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The \$5,000 Solution

Charles Allen Brings Drama and Sophistication to a Los Angeles Apartment



Text by Amanda Vaill/Before Photography by Peter Valli
After Photography by Fred Licht/Portraits by Jim McHugh

Working with a budget of \$5,000, interior designer Charles Allem updated part of a 1950s Los Angeles guesthouse for Jeff Kohl. RIGHT AND OPPOSITE: For the living/dining room walls, he matched the hue to the marble floor veining. He re-covered a 1950s sofa in inexpensive flannel.

Charles Allem's is probably not the first name you would think of when trying to design a house on a shoestring. The South African-born Allem, a disciple of David Hicks and William McCarty Cooper who, he says, "began designing the moment I set foot on this planet," is notable for extraordinary—and extraordinarily lavish—interiors, such as Dayna and Steven Bochco's many-pavilioned Hawaiian pleasure dome (see *Architectural Digest*, August 2005) or the \$27 million, 32-room James Bond-style bachelor pad he rebuilt for private investor Reagan Silber in Bel-Air (see *Architectural Digest*, January 2005). But when the high-end Los Angeles real estate broker Jeff Kohl was camping out in a Los Angeles apartment while his own home was being renovated, the designer sensed an opportunity.

"I thought, Why not undertake this as a personal chal-

RIGHT: Allem, left, and Kohl discuss armchair options at Shelter in Los Angeles. "How much something costs doesn't have anything to do with how marvelous it is. It's the shape and what it's made of. The object itself must excite you," the designer comments.



lenge?" says Allem. He was, he admits, intrigued by the space in question, which had been carved out of the guesthouse of a 1950s Regency mansion built by the architect John Woolf for the film and television star Loretta Young. "And when I saw the rooms"—an oval living/dining room with deep dentil molding and a marble floor, and a bedroom leading to a sunny patio—"I was so excited that I had to do it."

Kohl, who was sharing the flat with his Samoyed, Sasha, didn't want to put up with lengthy or extensive renova-





"Keeping one color is always my philosophy," says Allem. "It makes the area look bigger and creates a flow from room to room." **BELOW AND RIGHT:** Near the bedroom, Allem used a "lusty orange" suede pillow from Shelter to punctuate a 1930s flannel-covered armchair.

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tions; that was why he'd taken the apartment in the first place. But he did want to make the small space seem larger and to give it a contemporary, sophisticated feeling. "The whole thing needed editing," is how he puts it.

Allem took his editorial guidelines from the main room's marble floor, original to the house, which "had a beautiful vein of gray running through it." Since nothing changes the look of a space more quickly (and cheaply) than a coat of paint, Allem decided to cover the walls with Benjamin Moore's rocky coast paint, a perfect match

for the gray in the marble. At Boomer's Carpet Outlet he found carpeting in the same gray for the bedroom. But his greatest coup was buying a bulk lot of gray flannel ("I think it cost \$25 a yard," he says) to reupholster Kohl's 1950s sofa, cover a headboard and make draperies (some of which disguise unsightly storage) for the bedroom.

A trip to Crate & Barrel gave Allem and Kohl the perfect note of contrast to all that gray—a pair of persimmon velvet pillows, whose color is echoed in a 1950s painting by Mario de Ferrante that was already hanging in Kohl's living



LEFT: Allem was careful to preserve the white dentil molding throughout the apartment to give a visual punch to the new darker tone. "The architecture was great to work with," he says of the structure, which was designed by John Woolf. "We just tried to give old pieces new life."

graphs, 1950s sculptures and oil paintings, and some modernist furniture, not to mention a set of Frette linens for the bedroom. "It's nice to work with someone who has a sense of what they like, and nicer still when they already have it," Allem says. But he gave some of Kohl's existing pieces what he calls a "new millennium finish": The vintage sofa was not only reupholstered but the legs

room. Moving on to Shelter, a vintage-furniture store on Beverly Boulevard, they discovered another shot of color—a paprika-colored rubber Non chair by Kallemo for the bedroom—among the wealth of midcentury pieces in stock. "They have wonderful things for incredible prices," marvels Allem, "which really give you a lot of bang for your buck." Another treasure was a pewter-finished low table whose richly worked surface makes it seem like a piece of much greater value than it is. "I was shocked at the price," Allem confesses. A few lamps from Crate & Barrel and some pillows from Shelter completed the look.

The designer's budget got an assist from the fact that his client already had a carefully edited collection of art and furnishings—vintage photo-



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ABOVE AND LEFT: A niche in the bedroom was the perfect place for a writing area, but "we wanted a moodier environment," says Allem. He placed a 1950s oil on canvas by Mario de Ferrante to be reflected above Kohl's 1950s desk, which he refinished in an ebony lacquer.

RIGHT: The original bedroom needed to be "more masculine and sexy," says Allem. OPPOSITE: A vintage black-and-white photograph found at a flea market hangs above the bed. The red rubber Non chair by Kallemo is from Shelter. Allem found the lamp at Crate & Barrel.



BEFORE



ABOVE: Kohl, seated in front of an iron room divider by Jean Royère, examines a blown-glass bowl at Modern One. Allem, inspired by the Royère design, conceived a six-foot-tall headboard for the bedroom. "Never say never, and always be open to new ideas," he says.

were lacquered with a black piano finish, as was the 1950s writing desk. "If it's something extraordinary, an investment piece of furniture, you should leave it as it is, but if it's something decorative, you should bring it up to today's standards, give it an edge," he advises.

Allem did more than give Kohl's apartment an edge: He completely transformed it from an attractive but unexciting suite of rooms into an en-

vironment full of plush drama. Amazingly, the transformation took only 14 days to accomplish. As Kohl remembers it, "I went on vacation for two weeks, and I needed to have the apartment done when I got back. And when I walked in the door, everything was finished, and a photographer was shooting the result."

Even more surprising, Allem not only managed to achieve his results on a tight budget,

he actually enjoyed the process. "It was an enormous challenge for me to do something like this in terms of that kind of money," he admits. "My entire sense of reality changed." Don't imagine, however, that the change is permanent or that Allem will be designing a host of budget interiors in the future. "Darling," he says with a laugh, "I've gone right back to sheared mink and alligator on the walls." □

PURCHASES

1 desk refinishing	\$175.00
1 sofa refinishing	\$75.00
3 lamps and shades	\$204.71
1 Kallemo Non chair	\$470.00
1 armchair	\$100.00
7 throw pillows	\$310.67
1 low table	\$690.00
1 artwork	\$50.00
accessories	\$110.00
fabric	\$1,250.00
bed linens	\$525.58
draperies	\$470.00
carpet	\$294.85
paint and supplies	\$250.00
TOTAL	\$4,915.81

Charles Allen's greatest coup was buying a bulk lot of flannel ("I think it cost \$25 a yard," he says).



AFTER