

## ALL IN THE FAMILY

By NEAL T. MELDEN

This is not the story of a house. It is the story of a home and the family that created it. If the owners were of lesser means, this writer is convinced that their home would still have been creative, and friendly, and children accommodating ... just on a more modest scale.

Fortunately, Dennis and Susan Sandler had the where-with-all to embark on the creative journey that resulted in this extraordinary home. “A home should be an organic thing that evolves as your family evolves ... as your children grow up and as everyone’s interests change,” explained Susan. “From start to move in it took four years ... but if this home will truly be an extension of our lives, it will never be finished.”

The home is a tightly designed 8,817 square feet. It has some of the most gorgeous built-in cabinets this author has ever seen. These include copper bubinga wood throughout the “Great Room,” including the bar and coffered ceiling. The hardwood floors are steamed beechwood imported from Yugoslavia. Even the guest bedroom treats overnighters to birdseye maple bathroom cabinets. Sumptuous treatments abound ... from the unique bathroom hardware to the deft use of nine different imported granites, including rare blue pearl granite in the pool’s spa. Italian travertine adorns the living room walls and entry. Amazingly, with all this elegance, this is a place specifically built for an active family to live, love and grow in.

“This home is for our children as much as it is for us,” Susan continued. “From the outset each child was able to choose their own room.”

“Tasha, who is now 15, is our oldest,” Dennis interjected. “She got to pick her room first. Ben (now 12) chose the room with the most interesting shape ... and Jeremy, who was three at the time, got what was left ... but it didn’t matter to him.”

Each child worked with a designer in selecting colors, cabinetry and furniture. “Every bedroom reflects each of our children’s special interests and accomplishments,” Susan added. “Last year Tasha became the UPHA Junior Equitation National Champion. Her room has special exhibit

cabinets she designed for her awards. Even her area rug was woven from a pattern and colors she personally selected. This kind of participation has made all of our children more sensitive to art and design. That's what's important to us."

But, let's start at the beginning of this adventure. Back in the 1980s, when Dennis Sandler was a practicing physician, the Sandlers had owned and outgrown several homes. By 1994 they were ready to build the one home that they would never want to leave.

For this purpose, Dennis and Susan had purchased a lot in Del Mar with a spectacular ocean view. But as they were beginning to plan that home, they were offered what Dennis referred to as "an obscene amount of money" for it. He sold, and then came upon the Rancho Sante Fe property of this home. Before the Sandlers purchased this lot, they brought their architect Jorge Engel to the site and asked his opinion.

"We needed Jorge involved from the very beginning," Dennis explained. "This was a difficult piece of property to build a home on. It's a hillside lot with a decided slope and an odd shape."

"What we needed most in an architect is someone who understood our taste and what we were looking for in this home," continued Susan.

"When we started designing this home, his inquiry wasn't directly about the design," Dennis recalled. "Instead, Jorge kept asking us question after question about how we lived, what we did together as a family ... and what we did alone."

Engel took them through a procedure that is not emphasized by most architects. "This process kept the integrity of what Susan and I wanted," said Dennis. "Jorge taught us to be patient and let the numerous complexities settle in. By doing so, we not only saved money, but continued to refine the design around our specific lifestyle."

"That's right," remarked Susan. "Jorge kept asking us questions and made drawing after drawing ... not computer drawings either. These were hand-rendered illustrations. He's right up there with those gifted architects who are also designers and artists. And, he didn't rush the design phase. For almost two years our mistakes were on paper, not with cement and wood."

Engel describes his approach this way: “When people come to me, they often say I want a Cape Cod home, or Colonial Home, or whatever. They define it by style. In my opinion, that’s a house, not a home. A home is not the sticks or bricks ... or the design style. It’s people.”

The general sense of what the Sandlers initially wanted never faded. It evolved. At first blush, every visitor is so visually awestruck that they would assume that beauty was the primary consideration. But, it was the opposite. How the family would function was always paramount. If you were to analyze each room and define the various uses, one truth would become self-evident: Form does follow function in the Sandler home.

“Susan and I have a very similar aesthetic sense; probably more than most married people. We like eclectic. In working with us, Jorge left enough room for us to actively participate in selecting the design elements ... to express our quirky view of the world,” Dennis explained.

Susan continued: “Dennis and I are home people. Our preference was contemporary design, whatever that is.”

“We knew it was a form of modern, but not cold, austere modernism,” interjected Dennis.

“We lean toward warm colors,” added Susan. “But we don’t mind cool for accents. We love the contrasts between natural textures, like stone and wood. And, we do not like expansive walls in only one color. That’s why so many of our interior walls are subtly sponged in several colors.”

“Sometimes it’s not so subtle,” Dennis quipped. “But the unexpected is fair game ... as long as it’s interesting and coherent. You can go through magazines and get ideas, which we did at the beginning. But they are still bits and pieces.”

“In the end,” Susan said, “We threw all the magazines away and mutually created` our own work of art with Jorge ... and we live inside the picture frame. That’s what’s so wonderful about our home.”

Initially there was also a professional designer involved. “Here’s where it got a little bizarre for a while,” Dennis said. “We hired Jannet Butzinger to

work on the interior designing. She was very good, but her contribution was interrupted when her husband was transferred to Germany and she followed. At the same time, Jorge took a position in Texas and he also left, but commuted to San Diego for this project, including the space planning and kitchen design. Now he's back in San Diego with a local architectural practice."

As the project progressed, another valuable team member was called upon: Mark Gleicher of Modern Home Systems. "This is the company responsible for the speaker system throughout our home, the entertainment centers, our home theater and our easy-to-operate remote control system," explained Dennis.

Modern Home's job was to gently take the bull by the horns and coordinate their work with the framers, electricians and cabinet company. "This was no easy task," said Dennis. "But they did it so professionally that I was genuinely amazed at how flawlessly it worked."

"The objective is to make complex systems simple for the trades to deal with," Gleicher added. "Everybody must get on board; framers, electricians, drywall people, cabinet makers ... we're all in this together. They enjoy the challenge and creativity. Home theater and multi-area sound is not the same old thing."

Dennis and Susan's sound system is designed to not only flow from room to room within the house, but also to the exterior patios and all the way down to the peristyle colonnade at the pool. Gleicher explained: "This is what we call a 'whole-home' sound system with all the bells and whistles. The same music must flow seamlessly from one area to another, but you should also be able to opt for different music in different areas. And, the entire system must be designed to operate from any room in the home."

"These audio/video systems were created specifically for our lifestyle," Dennis said. "And as far as Modern Home Systems goes ... this is a great company. When something needed tweaking, they were here ... no delays, no hesitation ... and no excuses."

"Our family loves nothing better than making fresh popcorn, nestling together on our sofa in the Great Room and watching a movie with the surround sound turned up," Susan bubbled. When the Great Room's

theater is not in use, they hide the large screen TV and components behind beautifully veneered doors.

This is the home that family values really built. It did not start out as a work of art ... though it fortuitously ended up as one. It began as a habitat for a specific family. It was designed to evolve with that family. Expensive? Yes, it was to be that, but not pretentious ... and certainly not a monument to impress others. The owners, Dennis and Susan Sandler, must be given credit. Their genuine decency and unselfish commitment to their family has given this home an indelible purpose ... one that will live in the memories of everyone involved, including this writer.

## **RESOURCES**

### Architect:

*Jorge Engle, AIA; Del Mar*  
(858) 350-1175

### General Contractor:

*Steigerwald-Dougherty, Solana Beach*  
(858) 259-5100

### Custom Cabinets:

*Van's Custom Cabinets, Escondido*  
(760) 745-5432

### Children Rooms and Bath Cabinet Design:

*Jannet Butzinger, ASID (Now Residing In Germany)*  
(001) 49 6223 2109

### Home Theater/Multi-Area Sound:

*Modern Home Systems*  
7007 Carroll Road, San Diego  
(858) 554-0404

### Kitchen Appliances:

*Brad Ansley, Unique Visions, Solana Beach*  
(760) 747-4703

### Faux Surface Painting:

*Beth Ladwig, San Diego*  
(619) 595-0655

### Master Bedroom Closet Cabinets:

*Closets By Design*  
7310 Miramar Road, Suite 204, San Diego  
(800) 293-3744

