



*from Hope*  
to HOME

The Schiffer Family Rebuilds in Mission Canyon

BY CHERI RAE PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAUREN DEBELL AND ERIN FEINBLATT



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he location is familiar, but the house is not.

At one time, a big, old rambling ranch was situated here among the oaks, near the ephemeral creek in Mission Canyon where Kim and Howard Schiffer have lived with their children Austin, Zoe and Eliana since 1993.

In its place stands an exquisitely designed, simple structure with clean lines settled into a clearing in the quiet Mediterranean canyon like a Tuscan farmhouse in the hills of Italy. A gracefully curved driveway leads beyond the fine stonework to the elegant new home.

I've been here before: my daughter and Zoe were longtime schoolmates who spent long magical afternoons playing in the tree house, the old tire swing and the wilds near the creek bed. All that is gone now, and I'm disoriented by all the changes—not all architectural.

Kim laughs, "We moved the house over and turned it around."

Long before the Jesusita firestorm raged through this tranquil place, obliterating the family home and all the possessions in it, Kim had studied a book that Howard had given her, *Patterns of Home: Ten Essentials of Enduring Design*. The classic volume includes wisdom of many architects distilled into 10 principles of designing human-sized spaces, how to integrate home and nature and balance private and common space.

Feng-shui-wise, "I realized we needed to reorient the house to the heart and soul of the property," Kim notes. "I told Howard, 'We have to turn the house around in order to make it work.'"

It wouldn't have been easy—or likely even possible without spending a fortune the couple didn't have—to reorient the ranch house so the front door would face the creek and oak trees at the front of the property and the back door would face the rear, but when it was reduced to ashes through the crisis of the fire, the opportunity was there.

But that wasn't easy either—and very nearly not even possible. Due to the Tea Fire just months before the Jesusita fire, the



Left: Rescued from an ancient Pakistani mosque, these carved cedar corbels and doors form a framework for chef Kim Schiffer's "kickass kitchen." Above: Howard and Kim with their youngest daughter, Eliana, who attends Santa Barbara High. In the background is the Italian style pizza oven, which, once fired up, stays warm enough to use for several days.



The open plan kitchen/dining room and the design of the oversized kitchen island were inspired by one of the homes the family stayed in after the fire. Right: Kim enjoys a moment of solitude perched upon a 200-year-old cedar column, transformed into a reading nook.



To watch Kim at work in her kitchen go to: [www.sbseasons.com/blog](http://www.sbseasons.com/blog)



## How They Did It

“THE EXPERIENCE WE HAD designing the Schiffers’ home was extraordinary,” says architect Akiko Wade Davis, partner in Wade Davis Designs. “When we first met Howard and Kim after the fire...Jim (her partner) and I felt an immediate bond with them, and, unbeknownst to them, essentially started designing their home the second we got in our car to drive back home from our first meeting. We weren’t even hired on yet, but we just couldn’t help but be inspired by them from that first meeting. After they did hire us, they had complete trust in us, which allowed for a wonderful collaboration to take their wishes and create a home that suits them so well.”

“An absolutely unique part of this rebuild was that the Schiffers brought their three children in, so their kids were part of the design process,” says contractor Dennis Allen, president of Allen Associates. “That has never happened before in my more than 35 years of building homes.”

He continues, “Because the house was very under-insured, they opted to build about 500 fewer square feet than the original home in order to create both a more beautiful and more sustainable home. Choosing to rebuild smaller is very unusual, for post fire people usually go bigger.”

“We’ve worked on a number of fire rebuilds in the past couple of years, and they’ve all been different, of course. The people we have worked with obviously have had a lot to go through, and a lot to process before they can even think about rebuilding...It can be incredibly overwhelming for people, especially when it’s not something they ever planned to do...I don’t know if we would have the strength to handle it with the grace and perseverance that our clients have. With the fire rebuilds we’ve worked on, there has been a really strong sense of gratitude that our clients have had after they can move back into their homes. It’s much deeper than just moving into a new home. We’ve, in a sense, helped to give a part of their lives back to them, which is not a small thing, and we recognize that from the start,” says Davis.

“I was amazed and inspired by how the Schiffers turned both a personal and community tragedy into a loving community project” says Allen. “It really was a wonderful thing to be a part of.”

— LESLIE DINABERG

Schiffers’ insurance company cancelled its fire coverage, but Howard eventually managed to get them into a policy with the California Fair Plan, with just a day to spare before the policy expired. He signed up for another policy, too. “It was some kind of disaster insurance that said for \$500 bucks a year, we’ll pay your mortgage if your house burns down,” he remembers.

Without that extra insurance, they couldn’t have even considered rebuilding the house. After the traumatic losses from the fire, it wasn’t a given, but a thoughtful decision based on the family’s values and sense of belonging to a place they call home.

“We had to ask, ‘Do we really want to do this?’” Howard continues, “but then we thought it was really important for the kids to know we could come back and make a new start. This is our home.”

Howard, known for his humanitarian work throughout the world with his nonprofit organization Vitamin Angels Alliance, was quoted on the front page of *Los Angeles Times* the day after the fire. He had returned from a refugee camp in Kenya just days before. His comments were transmitted around the world, via AP, the BBC and NPR: “These people had nothing at all.

They had to deal with losing their homes to violence and hate, which, I believe is tougher than losing one to a natural disaster. We’re OK.”

With that consciousness of global community, along with the kindness and grace that defines this family, the process of creating a new home began. The energy they put into the universe returned in profound and wonderfully unexpected ways that they received with gratitude.

It wasn’t a phoenix, but a bright yellow oriole that caught Kim’s eye the first time she arrived on the scene with smoke still rising from the ashes. She sat sobbing in the car, unable to move. She reflects, “It was so devastating, looking at my life that wasn’t here. Then I started seeing these birds everywhere. Nature is so amazing, the life that was already here. Then I thought, ‘OK, I can get out of the car.’”

And that was the beginning.

Friends sifted through rubble and initiated fund-raising efforts; strangers from the Southern Baptist Convention removed the charred debris and carted it away for free; a surveyor offered, “When you need me, I’ll be there.” And he was. The next-door

neighbors offered to trim some tree limbs so the Schiffers’ new home would have an ocean view.

With Kim working with the design team and trusted to make the right decisions, Howard handling the finances, permits and insurance issues and a gathering of angels who guided them through the process and gifted them at every turn, they began to consider their new home.

When friends offered them leftover carved cedar corbels and columns from a 200-year-old mosque they had transported from the Swat Valley in Pakistan—a place considered paradise on earth, where the people are good-natured and industrious—the Schiffers realized they could create a home of their dreams.

“We never would have chosen this,” Howard observes, but if it hadn’t happened, “we never would have seen all this beauty, with all these people coming to us.” Kim chimes in, “People have let us have our dream house.”

In a collaborative celebration of creativity and practicality, they teamed with dozens of workers who listened, brought ideas into reality and transformed materials, old and new, into an inspired, artistic home of their own.



Howard and Kim love to entertain and celebrate their joy in their new home as often as possible. In the background are architect Akiko Wade Davis and Jim Davis of Wade Davis Design (below left), along with project manager Mark Hutter of Allen Associates and his wife Laura (below right).

## THE SCHIFFER TEAM

**Contractor:** Allen Associates, 805/884-8777  
www.dennisallenassociates.com

**Architect:** Wade Davis Design, 805/963-2414  
www.wadedavisdesign.com

**Landscape Design:** Brodie Design  
805/969-4157 www.brodiedesign.com

**Landscaper:** Erik Balderas, 805/453-7348

**Tile:** Cayetano Lopez, 805/451-8023

**Stonework:** Emi and David Botello  
805/637-0950

**Demolition:** Southern Baptist Disaster Relief,  
ojaiedlamb@yahoo.com

**Survey:** McGee Surveying Consulting  
805/964-3520, www.mcgee-gps-iriad.com

**Survey:** Robert Reese, 805/543-5375,  
www.reesesurveying.com

**Grading:** Pat Mills Construction  
805/453-5171 www.patmillsconstruction.com

**Painting:** LLG Painting, 805/933-1005

**Countertops:** Pacific Stoneworks  
805/648-4098, www.pacificstoneworks.net

**Engineering:** Anacapa Engineering, 805/  
641-1324, anacapaengineering@earthlink.net

**Wood Finishing:** Ken Kutcher  
805/966-3915, www.kenkutcher.com

**Furniture:** Great Rooms, 805/445-9057  
www.greatroomsdesign.com

**Plumbing:** Ventura County Plumbing,  
805/650-1941

**Electrical:** HS Electric, 805/947-6500

**Cabinets:** Coast Woodworking  
805/386-7088

**Exterior Windows and Doors:** Sierra Pacific  
800/824-7744,  
www.sierrapacificwindows.com

**Interior Windows and Doors:** Rustica Arts  
805/892-5200, www.rusticaarts.com

**Floors:** Dalgenes Interiors, 805/965-7751

**Appliances:** Ferguson Bath and Kitchen  
Gallery, 805/962-5811

**Lighting:** Steven Handelman Studios,  
805/962-5119,  
www.stevenhandelmanstudios.com

And in return, the team building the house was treated pretty well. Kim, a professional chef, served fresh lemonade and home-baked cookies, homemade cheeses and crackers. Howard notes, "She called everyone 'Lovey.'" In August, the family threw a huge appreciation party for everyone who worked on the project—serving two roasted pigs and dozens of pizzas fired in the new pizza oven.

The home and the family were blessed—literally—throughout the process. There are poems and good wishes scrawled in Magic Marker on the wooden framing inside the walls and cards, photos and articles glued on. Some are personalized: in the bedrooms of the children; a poem from Howard to Kim in the kitchen and one from Kim to Howard in the master bedroom. "It only stopped when there was a finished piece of wood and someone wrote on it," says Kim. "There's such love in the walls, it will just pass on through generations."

Their efforts to salvage and recycle materials warm the newness of the home. The wooden accents from the old mosque add an historic feel that softens and intrigues throughout the house; a striking dining table was built from poplar trees that were on the property and milled into lumber; some tile from Habitat for Humanity decorates the floor of the balcony outside the master bedroom.

And, in what Kim refers to as "a kickass kitchen," the hood design incorporates a couple of wooden birds, carved two centuries ago in a land far away. Perhaps they're orioles, since they symbolize peace, tranquility and happiness in a home where expansive giving—and receiving—is an everyday occurrence. ✨

**Clockwise from top left: The bedrooms were kept purposely compact in size to allow for larger communal living spaces; This dining room table, as well as the outdoor version at right, were both custom made by Don Seawater at Pacific Coast Lumber from the Schiffer's burned down poplar trees; As a professional chef, Kim is getting a lot of use out of her new vegetable garden, which was designed to her specifications by landscaper Pat Brodie of Brodie Design.**