



Jeff Shelton Architect

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA

The Bridge House

Santa Barbara, California

The city of Santa Barbara sits between the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Ynez Mountains. On a sprawling foothill along the base of the mountains, parallel to the ocean, the Riviera neighborhood backdrops the city and has stunning views of the town and the sea in the distance.

Our clients purchased a lot on one of the many twisting streets that wind up, down, and around the Riviera. Across the street was a George Washington Smith house, and within four hilly blocks there were a dozen historic homes from the 1920s. There are no simple lots left to build on in Santa Barbara, and building codes and local ordinances have gotten more difficult to deal with. This property held many challenges, including how this lot drops off sharply on two sides, leaving only a small piece of land for a structure.

New setback ordinances made building on the property nearly impossible, and upon receiving our survey, we found out that the neighbor's pool was on our property. Each time we turned around, another hurdle popped up. As usual, neighbors wanted nothing built near them, as change is never welcomed. Neighbor complaints are typical in any residential neighborhood in Santa Barbara, but the Riviera is notorious. All through the design and building process, neighbors tried to stop the project.

Despite these distractions, we stayed focused on the prize: creating a home for our clients

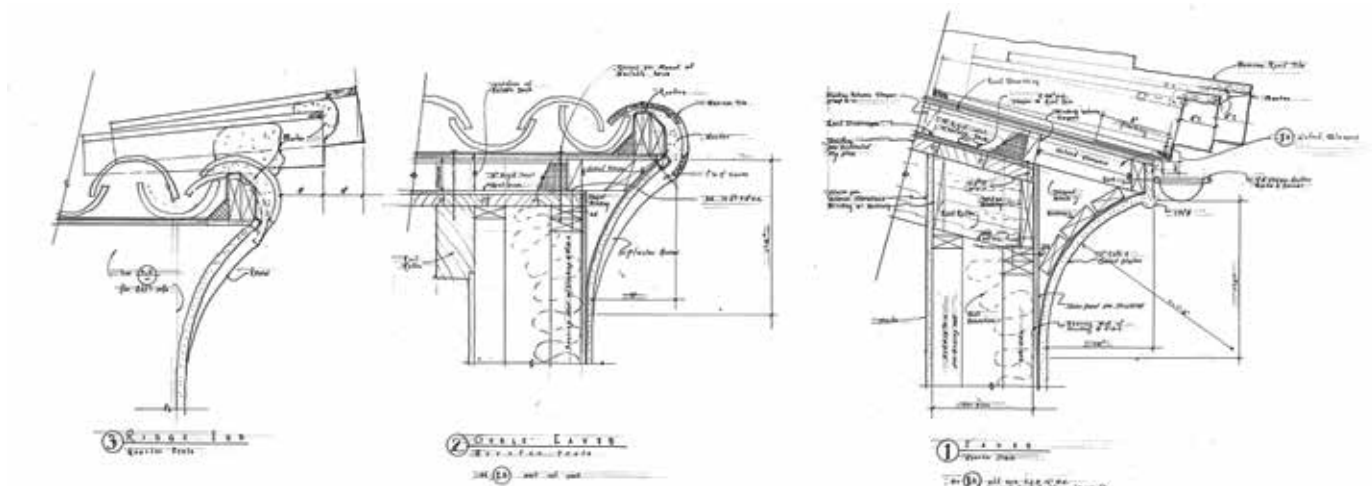
that embraced the site and the views while giving back to the street and the neighborhood.

We quickly realized that we needed a front yard setback modification, as the ordinance had been created for flat lots. The existing thirty-foot front yard setback would have pushed the house down over the hill and into the neighbor's pool (on our property). But even with the approved modification for a twenty-foot setback, the constrained lot and the owners' wish list created many obstacles that proved difficult to solve.

Another obstacle in locating the house on the site was the garage. In Santa Barbara "form follows parking," so the garage always leads the way. Options were limited on this steep site, since parking cars on a hill is more difficult.

The owners wanted the living room, family room, and kitchen on the top floor, as well as their bedroom. Because of the stunning views, the second floor was the best location for this part of the house. Size, bulk, and scale issues began to arise as we tried to combine this mass with garage requirements and the compressive architecture style that comes with Spanish revival aesthetics and proportion. Our solution was to incorporate a bridge to connect the house mass with the garage and the main bedroom mass. We kept the bridge light and fragile, unlike the two plaster buildings. The flooring became light wood that seems slightly undersized. We omitted any sound dampening

Opposite page, top: View looking west from entry patio. Bottom: Looking northwest from the street.



insulation to make the transition from bedroom to the main house memorable and ceremonial with the sound of creaking floorboards.

As with many houses and buildings we design, celebrating the base, the body, and the top of the structure is essential, and a part of Spanish vernacular architecture. The plaster line at the base of the walls is hand-formed and purposefully uneven to help keep a stark and machined language from creeping into the overall idea of a handmade house. A soft, sensual building would not look or feel right sitting on a straight sheet-metal plaster screed.

The windows and penetrations to the house all start from the inside, then work their way out to the exterior skin. There, we make sure that the fenestration is balanced with the widths of the walls around them. The roof on this structure is two-piece Mexican roof tile. It is important that the eave tiles are asymmetrically staggered and extend out beyond the gutter so that the shadow of the tile inaccuracies are elongated on the walls and the ground below.

The plaster undulates and catches sunlight throughout the day, and the resulting shadows help diminish the mass and soften the hard cement plaster. The hand-crafted rails and floral perforations in the dark purple balconies also cast shadows on the walls and floors. Exterior curtains help mitigate the afternoon sun, which can become intense on the south-facing Riviera. A large, billowing canvas awning is draped open most of the year to help

passively cool the house, and is drawn back to allow sunlight into the living room and kitchen only during those few months when the weather is typically cool in Santa Barbara's Mediterranean climate.

The interiors at the Bridge House are simple. When on the Riviera, we try not to fight with the spectacular views of the city and the Pacific Ocean, so we let the views become a part of the interior of the house and try to simply complement what we see. The vastness of the Pacific has a gravitational pull.

The windows, beams, roof rafters, and the floorboards are a deep, orange-striped Douglas Fir. The center of the house is the kitchen, with its twelve-foot tile wall behind the stove. It's patterned after nineteenth-century Spanish and Mexican kitchens, where the simplicity of the layout and a bold tile feature is all that is needed to anchor the house.

The first floor was designed to be an isolated bedroom wing. The clients' children had already left the nest, and the isolated wing would work great for returning families and privacy.

An existing giant Chinese Elm dominates the front yard, so the landscape design works around the leftover sunlight. A fabulous collection of aloes and succulents helps separate the street from the house at the entry, and large orange trees and guava trees descend down the hill as the street winds its way toward the ocean.

Opposite page, top left: Early concept elevation. Top right: Interior elevation detail. Middle: Concept elevation. Bottom: Concept floor plan and interior elevations. This page: Eaves and rake details, construction documents.



El Andaluz Santa Barbara, California

El Andaluz is a mixed-use project in downtown Santa Barbara, California, consisting of a seven-unit condominium complex above two commercial units, all surrounding a tile- and citrus-filled interior courtyard. The site is in a district called “El Pueblo Viejo,” reflecting the fact that the first Europeans to colonize California were the Spanish, who took over from the indigenous populations and settled in small villages, creating a string of missions and presidios. Because of this history, the architecture in this historic district is required to follow guidelines that are patterned around the vernacular architecture of southern Spain. After an earthquake in 1925 destroyed much of the Anglocentric architecture in Santa Barbara, architects from Southern California got together and assembled design guidelines that limited the types of materials and the general composition of buildings to reflect the city’s Spanish heritage. As Santa Barbara has grown from a sleepy fishing town of twenty thousand people to a town of over one hundred thousand people, the architecture has needed to change, becoming denser to meet housing needs and changing times.

I had completed four other projects with a development team in town, Leon Olson and Contractor Dan Upton, and the team wanted to start a new project. Their goal was to create condominiums to sell, while also creating homes for themselves. Fortunately, we selected a vacant lot (formerly a used car lot) just a Frisbee throw from the back door of my office.

Working within the accepted density guidelines of the city ordinance, we decided to pursue the idea of a classic Mediterranean courtyard building, reminiscent of many buildings throughout southern Spain and northern Africa. I have always admired this type of building while visiting Spain, but had never had the opportunity to put this layout to use.

The program we created required that we occupy the entire lot, with enough units and enough area for each unit to make the project financially viable. One of the advantages of this particular site is that there is an automobile access alley in the rear. This alley allowed us to eliminate the need for any driveways along the front of the building, making the building friendlier to the pedestrian. The project

Opposite page: Early concept elevation; final front elevation; final alley elevation.

This page: Looking southwest from Chapala Street.





is in a commercial zone, so we were not required to have any building setbacks. We decided to push the face of the building up to the sidewalk, as is the case with most buildings in Spanish towns and cities. With the building on the street, we were also bringing life to the street, or “eyes” to the street, as Santa Barbara has been transitioning from a typical low-density American city with single-family homes to a higher-density midsize town. Streets that once were lined only with car lots and fast-food joints are now filling in with housing projects. Bringing life to the street and sidewalks will help glue the buildings and the new mixed-use neighborhoods together, and make the streets safer and more desirable for pedestrians during the day and at night.

Chapala Street runs east to west, parallel to the majestic Santa Ynez mountains. The view looking north toward these mountains is one of the great views on earth, as the four-thousand-foot high mountains turn colors all through the day and all through the seasons. We positioned four of the units toward the mountains, providing beautiful and consistent northern light throughout the day.

The key to designing buildings in a city is to make sure the first fourteen feet above the sidewalk is enticing and exciting for the pedestrian. We added an arcade of tiled elliptical arches along the sidewalk to open up the three-story facade and invite pedestrians in to wander about. The poured concrete arches are covered with one-inch by eight-inch ceramic tile that has been decorated with splattered glaze, and then installed randomly. This method created depth to the tile while giving a sense of the Moorish influence. Not knowing what businesses would move into the commercial spaces, we made the arches open to the street to leave room for cafes or outdoor sales. The lot is two hundred feet along the street, and the facade needed to be pierced or divided in some way to help reduce the mass of the building along the sidewalk. We decided to break the mass into two sections, each section with its own balance and asymmetry. Between the two masses, we created a twenty-foot-wide opening to the central courtyard, and to connect the two masses, we added a decorated wooden bridge. The wooden structure provides visual relief between the heavy and



compressive plaster buildings to each side. The bridge was hand-painted by artist Cara Cummings and myself, playing with versions of traditional florets, and, for some odd reason, salamanders eating oranges. From the street and sidewalk, the light and the plants of the courtyard glow. They seduce the pedestrian to come closer, under the colorful wooden bridge, and attempt to get into the flowering garden.

The courtyard acts as a semi-private space, used only by the residents of the building. It is the heart of the building, filled with tiled planters, fountains, and benches. Orange trees, lemon trees, tangerine trees, strawberry guava trees, Mission Fig trees, and succulents fill the planters. Each corner of the courtyard is used by the adjacent dwelling, while the center of the courtyard is used by all of the tenants. Surrounding the courtyard is a steel loggia, reminiscent of the wood and plaster loggias in southern Spain. These steel loggias are made of one-inch-thick steel cut from freehand pencil drawings to maintain a loose line feel. The twenty-seven-foot-high loggia sections were hot-dip galvanized, then shipped and craned

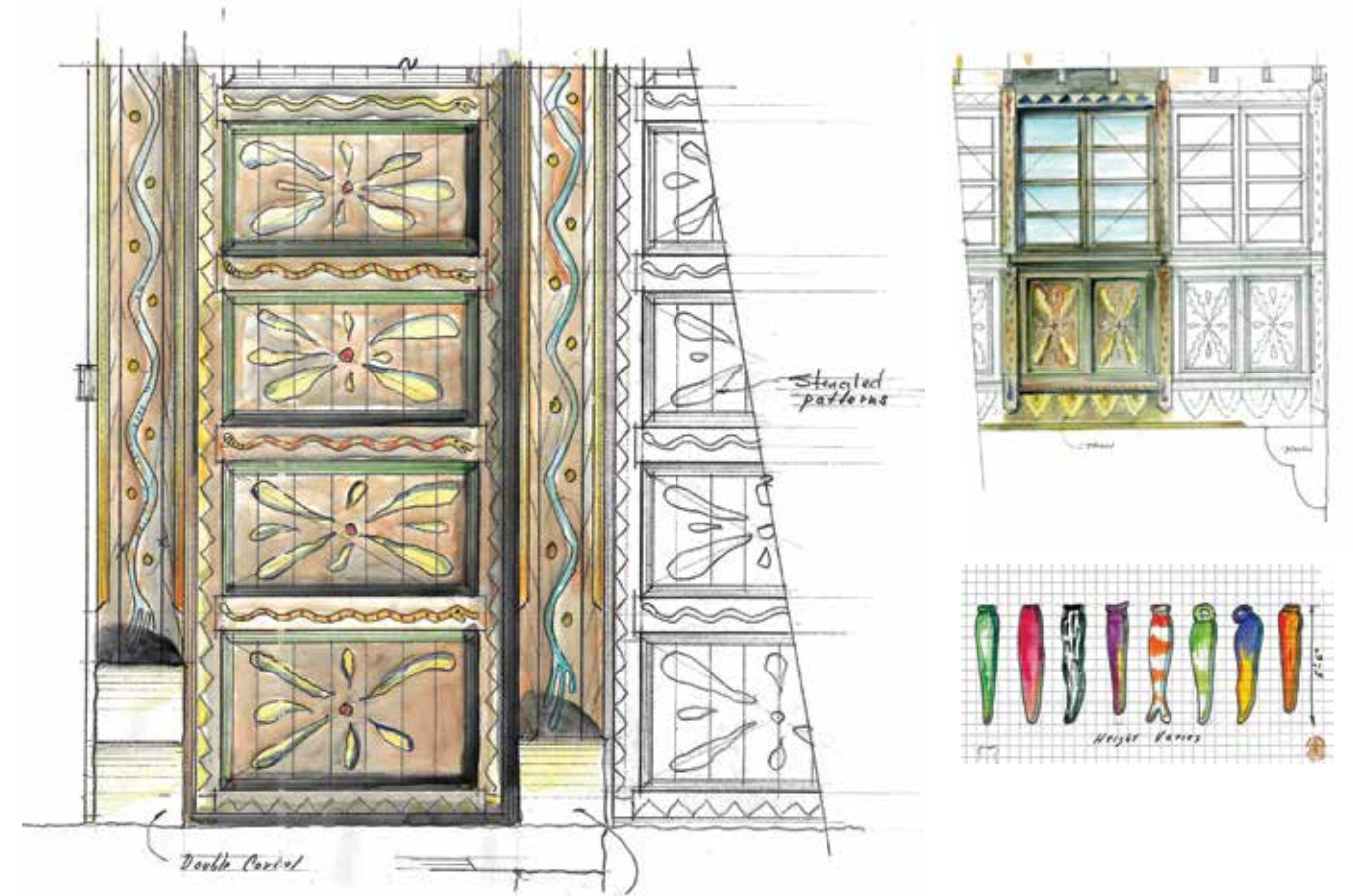
into place in six-foot-wide sections. Once bolted together, a concrete second floor was added, and they were complete.

The detailing and artistry get done only because of the “guild” we have been fortunate to nurture over the years. Upton Construction worked on our first building in 1994, and we have built over sixty together. We work with the same group of artisans and craftspeople on all of the buildings. These workers are people from the community who want to contribute to an interesting project. Dan Upton is a trained schoolteacher, and runs projects like a teacher, getting everyone involved and turning each problem into a challenge that each trade gladly takes on. There are very few product catalogs used in the design process, except for the ones we have invented.

We create our own original tile designs, fabric designs, lamp designs, and furnishings. We work with a glass blower to create our glass lampshades, and a stone artist named Anders Johnson who carves gargoyles from limestone and local sandstone. We generally design the landscape as well, working collaboratively with

Opposite page: The semi-private, shared space of the courtyard serves as the heart of the building. The steel loggias and decorated wooden bridge frame the space.

This page, from left: Looking northeast through the courtyard; A view across the courtyard fountain to the horseshoe arch; This covered exterior space opens to the courtyard and wooden bridge beyond through the ornamental balcony.



landscape architects to create a harmonious design. This method makes designing far easier, as we don't need to try to incorporate different design approaches into one design.

The ironwork is fabricated by David Shelton, one of my three brothers. Because of what he can do, and because we are of a similar mind, I am free to sketch and not worry about whether something can be done or not. We always find a way to come up with ironwork that adds to and enhances the project, as if each was designed for the other.

The plasterers are also a key component in creating these projects, as they rub the building into shape, giving the hard surface sensuality.

We treat all projects as if they were our last project. We don't dwell on the Spanish heritage

component. That is, we don't scour books for ideas and verification, but rather simply honor the general proportions of building with compressive materials, while maintaining the classic tradition of embracing the idea that buildings have a base, a body, and a top. Connections are celebrated, and we try to let the strengths and the flaws of the craftspeople add the final touch.

JEFF SHELTON is an architect in Santa Barbara, California. He has been designing buildings in his hometown since 1994. After graduating from the University of Arizona School of Architecture in 1983 and working for a decade in downtown Los Angeles, he returned to Santa Barbara. He has become known for his colorful and playful interpretations of the city's strict design guidelines. To date, he has designed over sixty residential, commercial, and mixed-use buildings in the Santa Barbara region.

Opposite page: Tiled horseshoe arches frame the public staircase leading to the residential units. The playful iron railing was fabricated by David Shelton, brother of the architect. Above, a painted coffered ceiling crowns the space.

This page, left and top right: Woodwork stenciling. Bottom right: Colorful studies for the ceramic pots that crown the building.