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The Southern California lifestyle is so special that people the world over dream of living it, even going so far as trying to duplicate it in their countries. I see it firsthand every day as I continue my work throughout China, Europe and the United States. It is something that can never be duplicated. Our amazing California Riviera-style architecture also evokes excitement.

We are surrounded by many new interpretations of California Riviera architecture, some of it wonderful, others, lackluster or overdone. So what distinguishes a tasteful rendition from the rest?

To get answers, I recently had a discussion with architect Homer Oatman, one of the genre's leaders in Orange



details
make
the

design



Homer Oatman has designed many California Riviera custom homes, including this Shady Canyon residence.

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HOMER OATMAN

County. A design principal and partner at KTGy Group Inc. in Irvine, Oatman has designed many California Riviera homes. Here, he talks about the significance of detail and historical research in creating new homes:

David-Michael: When did you become interested in California Riviera architecture?

Homer Oatman: I can't remember not being interested in it. Growing up in San Diego it was all around me. The old neighborhoods of Mission Hills, Point Loma, Kensington, La Jolla and Rancho Santa Fe were filled with some terrific examples of Spanish revival architecture. Also, there were the historic adobes in Old Town, the Casa de Estudillo, the Casa de Bandini, the Casa de Machado y Silva and the Presidio, the Mission de la Acala.

D-M.: Have you spent much time in traveling the world for inspiration?

H.O.: I have traveled throughout Mexico since I was a child. It's so accessible. It's like a second home for me. However, al-



Ornate ornamentation is a hallmark of this California Riviera home Homer Oatman designed in Shady Canyon.

though I studied in Europe when I was in graduate school, I only visited Spain for the first time about four years ago.

D-M.: How did you like it?

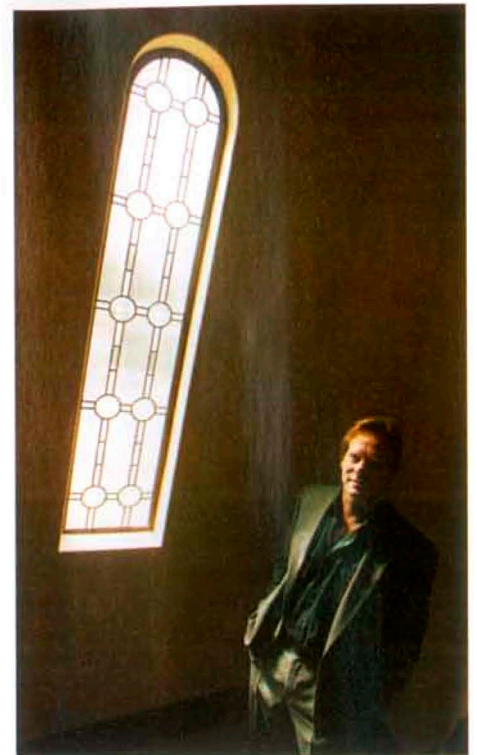
H.O.: I loved it. We spent about two weeks touring through Andalusia just looking at architecture. I took literally over 3,500 photos.

D-M.: Do you refer to those images often in your work?

H.O.: Absolutely, almost daily in fact. Digital photography and computers makes cataloguing, storage and retrieval of imagery so easy. Original source imagery is so crucial when you're designing historical theme architecture. Purity and accuracy is everything, from the overall massing down to the smallest details. For me, the biggest sins are making it up as you go, which is inexcusable, or copying contemporary examples, which is like taking a Xerox of a Xerox, and more often than not a bad one to begin with at that.

D-M.: What other design resources do you use?

H.O.: All of the great early 20th century practitioners of Spanish revival architecture were students of the architecture of Spain and Mexico. Consequently, there were a number of fantastic resource books



The details in California Riviera-style homes must be well-thought-out, says Homer Oatman.

written from between about 1910 and 1929. I've collected a number of them and I refer to them frequently

There are also a number of good books on Spanish revival architecture that have come out since the early '90s. I think you can track the resurgence of the popularity of the style by the number of books published on the subject during the last 15 years.

D-M.: Can you tell me about the role of architectural details in your work?

H.O.: There are only a handful of details that are particular to any given architectural style which, when appropriately designed and incorporated in the architecture, distinguish it from other similar or related styles. It is the obligation of the architect to understand which details are unique to each style and their appropriate use and application.

D-M.: How do you use these details?

H.O.: First, we must differentiate between detail and ornamentation. Detail is the careful design of architectural components to achieve a functional and aesthetically pleasing result. Ornamentation is decorative embellishment separate without functional need or necessity.

Today, in the post-postmodern age of architecture, when one designs architecture within a particular regional style or period,

the challenge is to strike a tasteful and appropriate balance between austere functionality and excessive ornamentation within the selected style.

Architectural ornamentation is metaphorically referred to as jewelry. Just as jewelry is a matter of personal taste and expression which should be carefully chosen and judiciously applied, architectural ornamentation should be approached in the same manner. Too much jewelry, no matter how expensive or intricately designed, will look like an overly exuberant collection of refrigerator magnets. However, with the right piece in just the right location and the effect is perfect.

D-M.: What's the role of architectural history in choosing details?

H.O.: All elements of detail originated as functional elements of the structure. Understanding the structural origin and function of these elements is necessary to design them correctly today, even though in many cases they are no longer required to fulfill their original structural purpose.

For example, stone door and window surrounds originally provided the structural reinforcement for the openings in the wall where they occurred. Today, they are purely ornamental. The true structural reinforcement is hidden within the wall. However, to properly design door and window surrounds, one needs to understand how they functioned originally, and how their design changed as they transitioned from necessary structural components to purely ornamental detailing over time.

And time, in this case, is a matter of centuries.

The same holds true for other applied ornamental stone detailing such as eave brackets, cornice molding and water table, as well as wrought iron and tile.

Once the criteria of stylistic appropriateness, detailing with a regard for the functional origin of the ornamental component, restraint and elegance of design have been addressed, the customary considerations of rhythm, balance and compositional restraint must be applied as well.

MY FINAL THOUGHT

As a native Californian, I have fallen in love with our California Riviera architecture. I just recently purchased another historic home, a classic 1933 Monterey Colonial. The enduring style of this native California design fits me just right – two natives living happily together.