

Time Travels

Designer Kevin Cozen may be a committed modernist, but he has a soft spot for history.

By Roger Grody

Santa Monica, California-based Kevin J. Cozen is known for his sleek contemporary designs for both residential and commercial buildings. But those structures and interiors are imprinted with historic footnotes: a 500-year-old entrance door to a steel-and-concrete home, or a chic glass-bottom pedestrian bridge supported by 19th century wood beams. Protecting the old while embracing the new is the signature of Classical Progression, the construction/design studio Cozen founded with his interior designer wife, Carolynn, in 2000. He absorbs the good and bad of Southern California's urban environment, inspired by masters Frank Lloyd Wright and John Lautner, dismayed by tract housing and faux châteaux. The 56-year-old Cozen doesn't simply accent spaces with vintage pieces, but uses remnants of abandoned farmhouses and restaurants to breathe new life into his modern concepts.

When did you first realize you might be headed for a career in design?

My father and all his brothers were dentists or doctors, as are many of their children, so it was destined that I was to attend medical

school at USC. I ended up hating pre-med, so my father encouraged me to take an exhaustive week of aptitude tests, which for some reason concluded I should be an architect. I said, "Dad, you wasted all your money on that stupid test!" But after working as an unpaid intern at a small architectural firm, I realized it was the first thing I ever did that I truly loved.

What was your breakthrough project?

Shortly after graduation from the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-ARC), my sister bought a home in Beverly Hills that needed to be gutted. I came up with a new design, a modern concept that my brother-in-law hated...but fortunately my sister won out. I even built it myself, and when it was completed, people started knocking at my sister's door asking who designed the home. I suddenly got a lot of clients.

Do you have a universal approach to every project, regardless of the client or type of building?

To me, there are two approaches to every project. The first is the functional and pragmatic side, which deals with the flow of the floorplan, lighting, capacity, etc. The other side is developing a creative concept that permeates throughout the building — what I call the heart and soul of the structure. Once you've developed that concept, every subsequent decision is checked against it.

Give us an example of how you've arrived at the heart and soul of a project.

I recently finished a 10,000-square-foot



PHOTO BY SYLVIE COGRANNE



CHATEAU PHOTOS BY LAURA HULL



Château Zoo, Cozen's home in Malibu, reflects the designer's penchant for incorporating vintage elements into modern concepts.

interior for the World Surf League in Santa Monica. The functional, pragmatic side required a relaxed, non-corporate work environment, as well as a full-service sound stage for filming commercials. But the conceptual challenge — the heart and soul of the place — was to create an environment that indicated surfing and the movement of waves, but not in an obvious way. I was able to do that by smoothing out the L-shaped floor plan's right angle into a curved, undulating wall that spoke to the motion of the ocean in a gradual, elegant manner. That wall became a theme for the entire building, and to finish it — I wanted rustic materials reminiscent of a fish taco shack on the beach — I found 7,500 pieces of mahogany from old wine barrels. A set of doors from Bob Hope's old estate and an 85-year-old bar from a restaurant back East give the modern design another dimension.

Your signature style of incorporating vintage elements in a modern context is rather unique. How did it begin?

When my wife and I found our current property in Malibu, two and a half acres on a creek, it felt like an old soul. The thought of constructing a steel-and-concrete box just didn't feel right, so we decided to build a modern house, but using old materials. I designed the home, built a model, prepared drawings and then we hunted down all the pieces to fit together. People saw it and wanted to do the same thing, insisting it was a significant new style of architecture. I love classical architecture, but also love modern design, and the dialogue or interaction between the two is very exciting for me.

Describe some of the vintage elements you incorporated into your family home.

In France, we fell in love with the stone farmhouses in Vézelay, so I decided to deconstruct one of those — encapsulating all of the qualities we loved about those structures — in a progressive design. That became the essence of the concept, and we then hunted down all the old pieces to complete it. The roof trusses are from a hundred-year-old warehouse, and we salvaged a fireplace, wine cellar door and chandeliers from a famous house in Beverly Hills. When Danny Thomas' old Beverly Hills home was being torn apart, we retrieved gilded mirrors and banisters, and we have a bar from a historic Hollywood estate. Virtually every window, railing and doorknob is from a different place, and the bridge over our creek was constructed with lumber from the Malibu



PHOTOS BY UNIDINE PROHL

An undulating wall that mirrors the motion of waves is the centerpiece of Cozen's World Surf League project.

Pier. On either side of that bridge are a pair of rewired lampposts originally from the streets of Paris.

Do you have any interesting hobbies outside the office?

Since I was a teenager, I've had a passion for exotic cars and have restored about 150 of them over the years. I love Italian manufacturers like Lamborghini, Ferrari and Alfa Romeo, and also collect British and German automobiles. I currently have about 15 cars on our property in Malibu.

Are there any parallels between auto design and building design?

Actually, my hobby has directly benefited my work. When I was designing corporate offices at a warehouse for high-end denim designer 7 For All Mankind, I was having a hard time bringing light into the center of a massive space. Ultimately, I borrowed a concept from the design of a mid-engine Ferrari that proved to be an effective solution for the building, both pragmatically and creatively.