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Zen Story

Actress Susan Sullivan and Psychologist Connell Cowan Find Calm near Santa Barbara

Architecture by Andy Neumann, AIA/Landscape Architecture by Van Atta Associates

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A glass stair marks the entrance to the 2,675-square-foot Santa Barbara County, California, house (left) shared by actress Susan Sullivan and psychologist Connell Cowan. Architect Andy Neumann's firm built it around a 1960s structure by Jack Lionel Warner.

SHE WAS TRAINED AS A stage actress and has appeared in a number of films, but most of us are acquainted with Susan Sullivan by way of the small screen. For nine years (until her character's untimely death by drowning) the actress suffered exquisitely as the virtuous and stoic Maggie Channing on *Falcon Crest*. More recently, she sent up WASP stiff-necks as Kitty Montgomery on *Dharma & Greg*. And it's difficult to imagine anyone else bringing quite the same authority and cucumber-cool composure to a pitch for Tylenol.

It comes as something of a surprise to discover that in real life Sullivan has had her less-than-serene moments. "In the mid-'80s my daughter on *Falcon Crest* asked if I

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The owners decorated the living room and the other spaces in the house themselves. Finds include a Chinese cabinet and chairs from Kim3. The floor is polished concrete.

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was dating anybody,” confides the actress in her low, precise way over a bottle of sparkling water. “She knew a guy who had just written a book called *Smart Women/Foolish Choices*. I said, ‘That’s too interesting. Of course I want to go out with him.’ I always say he wrote the book and I lived it.” Smart woman, smart choice: She and psychologist Connell Cowan have been happily yoked ever since. They share a hilltop home in Los Angeles filled with Cowan’s paintings and sculpture, an apartment in New York City and a beach house in Santa Barbara County that is as self-possessed as Sullivan herself.

It was a flood in their L.A.



headquarters that led the couple to rent in Santa Barbara several years ago. While they were there, they did some house hunting, homing in on a quiet stretch of coast flanked by a wetlands preserve and lined with mostly old-fashioned beach cottages. The house that won them over was neither old (circa 1960s) nor particularly comfortable (a mere 900 square feet), but it *was* impressive—a modern pavilion

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LEFT: With sculptor Paul Lindhard, Cowan created the “familial” basalt sculpture before the guesthouse. The landscaping was done by Michael Sanchez, of Van Atta Associates.

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built by the prominent Santa Barbara architect Jack Lionel Warner. After weekend- ing at the place for a couple of years, Sullivan and Cowan decided it was time to ex- pand. "It was very pristine and beautifully designed in

"I always felt that it needed to be a clean, open space," says Susan Sullivan.

terms of scale," explains Sul- livan. "But it ended up just being a bit too small."

The hurdles to enlarge- ment were considerable. To begin with, the pair wanted to save and incorporate the existing house rather than simply start over from scratch. Then there were legal con- straints as to how high the roof could be (no higher than 25 feet) and how low the floor could be (no lower than four feet above ground, for flood control). And, like many beach houses, the place occu- pied a long, narrow lot and suffered from light depriva- tion. What Sullivan and Cowan had going for them was a knockout location and an architect on intimate terms with it: Andy Neumann, of Neumann Mendro Andru- laitis Architects—a lifelong Santa Barbara resident (and avid surfer) who has worked on more than 50 beach hous- es in the area.

Working hand in hand with the couple, Neumann and project architects Dave Men- dro and Bob Pester kept to the roof and floor restric- tions by raising the old house,

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ABOVE: The master bedroom achieves a minimalist look with a floating limestone hearth. The sculpture at rear is by Cecilia Z. Miguez. Rug, Baus- man & Company.



"It feels like the last unspoiled bit of Cali- fornia coast," Sullivan says of the area. LEFT: The master bath over- looks the ocean. The tub was designed by Philippe Starck.

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centering it on the lot and, in essence, appending a new two-story structure behind it. The lifted house was cantilevered like a monumental piece of sculpture over a reflecting pool and a breakaway wall that Cowan suggested cladding in Cor-Ten steel. Light and views were captured by a generous entrance courtyard, skylights, and walls of glass on the beach side. "It's quite a departure from the cottages on either side," says Mendro. "But keeping the house set back from the ocean and painting it gray helped it fit in."

On the street side, a low

translucent garage/guesthouse wall and a red-trimmed door only hint at the intrigue inside. "As you pop through that door, you enter this other world that is private and serene," says Neumann. "There's a whole sense of procession as you come up to the house." *Zen-like* is an overworked

word, but the stands of bamboo and the glassy reflecting pool, the water sculpture created by Cowan and sculptor Paul Lindhard from three slabs of basalt, and the circular garden of pebbles and grasses designed by the landscape architect, Michael Sanchez, of Van Atta Associates,

all form a composition as simple and as intricate as a koan.

Inside, Sullivan's notion of a twisting exposed stair, linking the airy living/dining/cooking areas on the first floor and the master suite upstairs, became a cardinal design feature. "I always felt it needed to be a clean, open architectural space," she says. "I'd seen a photo of some similar stairs, and the glass treads came in when Frank Louda, the contractor, found a way of adhering them to the wall." The floors are poured concrete, and there are walls of plaster and accents of ma-

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What Sullivan and Cowan had going for them was a knockout location and an architect on intimate terms with it: Andy Neumann.



Neumann notes that modern houses "look simpler but are demanding because you can't hide anything." The south face is glass. White patio furniture by Brown Jordan.

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ple, limestone and stainless steel, but for the most part this is a glass house. Upstairs and down, floor-to-ceiling glass doors and mitered glass windows celebrate not only the beach but also the surrounding wetlands and the mountains of Los Padres National Forest. (Check out the views from the actress's bath.)

Immersing themselves in every phase of design and construction, the couple also acted as their own decorators. Their first acquisition was a glass-and-steel dining table by Mark Harvey, a piece sculptural enough that they don't like to obscure it with chairs when they aren't entertaining. They bought an old Chinese chicken coop to serve as a TV hutch. And they enjoyed shopping for other antiques and art so much that they didn't want to stop. "It was like an art project that took three years from start to finish," says Cowan. "A faster pace wouldn't have given us time to think through those decisions. And we did kind of resist finishing. We didn't want to feel it was *done*."

"Fortunately, the series was still on the air," deadpans Sullivan, alluding to the long and not inexpensive process. "It took three years because every time the surf was up, the entire crew would be

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in the water." Cowan and Sullivan have since purchased their own wet suits—though their seaside pursuits tend to be more contemplative. "I was reading something that Matisse said about his compositions. He said that they were a total expression of his feeling. This house is an expression of how I want to feel," says the actress. "The ocean, those dolphins, those birds—I don't know how to say it without sounding corny, but it's like church. It's a place where you are connected to the divine." □