



# RD

RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

FOR ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS  
OF DISTINCTIVE HOMES

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Reinventions





# Invention and Reinvention

Breathing new life into  
three neglected masterworks

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## Morgan Phoa Library and Residence

LOS FELIZ, LOS ANGELES  
SPF:ARCHITECTS

When the new owners of this historic, early Wallace Neff house called SPF:a to discuss a renovation and library addition, Zoltan Pali, FAIA, was only mildly interested. “I had been intimately involved with a Wallace Neff project before,” he recalls. “This one was on a property that was once much larger. But I worried that clients who would buy a house like this were probably really into historic architecture.”

Notwithstanding the name-brand provenance, renovations are not always the most exciting projects for architects to undertake. They have to find a way to fall in love with the old building while also tapping into a vision of how to contribute something new. Whether the “something new” aims for iteration or inven-



Opposite and this page: By day, the anodized bronze screens protect a vast collection of volumes in the new library from harsh sun, while activating the interiors with filtered light and shadows.

tion is a decision all parties must agree to—the clients, the architect, and, as was the case here, the Office of Historic Resources in Los Angeles.

Zoltan Pali was struggling with these questions when he and his wife and partner, Judit Fakete-Pali, decided to head over to the Getty Villa for a stroll through the galleries. (They know the museum better than most because they served as executive architects for the Machado + Silvetti renovation and expansion.) They capped the visit off with lunch at the museum café and a glass of wine. That’s when inspiration hit.

In his visits to the Spanish Revival Neff project, Zoltan hadn’t consciously noted the ornate precast concrete screens on the windows. But on his lunchtime sojourn to the Getty Villa, originally modeled after an ancient Roman country house, he noticed similar screens on the old building and they triggered an epiphany: They were the path forward on this project. He just had to get his clients and the Office of Historic Resources to agree with him.

### Three-Part Harmony

The screens provided Zoltan with a design language he could innovate. The other part of the puzzle was addressing the clients’ program requirements. In early meetings, they had presented their list: renovate the north end of the house, which is the casual, family wing already “remuddled” by a previous architect; add a substantial library and office area; work in storage and charging stations for a collection of electric vehicles; and put in a swimming pool.

Already on the property were the original house, a carriage house, and a small tree house. The once large estate had been pared down to just under 2 acres, much of it steeply sloped and cut through with retaining walls.

The clients initially suggested incorporating the new library in the north end renovation and Zoltan did studies of how that might work, but the idea didn’t spark any good solutions—not until it dawned on him to combine the library with the garage in an entirely separate building. The answer to the puzzle was a “separate



Above: Precast concrete window screens on the original Wallace Neff house inspired the metal library screens.



*This page:* The entry hall to the new library is compact, but an open stair and plenty of natural light make it feel more expansive.

piece of the same proportions and materiality as the original house,” and Zoltan knew the perfect place to put it.

“The carriage house is on the west end of the property, the main house is on the east, and to the north is a hill,” he explains. “In the gap between the west end and east end was a natural spot to add something to the property, but there was a hill. So, we thought, let’s tuck this library and electric car storage into the hill and align it with the old carriage house.”

The new building could provide the vessel for invention and remove the burden of the main house stretching beyond its natural capacity. But were the clients “really into historic architecture” or would they be willing to add a new structure to the property?

### The Buy-In

The answer to both questions is “yes.”

The house, originally designed and built in 1926 by Wallace Neff, was also renovated by him just a few years later after a fire destroyed much of the second floor. (Newspapers of the time mentioned a heroic family dog who roused everyone in the nick of time.) In the second iteration, the architect eliminated the upper floor of the two-story building and moved the master bedroom to the first level.

Because this is L.A., the house’s history includes a number of celebrity owners—among them Madonna and Katey Sagal, co-star of *Married With Children*. (The latter may have been responsible for the pink kitchen cabinets.)

Enough had been altered over the years prior to the house being placed on the historic register in 2008 to argue for a more liberal interpretation of renovation.

After a series of meetings with the clients, Zoltan learned his clients were not opposed to a new building and not rigid about its style, so the next question became “what it would look like?”

Zoltan thinks through problems by modeling potential solutions—physical models he can hold and manipulate. So he took the notion of the screens he had at the Getty Villa and churned them through a series of 3D creations. “I presented the clients with a dumb little laser-cut model of what the screens might look like,” he says. “I thought they weren’t going to like it, but they



*Clockwise from above:* A previous renovation captured the original attached garage as service space. A new grid of paved and pervious driveway tie together old buildings and new additions. The original ashlar pattern at the front entry provided inspiration for the driveway patterning. The library addition, existing guest house, and new retaining walls carve ribbons of garden in the hillside.

loved it. We decided to go to the historic resources department with it, and they loved it as well.”

“Same proportions and materiality as the original house” meant the new

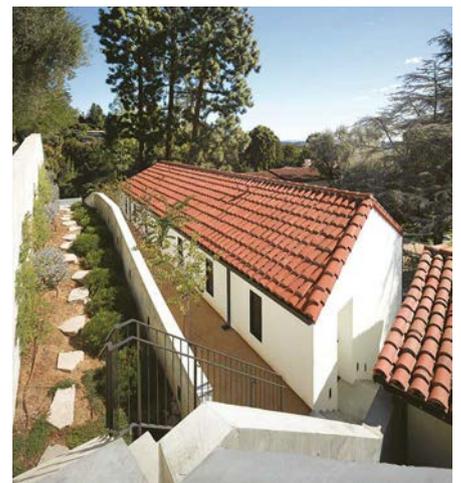
**“Everything is neatly organized on a mathematic module.”**

—Zoltan Pali, FAIA

building would “use the general shape—the simple gable idea and basic form of the house—so there wasn’t a foreign object on the site. Same form and same tile roof,” Zoltan explains. “The screens would be something that would give the

new building its own identity but tie it to the existing buildings.”

Not everyone could go to the Office of Historic Resources and get approval for such a loose idea. But Zoltan had kept them informed through design development, and the firm has an impressive track record of sensitive historic rehabilitation. In addition to the Getty Villa, SPF:a tackled renovation of the Hollywood Pantages Theatre, and the Crescent Drive Post Office as part of the Annenberg Center for the Arts complex. As often as not, the firm prefers a light touch on historic buildings and to add new buildings that complement them functionally and aesthetically—essentially the same plan they had for this project.





### Timeless Motif

The perforated screens that form the façade of the library/garage addition are highly abstracted from the concrete window screens of the original house. “We digitized them, modified them, and used their base proportions to create a series of bronze anodized aluminum panels—in upper-portion and bottom-portion designs.”

Like the screens on the old house, the new screens serve the practical function of shading interiors from the strong California sun. This is especially important for the library interiors on the second level, where the clients store nearly 5,000 volumes, including some rare editions. When the sun begins to set, the clients can slide open glass doors on the interior and swing open the upper panel screens to form “a series of little Juliet balconies.” Glass partitions function as safety railings.

Although the new building’s material vocabulary shares a common language with the existing buildings, the pertness of its planes contrasts with its nearly century-old companions. There’s a photograph that shows the rear of the old carriage house and the adjacent library building, linked by an outdoor stair. The pitch of the carriage house roof has a gentle, old-house sway to it that stands out from the military bearing of the library roof.

The two buildings nestle up to a series of retaining walls that capture flat ribbons of garden space on each ledge. Those controlled collisions of building, stair, hill—along with the stucco and red tile—remind Zoltan of his grandparents’ Hungarian hill town.

By day the screens of the library and garage put forth the cool reserve of Spanish lace, but at night, they are aglow with warmth and invitation. Inside, the stacks are clustered to the center of the room to allow circulation on both sides. There’s a kitchenette,



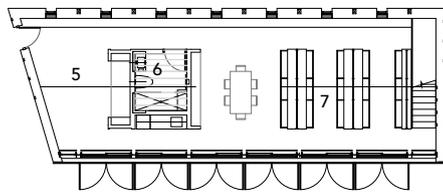
*Above and left:* A light-touch renovation revived the formerly pink kitchen. Acing the cross-vault geometry was the team’s toughest test.



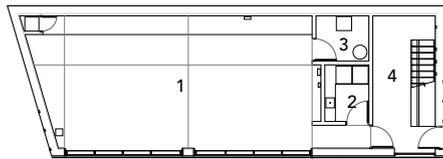
Above: Renovations within the existing house were subtle and sympathetic, but transformative—such as the new passage to the pool addition.  
Right: Custom casework weaves seamlessly into new vaulted niches, their wooden grills echoing the screen motif.



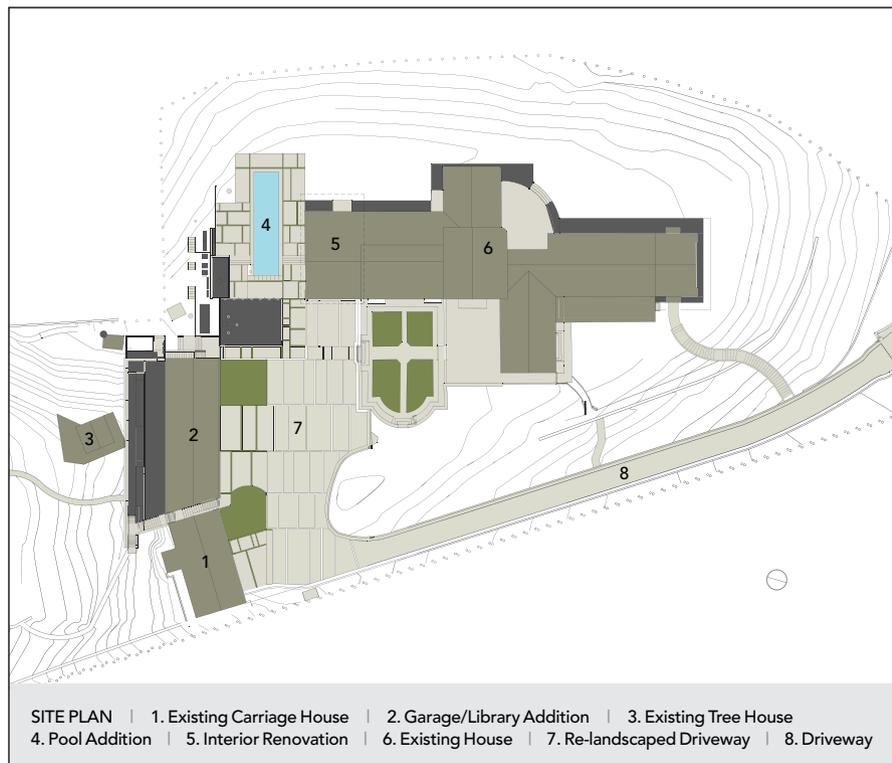
SECOND FLOOR: PRIVATE LIBRARY



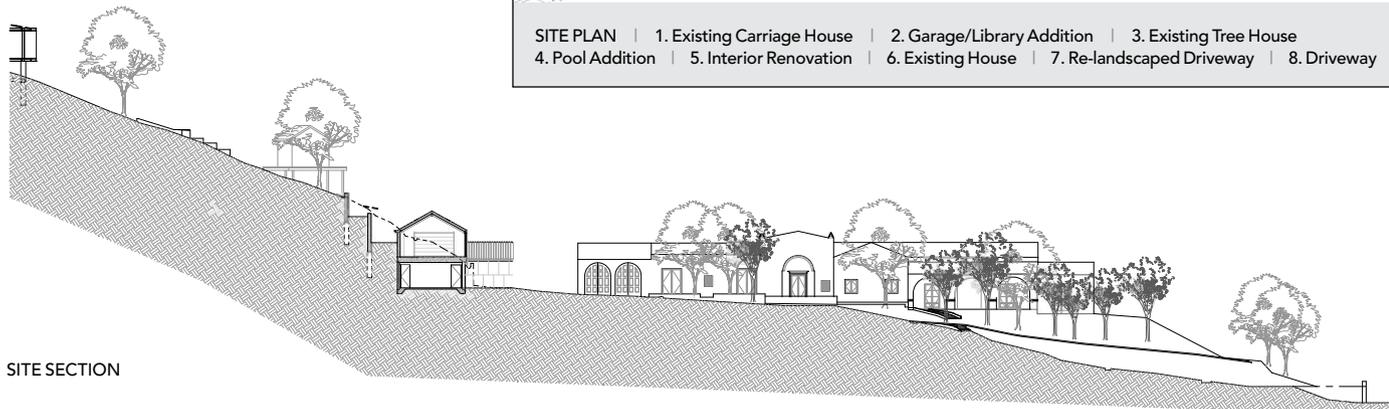
FIRST FLOOR: GARAGE



FLOOR PLANS | 1. Garage | 2. Storage  
3. Mechanical Room | 4. Stair Hall | 5. Reading Room | 6. Powder Room | 7. Library



SITE PLAN | 1. Existing Carriage House | 2. Garage/Library Addition | 3. Existing Tree House  
4. Pool Addition | 5. Interior Renovation | 6. Existing House | 7. Re-landscaped Driveway | 8. Driveway



SITE SECTION

small conference area, and a lounge with comfortable seating. Says Zoltan, “There’s a place for the books, a place to work, and a place to write. It’s a place to do the work that is not for money.”

There’s also a small bathroom with a shower, so the space can double as overflow guest accommodations. “Everything is neatly organized on a mathematic module,” he adds. “The shape of the gable, the volumetric expression of it—we really enjoyed those. And the screen elements that fold out like shutters.”

When the sun is shining in, the computer-carved screens cast shadows like artwork on the floors of the garage and library. For the clients, one of whom is a mathematician and the other who is an artist, the screens are the perfect synthesis of their two disciplines.

### Inside Job

The main house rehabilitation, freed from the task of accommodating the new library, focused on restoring Wallace Neff’s aesthetic, undone by previous renovations. “My first

comment when I saw the interiors was, ‘what happened here?’” says Zoltan.

“The previous architect had taken that north end and turned it into something you’d see in a Cape Cod house—all clapboard. And the kitchen—it was Bulthaup, but in a dark pink! It all had to be rethought and redone.”

Not only did the interiors need realignment with the original aesthetic, they also had to tie in with the new pool and terraced outdoor areas. Again, the solution drew heavily on mathematics—in this case, the geometries

of the cross vaults. “Elsewhere in the house, Wallace had started this series of beautiful plastered cross vaults,” Zoltan explains. “We had to recreate the geometry to be indistinguishable from the old. We did laser-cut models to show the framers—who were like finish-level carpenters—that the lathe had to be very accurate.”

The team also set about restoring tile floors and other elements damaged or altered over time. A new opening to the pool area echoes the grand-scaled arched windows throughout the house, and the pink kitchen received a facelift in a calmer wood species to harmonize with the hexagonal tile floors.

Although primarily a job of reimagining and reinvention, there were still some opportunities for invention in the main house. For instance, the architects designed lovely casework (a desk, shelves, and consoles) that tucks into

arched niches. The built-ins play with the screen motif, cut in wood instead of metal or concrete. “The cabinets were engraved with a CNC milling machine,” say Zoltan. “All these elements that were once done by hand, we have to tackle with computers to even approach the precision of the originals.”

In the library, built-ins have a modern edge, such as benches that swoop under windows and join up with low bookshelves.

### Pattern Language

Viewed in site plan, the re-landscaped driveway and pool terrace evoke the patterning of a Klimt painting—a hybrid blend of ornate, organic design language and the orthogonal orderliness of modernism.

“We needed to create a more thoughtful paving experience,” says Zoltan. “There were traditional tiles leading to the front of the house—a staged red grid, almost like a running bond ashlar



*This page:* Code required a fence for the new pool, so Zoltan made it as beautiful as the rest of the property.





The screen façade appears almost solid by day, but shimmers at night, exuding warm and welcoming light.

pattern. We created a similar pattern off the geometry of the new and old buildings, like shifting grids, that allowed us to manage different alignments. If you take it piece by piece, it shifts and moves, but it regularizes as a whole. To make the ground plane a cohesive thing is an old trick. It’s what old campuses do as they add new buildings.”

Sympathetic and artful additions and alterations can breathe new life into a property and underscore the value and character of all the components. The critical move here was to relieve the burden on the older house of a more complicated program. A nip here, a tuck there, and in grand Hollywood fashion, it’s ready for its close-up again, albeit with a dashing new co-star sharing the limelight. —S. Claire Conroy

## Morgan Phoa Library and Residence

Los Feliz, Los Angeles

**ARCHITECT:** Zoltan E. Pali, FAIA, principal-in-charge; Siddhartha Majumdar, AIA, project architect, SPF:architects, Culver City, Calif.

**BUILDER:** Bill Gordon, William Kent Development Inc., Los Angeles

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:** Korn Randolph Inc., Pasadena, Calif.

**PROJECT SIZE:** 3,300 square feet

**SITE SIZE:** 1.81 acres

**CONSTRUCTION COST:** \$900 a square foot

**PHOTOGRAPHY:** Roland Halbe

### KEY PRODUCTS

**WALL PANELS:** Arktura LLC

**WINDOWS:** Arcadia T200

**WINDOW SYSTEMS:** Western Window Systems

**COUNTERTOPS:** Caesarstone

**APPLIANCES:** Miele, GE Appliances

**FAUCETS:** Waterstone, Hansgrohe

**SINKS:** Kohler, Duravit, Dornbracht

**EXTERIOR LIGHTING:** Bega

**INTERIOR LIGHTING:** Louis Poulsen Lighting, Bartco Lighting, USAI Lighting

**LIGHTING CONTROL, SHADING:** Lutron

**PHOTOVOLTAICS:** PermaCity Solar