

# az-life style

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# RENEWED SPIRIT

*Paradise Valley Home Gets  
A Family-Friendly Makeover*

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architect: George W. Christensen

designer: Nancy Kitchel

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The cozy garden room is where the homeowners often read and relax.



The living room offers an abundance of natural light and ample space for entertaining.

In the annals of Arizona architecture, few architects have left as lasting a legacy as the late George W. Christensen. Christensen, who passed away in 2004, is celebrated for his masterful use of light, space and materials, as well as for timeless residential designs that are as prized today as they were when they were first built. Influenced by his lifelong travels and a stint working with Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer in South America, Christensen often incorporated elements of Spanish Colonial and Mediterranean-style architecture in his designs.

**T**his Christensen home, which features an Italianate-influenced mien, replete with Roman-arched windows and doors, a Juliet balcony, wrought-iron detailing, a plethora of picturesque patios and interiors bathed in natural light, is a perfect example. Cozy and inviting, thanks to a combination of 10-foot to 12-foot-tall ceilings—some coffered, some beamed—intimately scaled rooms and a rich array of finishes, including pecan and stone flooring, alder cabinetry, cantera fireplace surrounds and Calacatta Gold marble countertops, the 6,000-square-foot abode is suggestive of an elegant villa in Tuscany.

The homeowners, a physician and his wife, moved to Arizona from New Jersey in 1970 with their two young daughters. Harsh winters and their children's seemingly constant bouts with colds drove them west in search of more temperate climes. "We looked at the almanac to see which cities were the fastest growing. It came down to Denver, Colorado and Phoenix. After visiting both cities in December, the choice was clear," the husband shares.

The family settled in Paradise Valley and resided in another home before deciding in 1996 to custom design this one. Part of the impetus to build anew

was driven by the wife's diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Their former house—a Santa Fe-style adobe—had many levels and stairs. "We didn't know how far the MS would progress over time but thought that I would likely need a home that was all on one level at some point," she says. "We built this house to have a straight shot across it." Although the residence has two stories, all the main spaces—kitchen, living, family, dining and sitting areas and master suite—are on the top level and free of stairs. An elevator allows for easy access to the lower level, which houses a game room, gym, wine cellar, guest suite, laundry and workroom. Another motivating factor was the property's prime location. High on a mountainside, it offers privacy as well as infinite Valley views to the north and a dramatic rocky backdrop to the south.

The couple, whose children are now grown and married with kids of their own, enlisted interior designer Nancy Kitchell of Kitchell • Brunsnighan Design Associates to design both the original interiors back in '96 when they first moved in as well as recent alterations necessitated after a wild desert storm sent a slurry of mud and water down the mountain last year and smack into the dining room and wine cellar. >>

The pair first met Kitchell more than three decades ago when they enlisted her help with the interiors of the adobe home. "We've worked with Nancy for more than 30 years now. She was with Est-Est back then," explains the lady of the house. Kitchell, who has been in the design industry since 1966 and is something of a local legend, joined Est-Est in '68 and credits its founders—designers William Bennett and Patrick Maas—with the majority of her training. "I learned so much over the 12 years that I worked for them," she says. The wife and Kitchell enjoyed collaborating and soon became friends. Over the years, that relationship has blossomed. "I have seen their children grow and worked on second generation interiors for them," the designer confides. "You could say that I have become a bit of a fixture in their lives; I dearly love each one of them."

Among the directives the couple gave Kitchell for the latest revamp, post the flood, was to make the interiors as inviting and family friendly as possible. "We have four grandchildren now, and I wanted them all to come here, plop down and feel comfortable," explains the wife. That meant not only selecting soft, beautiful, high-quality fabrics that are able to withstand heavy use, it also required seating layouts that comfortably accommodate large gatherings but still feel cozy and intimate when it's just the wife and husband at home. "The whole family comes over every weekend for dinner, and the grandkids like to bring their significant others

as well now," she says. The couple's other directive was to make the interiors as lovely as they were before the flood so that no one would continue to feel the loss. "It was definitely a traumatic event for them," Kitchell says.

When it came time to select furnishings for the renovated interiors, the designer looked first to prized pieces already in the owners' collection. Because she has conceived the interiors of more than three houses for the couple, including the Paradise Valley adobe as well as vacation getaways in Sedona and Vancouver, and because the style of this residence is in a similar vein, many of the owners' existing furnishings fit in seamlessly. "Nancy takes things from other homes and repurposes them so beautifully," states the owner.

With an overall color palette of earth tones threaded through the home, including rich ambers and cocoas along with warm creams and celadon, it was also easy for Kitchell to move furnishings and accessories from one room to another post the flood. "It's almost as if you can mix and match pieces throughout the home," the wife adds. This came in handy when the owners decided to turn the former dining room, which was destroyed during the flood, into a sitting room—a more functional space that is better suited to their current lifestyle. "We never used the old dining room all that much, so we decided to move the dining table into the living/great room and turn this space into a room that we can enjoy on a daily basis," she explains. >>



A dining area adjacent to the kitchen includes a welcoming fireplace.



The family room provides a gathering place for the entire clan.

“We have four grandchildren now, and I wanted them all to come here, plop down and feel comfortable.”

- the homeowner

With its sumptuously upholstered furniture, Versailles pattern limestone floors and expansive “inside-out” view window with a spacious cantera sill/shelf that extends from inside the room out to the patio, the sitting room has become the couple’s favorite hang-out. “The fact that I can sit here and look out at that epic mountain view, it’s just wonderful,” the wife says. The family’s Abyssinian cat likes it too and can often be found lounging on the sill.

Elegant old-world flavor defines the kitchen, which boasts Venetian-plaster walls in a mellow Tuscan hue. A small island topped with Calacatta Gold marble serves as a prep station and a casual eating zone. Lending texture and country charm are a ceramic tile backsplash and a porcelain farmhouse sink. Alder cabinets feature a glazed finish, planks of pecan flooring lend warmth and an oversized Sub-Zero stainless-steel refrigerator ensures there’s plenty of fresh eats.

Tall Roman-arched doors and windows in the living room take full advantage of the home’s dramatic surroundings and open to a patio on the south side and a Juliet balcony on the north. Sheer, gossamer draperies in a linen and silk blend convey an ethereal feel and allow for an abundance of natural light while coffered ceilings impart classic elegance. Wingback chairs upholstered and accented with

silver nailhead trim are set near the fireplace in a cozy quartet. Anchoring the other end of the space is a formal dining table. “During the remodel, we arranged the furniture around the fireplace and brought the dining table into the east end of the room. The homeowners find they use the dining area much more in this new location,” says Kitchell.

A new layout in the family room, which includes twin loveseats that face each other, ensures the space can comfortably accommodate both the extended family during visits as well as the couple alone. Upholstered in a linen fabric on their bases and a colorful patterned velvet on their rolltops, they play off a striped rug below. Of the patterned velvet accent, Kitchell says, “It adds a fresh and delightful spark to the room.”

Outside there are paved patios in nearly every direction. Punctuating the pool area as well as the home’s Italian-leaning are a series of classic columns. Cushioned seating upholstered in sun-resistant fabrics spells comfort, while a water feature designed to mimic a waterfall softly serenades.

And while the stunning house appears to be fully furnished and complete, Kitchell believes that it is still a work in progress. “The best houses are never really done because they contain real people whose lives change as do their living situations,” she says with a knowing smile : . :