and the Erika Girard had both studied dance extensively, which was, according to Behnke, a wonderful way to connect, not simply in a casual or conversational way, but on a deeper level. “Dance equals discipline,” Behnke explains. It also develops a deep understanding, yearning and quest for perfection, as well as an appreciation for nobility and a respect for form. As Behnke says, “To watch Baryshnikov do a split is to see an entire dance; to watch a movie plot is to see bent knees.” Not that either woman was serious to the exclusion of fun. Erika Girard’s bathrooms, for example, could, with its profusion of red, dark-stained woodwork and exotic lighting fixture, call to mind Napoleon III and the Second Empire style. Or it could conjure its more immediate influence and inspiration. “Sante Feng,” says Behnke with a laugh, referencing the 1960 movie The World of Suzie Wong, starring William Holden and Nancy Kwan.

Moreover, the shared perspective and steady resolve was the physical and aesthetic reimagining after the first phase. “We all loved the first floor,” says Behnke, “and the back house that became my first design for the second floor.” A large aspect of the redesign centered on the inclusion of a second sun porch into the house proper, a feat of architectural engineering that required a deft touch—exactly the kind that Peter Kuczynski, whose previous projects include historical buildings and Los Angeles architectural landmarks such as the Jonathan Club, the Oviatt Building and the Fine Arts Building, regularly exhibits.

The same sensitivity was applied to the grounds by Bob Truskowski. “We had removed a pool and poolhouse that were very close to the residence, then relocated the pool and created a cul de sac on the long axis of the residence,” Truskowski explains. “I had purchased the original plans, and when I received them, saw that there had originally been a reflecting pool and rill to accent the east location where I had prepared the new ones.” A surprising and highly satisfying discovery that poses the oft-pondered question: While artists, artisans and architects often have innumerable options at their fingertips or on their AutoCAD, is perhaps, case choice best? The quest for that sort of Platonic ideal him a resonant chord in Behnke, who sees it as a thread connecting her projects. “I edit. And I edit. Then I edit some more,” she says, “It can frustrate me and my team, but I always want something better, to refine it to its parent form.”
"The wife wanted something exotic," says Behnke of the master bath and closet area. The bathroom is furnished with red satin wallcoverings and drapes from Rogers & Goffigon and a red mohair and Lucite chair from J. Robert Scott. The woodwork in the closet, inspired by a trip Behnke took to Vietnam, was handcrafted by a local artisan.