

A woman with short brown hair, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt and dark pants, is sitting on a wooden kitchen island. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The kitchen has white cabinets, a stainless steel sink with a faucet, and a wooden countertop. A bowl of red tomatoes is on the counter. In the background, there is a chandelier with several lit candles.

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**kitchen
chameleon**

georgie kajer's work
stands out
by blending in

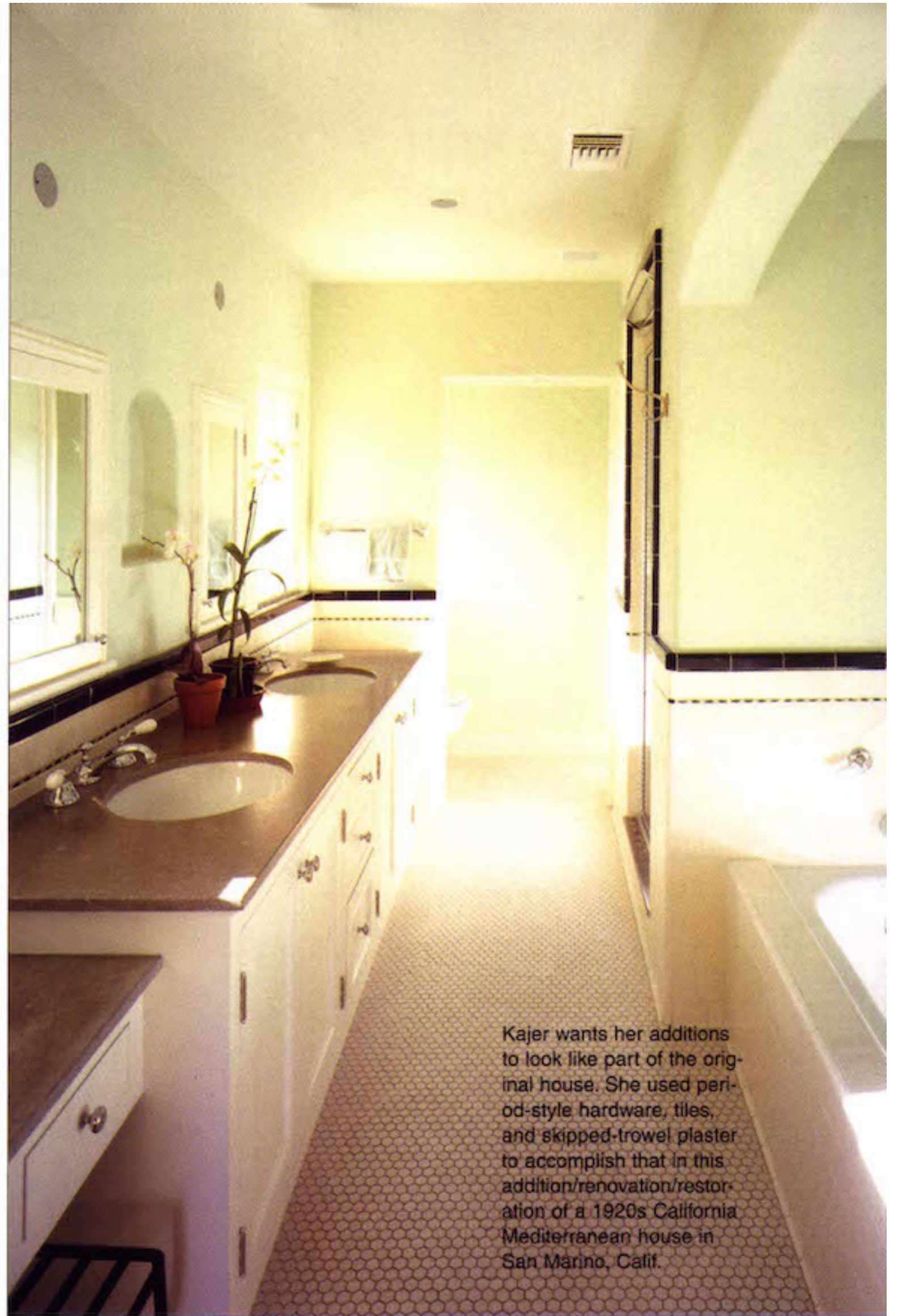
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Photos: Kajer by Mark Robert Halper; interiors © Eric Staudenmaier

kitchen chameleon



Kajer wants her additions to look like part of the original house. She used period-style hardware, tiles, and skipped-trowel plaster to accomplish that in this addition/renovation/restoration of a 1920s California Mediterranean house in San Marino, Calif.

georgie kajer's
kitchens and baths
stand out by blending in.

by meghan drueding

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annual house tours run thick and deep in genteel Pasadena, Calif., home to a treasure trove of historic residences. But local architect Georgie Kajer, AIA, stopped going on them years ago. "I always ended up disappointed," she explains. "In so many of the remodels, the moment you walk in, you know something's been done to the original house. The thing that's interesting about old houses is their scale and proportion, and it's too sad to see that taken away."

kitchen chameleon



Collaboration with other design professionals is a key part of Kajer's philosophy. She worked with interior designer Trish Boyer of Unruh Boyer in Los Angeles on this Glendale, Calif., ranch-house remodel.

Kajer loves old houses, and she loves her native Southern California. She's made a successful business out of those two passions, building a 12-year-old practice that specializes in sympathetic residential remodeling. Her work runs the gamut from light-filled ranch-house renovations to period restorations, with some new houses, private schools, and pro bono work sprinkled in. All of it navigates the tricky territory between deference to a vernacular style—usually California Mediterranean, Arts and Crafts, or Tudor Revival—and respect for her upscale clients' modern lifestyles.

learning the ropes

Kajer got an early education in the importance of a good floor plan growing up in a Garden Grove, Calif., ranch house. Philip Johnson's Crystal Cathedral sat right next door, but the ranch had more of an impact on her design sensibilities. "People sneer at them, but a good ranch house has a really livable floor plan," she says. At the age of 18, she knew she wanted to be an architect and entered school at Cal-Poly, Pomona. A year of study in Italy during college intensified a soft spot for the whitewashed, tile-

roofed Mediterranean house so popular in California during the 1920s and '30s. A job after college with Los Angeles architect William Pereira convinced Kajer that life at a large, corporate-style firm wasn't for her. And a year-and-a-half stint designing in Japan gave her insight into the sense of well-being that good architecture imparts. "I didn't leave Japan wanting to do 'Japanese architecture,'" she says. "But I learned a lot there about balancing spaces."

Back in the States, Kajer fed her interest in old houses by working for Pasadena-based restoration architect Tim Andersen. The West Hollywood, Calif., firm Serrurier Architects & Associates, which specializes in residential projects, was her last stop before going out on her own.

Like many architects with a hankering to open their own practice, Kajer didn't pay much attention to conventional wisdom. "I started my business at a terrible time, the recession of the early '90s," she says. "I was so lucky that friends were willing to hire me to do very small jobs for them, like laundry-room renovations. I did some really nice laundry rooms." Many of those friends worked at The Walt

The staff of Kajer Architects (from left): Tanya Cooper, Todd Curley, Scott Uriu, and Georgie Kajer. "I plan on keeping the office small," Kajer says. "It's more in line with my management style."



Disney Company's nearby animation studios, and they passed her name on to other friends in the entertainment and technology fields. When the later-1990s economic boom kicked in, Kajer found herself with a strong network of newly successful clients, many of whom hired her three or four times to remodel different parts of their houses.

place setting

As business grew, creating a sense of place remained a central goal of Kajer's practice. "I'm a regionalist," she says. "I believe in responding to climate with architecture." Though California Mediterranean is her hands-down favorite house style—"It's just so appropriate for the indoor-outdoor living opportunities that we have here; there are so many elements to play with"—she also enjoys climate-responsive work that's very different from her own. "Lake/Flato's work in Texas is very interesting to me," she says. "It's intellectually challenging, and it's of the place." She also appreciates the cool, fashion-shoot Modernism of Schindler and Neutra. Along with her husband, Eugene Sands, and their 1-year-old daughter, Mirjana, Kajer lives in a 1947, architect-designed ranch house with a rear terrace that functions nearly year-round as an outdoor living space.

Kajer describes her own work as self-effacing, and the same word could be used to describe her personality. It's won her fans in useful places—the world of general contractors, for instance. "Georgie doesn't have that 'stand aside, the architect is coming' mentality," says Tom Lake, a Pasadena builder who's worked with her for more than a decade. "There are lots of architects out there who want to create a new vocabulary," she says. "I'm not one of them. My goal is to make



Useful, attractive storage spaces, like the built-in in this master bath, abound in Kajer's designs. The kitchen (below left) of this 1920s Arts and Crafts addition/renovation in Pasadena, Calif., contains a casual breakfast nook (below right), something Kajer tries to include in every project.



Photos: Group photo by Mark Robert Halper; all others © Eric Staudenmaier

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to a house that never had it before?"—georgie kajer, architect

kitchen chameleon



In this 1915 Arts and Crafts remodel in Pasadena, Kajer reconfigured the kitchen to admit extra daylight and balance out the dark woods appropriate to the style. The master bath is similarly detailed.

a seamless connection between an original house and its new parts.”

thoughtful spaces

While she clearly prizes the character and romance of early-20th-century homes, Kajer is no slave to tradition. During her 22 years as an architect she’s formulated some very definite ideas about adapting old houses to the way people live today. “The universe of design problems in residential work is not that big,” she says. “The real challenge is, how do you give an open-plan feel to a house that never had it before? How do you make a kitchen that used to be part of the servants’ quarters into one you can use for entertaining? How do you take a stiff, Arts and Crafts house and break it open while staying true to the architecture?”

Formulating answers to these kinds of questions keeps Kajer’s design muscles strong. “I try to show clients three possible iterations of each space,” she says. “My job is to bring people options, and then guide them

through the selection process.” She’s a big proponent of open, informal floor plans, and she removes windowless hallways and rabbit-warren rooms with relish. Rather than adding on vertically, which California’s seismic codes make prohibitively expensive, she’ll either add on horizontally or reconfigure the existing house to find extra space the owners didn’t think they had. “It’s usually about flow and circulation,” she says.

Her clients agree. “I have small kids, and I wanted a family room just off the kitchen,” says Marie Queen, whose remodeled 1937 Monterey Colonial Revival home is a recent Kajer project. “The way she did it is fantastic. I can keep an eye on the kids easily, and it really keeps the integrity of the house.” Utilizing outdoor space is also a pet theme; nearly every remodel Kajer’s done ends up with an outdoor fireplace and extensive plantings, often designed in conjunction with a landscape architect.

Kitchens and baths are a main-

Kajer uses color to liven up small spaces. This kitchen in a 1920s California Mediterranean restoration in Glendale benefits from magnesite floor tiles, red granite counters, and bright-green window trim.



stay of her work, and it's here that her concern for function and form shines especially brightly. As a busy entrepreneur and new parent, Kajer obviously understands the value of extra storage space in hard-working areas of the house. Handy nooks and lots of built-ins characterize most of her kitchens and baths, no matter what the style. Durable, low-maintenance materials like soapstone and butcher block suit hectic lifestyles.

Most of the kitchens she's designed contain an island plus a separate, informal dining area or breakfast nook. "A lot of people think an island is fine for casual eating," she says, "but I think a table and chairs are much more comfortable." She's conscious that families tend to spend much of their quality time together in the kitchen, and allows enough space in between appliances so two people can prep or clean up at the same time. Even in these comparatively high-tech rooms, she makes the marriage of old and new work, using vintage tiles, hardware, and fixtures as counterparts to sparkling new appliances.

Owning a small business means that Kajer has to make careful choices about cash flow. She currently employs three designers, who act as project managers and handle CAD drafting. (She herself draws by hand.) And she invests in having her best projects shot by a professional architectural photographer.

"In many ways, this is still an old man's profession," Kajer says. "In cases where I'm finding it hard to be reckoned with as a woman, I'll take out my portfolio, and the problem goes away quickly."

Her work may not invent a new vocabulary, yet it speaks for itself beautifully. ra



The renovated kitchen in this Pasadena residence exemplifies Kajer's approach to her clients' relaxed but busy lifestyles. It's large enough for entertaining but also highly functional, with an island prep sink and a commercial-style range. Elsewhere in the house, she added a simple, light-filled bath (below right).



Photos: © Eric Staudenmaier

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