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BEFORE AND AFTER

Dramatic Transformations

Marvelous Makeovers

COLLECTING CLASSIC CARS

LANDSCAPERS' FAVORITE HEDGES

THE ART OF STAINED GLASS

CASTING A SPELL

The right house convinces a pair of Californians to leave the Golden State for Arizona's Sonoran cityscape.

BY **BEN IKENSON**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
CHIPPER HATTER

A 1968 walnut Baldwin piano anchors a corner of the living room. The homeowners—interior designer Denise LaVey and her wife, singer-songwriter Sarah Dashew—wanted to incorporate their connection to music into the home's overall design aesthetic. When the couple entertains, friends often pick up an instrument or two and play together. Sarah's collection of guitars hangs on the back wall. Included are two Taylors, a Gibson and a 1967 Martin that sailed around the world with her family in the 1970s.

Builder Aaron Genova installed a 20-foot-long window wall that opens to the renovated patio. The new feature facilitates an easy indoor/outdoor living flow while flooding the room with natural light.

Yellow cushions on white Phillipe Starck Masters Chairs add a bright pop of color to the outdoor dining area. In place of art, Denise installed a vertical plant wall, furthering the feel of a desert oasis.

IT WAS A CHANCE VISIT during a road trip through the American Southwest two years ago that convinced interior designer Denise LaVey and her wife, singer-songwriter Sarah Dashew, that Phoenix would be more than a mere pit stop. Both felt instantly connected to the vibrant and creative feel of Arizona's urban landscape—and they began discussing the prospect of selling their beloved 1931 Spanish colonial revival home in Los Angeles and moving to the desert.

"If you'd asked me five years ago where I'd be putting down roots, Phoenix would have been the last place on my mind," says Denise. "I'd never even seen the Grand Canyon."

The couple toured 20 to 30 homes, and continued to look for just the right place even after returning to L.A. "The first time we saw the house was online. It just popped up late one night," says Sarah of the 3,000-square-foot, three-bedroom, three-bathroom ranch-style abode in North Central Phoenix. "Something about the height of the ceilings and the light attracted us, so we flew over to take a look."

The unassuming midcentury dwelling, built in 1954, "was different, of course, in person," Denise recalls. "It was much darker, and it was obvious that it hadn't been updated in at least 30 years and needed some TLC." But the size was right; it had a pool and enough land for their two pups to run around; and it was centrally located in a great neighborhood. "We had an intuitive feeling to just go for it," the designer adds. "In fact, I couldn't wait to get my hands on it, and when I did, because the house was so dark and closed off, I actually ripped out a whole section of built-in shelves with my bare hands!"

The couple originally planned to bring in a contractor from Los Angeles for a month of intensive remodeling work. But when that plan fell through, their realtor introduced them to builder Aaron Genova.

"Aaron was a wealth of invaluable resources, which worked out well because what we thought was going to be a two-bathroom remodel turned into a whole-house renovation," Sarah explains.

According to Genova, the project was a collaborative process. "The fact that Denise is a design professional in the business and that she and Sarah are creative people with specific ideas about what they like made the job very engaging and fun," he says. "The intensive makeover allowed us to resolve some existing issues with the home, such as exterior windows and doors that previously had been replaced in an incongruous and unpleasant way, while bringing in more light and opening up spaces within."

Known for combining relaxed elegance with clean lines and subtle textures to create inspiring environments for her own clients, Denise paid the same attention to detail when it came to her new home. The result is a warm casual-yet-sophisticated look with an eclectic quality that plays off its midcentury roots.

Imbued with natural light, the home now boasts an airy, spacious feel, with inviting rooms awash in white walls. Dingy wall-to-wall carpeting throughout was removed and the newly polished concrete floors were left uncovered for an era-appropriate touch. In the living room, Genova installed a 20-foot-long glass wall that floods the interior with natural illumination and connects the indoors to the outside living and entertaining spaces, which were also updated with new hardscaping and plantings, charming covered patios, and multiple seating areas complete with fire features. The most dramatic transformation, however, occurred in the master bath, which had been dark and cramped with a walled-off tub and dated cabinetry and surfaces. Taken down to the studs, it was given a fresh, open feel and now features an

accent wall cloaked in floor-to-ceiling concave hexagonal tile, a floating walnut vanity, a waterfall shower and a free-standing bathtub.

Looking back, Denise and Sarah are glad they listened to their intuition. "In all creative professions, interior design included, instinct plays a big part," says Denise. "I made the choice to move to Phoenix on not much more than a feeling of connection to the desert and an inclination that the Valley would serve us well."

Her wife agrees. "With this house, we feel like we won the lottery," Sarah adds. "Everyone is so nice. We've been dropped into this great community with wonderful restaurants, farmer's markets, music venues and museums. It's hip and modern and urban, but the small-town warmth is still pervasive." □

BUILDER: Aaron Genova, Genova-Detwiler. INTERIOR DESIGNER: Denise LaVey, Denise LaVey Interior Design.

For more information, see Sources on Page 158.

Prior to renovations, a large wall of built-in shelving units closed in the hallway. Denise took a crowbar to the fixtures and replaced them with a vintage wood-and-brass room divider. The painting is by Christopher Ciccone, brother of music legend Madonna.

"I made the choice to move to Phoenix on not much more than a feeling of connection to the desert."

—DENISE LAVEY, homeowner and interior designer

Cloaked in shimmering tile and accented with art by photographer Cara Barer, the living room's wood-burning fireplace is an eye-catching—and functional—statement piece. A midcentury wood-and-brass room divider that the designer purchased at a specialty store in Phoenix defines the space while lending an open, airy feel. A custom curved sofa and vintage furnishings, including a tripodic coffee table build in 1956 for Sarah's grandfather's boat, complete the cozy setting.

OPPOSITE AND TOP RIGHT Denise envisioned the organization of the home's back garden desert oasis to include an eclectic collection of modern exterior furnishings in wood, marble and rattan, anchored by a 14-foot outdoor fireplace design in stamped concrete. To maintain a water-wise plant palette, the couple installed an array of lush blossoming shrubs and succulents. Sarah loves gardening and added many of the landscape accent lights herself. **CENTER RIGHT** A white rattan hanging egg chair offers a snug spot to curl up and read a good book on a sunny winter day. **BOTTOM RIGHT** Originally, the backyard was an uninspired jumble of red brick and patchy lawn, with no place to enjoy the Valley's outdoor living opportunities.

Denise gutted the master bathroom and created a warm, inviting space. The floating walnut vanity is backed by a floor-to-ceiling accent wall cloaked in concave hexagonal tiles.

RIGHT AND BOTTOM FAR RIGHT Built-in shelving units once lined the walls in the master bedroom that are now occupied by a TV and credenza. Tall French doors were added to brighten the room and open it to the back gardens.

INSET AND RIGHT Despite its large skylights, the master bath was originally dark and cramped. Denise replaced the dark-blue walled-in bathtub with a large wet room, complete with glass shower doors, a waterfall shower and a stylish slipper tub.

Denise designed the oak-and-steel dining table. French doors connect the interior space to the outdoor dining patio and provide easy access to herbs and plants growing on the opposite wall. The yellow and red painting is from South Africa; Denise picked it up during her travels. The designer notes that it took her months to find the perfect architectural chandelier to complement the table and contemporary wood-and-leather chairs.

LEFT AND BELOW
The homeowners kept the kitchen's original brickwork but demolished everything else. Denise eschewed upper cabinets for cold-rolled steel open shelving to maximize visual space. Graphite marble countertops complement and contrast with the sleek white cabinetry. Teddy, the couple's Wheaten terrier, approves.

"With this house, we feel like we won the lottery."

—SARAH DASHEW, homeowner