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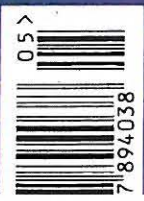
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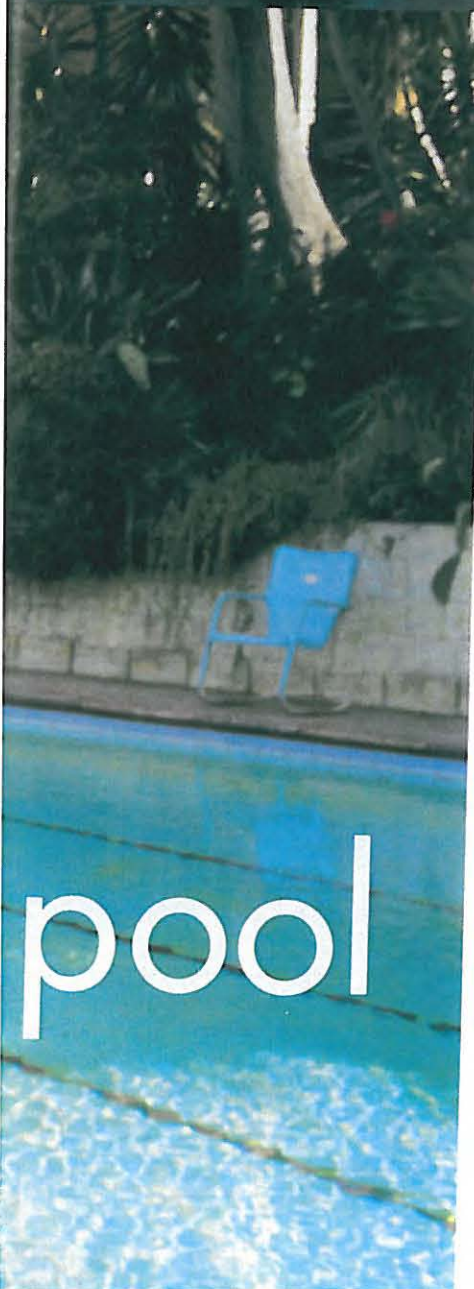


Breakfast by the pool is a daily treat. 'Everything was built around the pool. It's the focal point of the house'



playing





For architect Josh Schweitzer and chef Mary Sue Milliken

home is a converted swimming school. It took 10 years

but now life is one long pool party

Surrounded by run-down, lower-middle-class housing, a few liquor stores and one too many 'adult' hotels, the house belonging to celebrity chef Mary Sue Milliken, who owns the hip Border Grill restaurant in Santa Monica, and architect Josh Schweitzer, whose past clients include Diane Keaton and Linda Gray (who played Sue Ellen in *Dallas*), is in a distinctly unhip neighbourhood. 'It's a kind of a nowhere land,' says Schweitzer, struggling to describe its exact location. 'South of Hollywood, west of downtown, and east of Beverly Hills.' In fact, they might never have found it had they not been looking for a computer in the For Sale column of a local paper called *The Recycler*. Instead they saw an ad for an old swimming school, complete with 60-foot pool.

The original owners were an environmental artist turned New York stockbroker and his elderly mother. 'When he moved, she ran it until she got tired of it, then she put an ad in this free paper and we snapped it up,' says Schweitzer, who decided to forgo the computer. 'We couldn't afford to buy both.' They set up home almost at once, even though the only rooms were a tiny office, a snack-bar kitchen, and shower rooms. 'We knocked down the walls between the office and showers, >



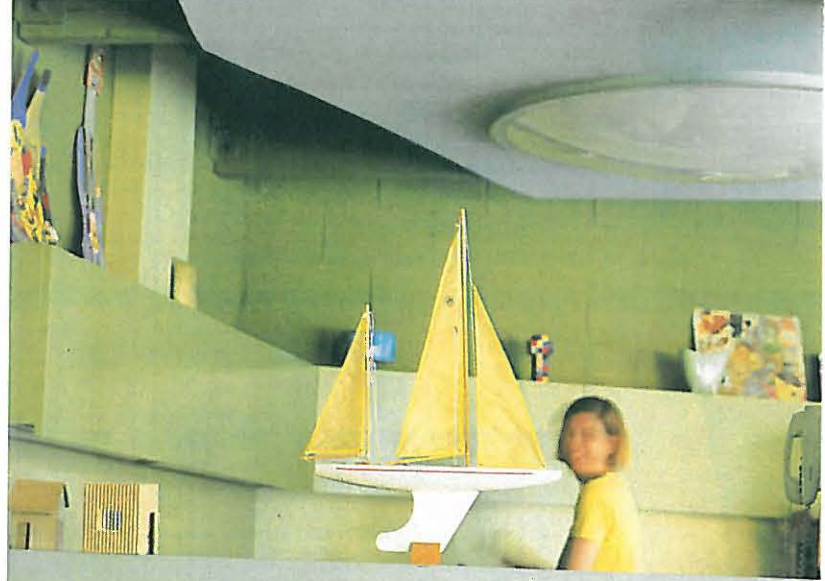
removed some of the toilets, hosed it all down and just moved in,' says Schweitzer. 'It was a mess. The concrete floor was all sloped to floor drains, so none of our furniture sat level. There were electrical boxes, conduits and pipes everywhere. It was quite uncomfortable,' he says, almost gleefully. 'But we enjoyed it because it was like camping out.'

They must really enjoy camping. For the first two years they showered outdoors. 'One day we looked up and noticed one of the neighbours just sitting on his porch rocking back and forth looking at us,' he recounts, amused. 'We waved at each other and carried on with our shower but we put up a wall after that.' It was four years before they had a finished kitchen and living area, and the bedrooms were only finished just over two years ago. 'At one point we had a bed, the toilet, bath, fridge, clothes, everything in one room, including Declan as a baby,' says Schweitzer. 'And we had guests sometimes. They'd sleep on the concrete floor of the living room and use the bathroom in our bedroom which had no walls around it at all. I always felt sorry for guests if they had to get up in the night. They had to pee right next to our heads.'

Nowadays they don't live in such close quarters. In fact they live in separate quarters. It's hard to believe that the years of living in such cramped conditions did not influence the final design of the

property, but Schweitzer swears that it didn't. Twelve years after they moved in, what they've ended up with is four detached structures built around the central pool. 'Declan, now six, has had his own little house since he was about one,' says Schweitzer. 'People think it's unusual but it didn't bother him at all. He thinks it's normal. One of the first times he went to a friend's house he said, "You know what's so amazing about your house? It has stairs *inside*". His whole world was room-to-room connected by outside space.'

It's the perfect playhouse. 'I thought it would be a great house for children,' says Schweitzer. 'A great big play area with trees to climb around in. It's a fabulous place to have friends, and >



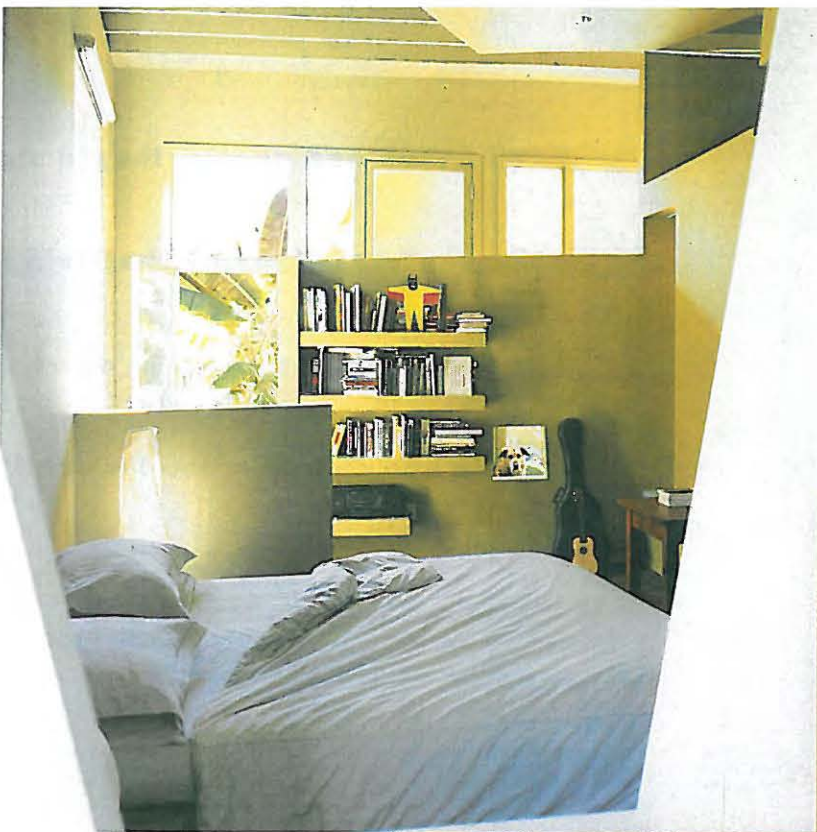
'When we had guests, they'd sleep on the concrete floor of the living room and use the bathroom in our bedroom which had no wall around it at all'



Milliken found the 50s 15-foot sofa still covered in its original yellow velour. 'We bought it at a used lot. The guy used to bring his stuff there in a truck. We knocked him down to \$325 because it was the end of Sunday and he didn't want to take it home again'



'Playing' is how Schweitzer describes his approach to his home. Playing with colour ('a symphony of greens - my favourite colour'), playing with shapes (in the ceiling and open kitchen) and playing with ideas



'Declan, now six, has had his own little house since he was one,' says Schweitzer. 'It's the perfect playhouse surrounded by a jungle of banana and bird-of-paradise plants. 'He enjoys it, especially now he's in his army-man phase.' The bedroom entrance plays off Cubism to ensure privacy



DIY **Logistics:** Josh Schweitzer Architects (001 213 936 6163) with a celebrity clientele, he's already international in practice. London Architectural firms Mark Guard (0171 380 1199) and Caruso St John (0171 251 6788) are particularly good at turning awkward or dull spaces into thoughtful, modern, flexible homes like the Schweitzers'; they would be great at modern pools, and excited by the challenge of unusual spaces – turning commercial into residential. **Details:** For **flagstone floors** like those surrounding the pool, try Paul Davis Design (0181 541 0838) which specialises in unusual UK stones for flooring, including beautiful shades of blue and black. For **shades of green**, try the 'Springfield' or 'Village' shades from JW Bollow (0171 370 3252) or 'Sèvres Green' from Papers and Paints (0171 352 8626). The Schweitzer's furniture came largely from Metropolis (001 213 954 7766) on LaBrea and 6th, both good LA streets to scour for **mid-century modern bargains**. In London, try Bonhams auction house (0171 393 3900), Camden Market on Wednesdays and Saturdays, the cavernous furniture shops ringing the Bermondsey Market and the few truly second-hand shops still on Lillie and Munster roads in Fulham.



kids love pools. Declan really enjoys it, especially now he's in his army-man phase.' However, they have no plans to enlarge the family yet. 'Every time it comes up that maybe it's time for Declan to have a sibling, I think, "Oh God, no, I don't know where we'd put the room. We're getting a bit full up here."' At other times Schweitzer thinks he'd enjoy the challenge of fitting in an extra structure. 'But then I think, "Okay, I could do another building, I'm just not sure I could be a dad again.'"

In the meantime, the place is as much a playhouse for Schweitzer as it is for Declan. They both play in the pool in the summer time. 'Declan has been having swimming lessons since he was three months old,' says Schweitzer. 'He's a fish.' In the winter they occasionally use it as a plunge pool when they get out of the hot tub. Although, he says, 'you'd have to be a polar bear to swim in it at that time of year.' And Schweitzer often uses the word 'playing' when referring to the work he's done on the house. Playing with colour (what he calls 'a symphony of greens' – his favourite colour),

playing with shape, with ideas. 'My house is an experimental area so I can see how these things work when it comes to designing for clients,' he says. 'The only problem I had was that every day I had a new thought about the layout and it was difficult to choose until the last minute. And then it would be: "Well, it has to be this one because the builders are coming today."' For Schweitzer it's clearly a calling, not a grind. 'I loved it,' he says, notwithstanding the time it took. 'I'd do it again in a second.' □