

modern love

David and Elizabeth Netto decorated their Richard Neutra gem in Los Angeles with an eye for family fun and unexpected flourishes. Mayer Rus reports.



MID-CENTURY MARVEL

The living room, with a Mies van der Rohe daybed and a pair of Poul Kjaerholm lounge chairs. Floor-to-ceiling windows showcase the view overlooking the Silver Lake Reservoir. The white sculpture is by John Koga and the wicker ottoman by Franco Albini. *OPPOSITE PAGE:* David, Elizabeth, and Madelyn Netto at the reflecting pool at the front of the house. Tracy Feith dress. *SEatings Editor:* Paul Fortune.

Photographed by Francois Halard



David Netto met his wife, Elizabeth, for the first time at a party in his parents' apartment on Fifth Avenue. They were fourteen years old. Halfway through the festivities, Elizabeth, something of a free spirit, decided to skip across the street to frolic in the fountains of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She was soaking wet when she returned. David took her into his bedroom—she recalls being struck by the green velvet wall upholstery—and gave her a button-down Oxford shirt, which she wore home. She never gave it back.

Despite the promising start, the story of David and Elizabeth Netto did not play out as a fairy tale of high school sweethearts and love at first sight. Their paths diverged sharply as David cultivated his talents as an aesthete and *arbiter elegantiarum* and established a reputation as the decorator of choice for a new generation of Park Avenue socialites, including Eliza Reed Bolen and Karen Groos. And when his friends and clients began having children of their own (and he had a daughter, Kate, with his former wife, the actress Ione Skye), David launched NettoCollection, a line of stylish, unfussy furniture for infants, snapped up by everyone from Gwyneth Paltrow to Michelle Williams. Elizabeth took a very different road, circling the globe as a journalist and documentary producer in volatile, war-torn countries like Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua.

They didn't see each other for nearly two decades, until David unexpectedly encountered his bride-to-be at the wedding of a mutual friend. David seized the opportunity to make a better second impression on his high school crush. "Elizabeth's life was obviously much different from mine, so I was a little nervous about asking her out," he recalls. "I was terrified the first time she came to my apartment on Washington Square. After Cambodia, I thought she'd be appalled by the Zuber wallpaper and Hermès aesthetic." The decor didn't stop her from marrying David in 2005. "He brought something new and exciting into my life, and I think I did the same for him," she says.

They spent their first two years together dividing their time between New York and Los Angeles, where David had bought a house in Silver Lake to be close to his daughter. A classic example of mid-century California modernism designed by Richard Neutra in 1961, the house suited both their tastes. Its fine pedigree held obvious appeal for David—good design is his business, after all—and its unpretentious materials and casual indoor-outdoor spaces satisfied his wife's bohemian sensibilities. When Elizabeth became pregnant with their daughter, Madelyn, now one-and-a-half, the couple decided



ernism designed by Richard Neutra in 1961, the house suited both their tastes. Its fine pedigree held obvious appeal for David—good design is his business, after all—and its unpretentious materials and casual indoor-outdoor spaces satisfied his wife's bohemian sensibilities. When Elizabeth became pregnant with their daughter, Madelyn, now one-and-a-half, the couple decided



MY BLUE HEAVEN

The dining area, anchored by a Jean Prouvé table and Jens Risom stools. The lamp is by Giacometti and the photograph and the photograph by Candida Höfer. (opposite page): the interior courtyard.



to rethink their bicoastal lifestyle and officially declare California their home. Next came the difficult part—decorating.

“For a couple of years, we were basically camping out in an empty house, with just a futon, a few odd bits of furniture, and piles of Legos for Kate. I didn’t have to commit to making a design statement, and there was certainly no pressure from Liz. She doesn’t need a ‘designed’ environment to be happy,” David says. “Besides, this is the kind of architecture that looks better empty. Neutra always pulled out most of the furniture before Julius Shulman photographed his houses.”

Os the reality of having two children took hold, however, the time had come for David the decorator to get off the fence. “This house is very difficult to work with. It’s essentially a series of small rooms that step up the side of a hill. At this scale, you have to be very disciplined and imaginative, and make the most out of a few limited gestures. If a piece of furniture is off by just a few inches, it won’t work. This house rejects furniture,” he laments.

The process was further complicated by his relative lack of familiarity with local resources and contractors, and the tricky business of trying to oversee a project in Los Angeles when your family still has one foot planted in New York. David wisely turned for assistance to his friend, decorator Paul Fortune, “the guy with the best taste in town. When you go to Paul’s house, you see the dream of Los Angeles. It’s like being invited to George Cukor’s house,” David says. “Paul is the king of atmosphere. I knew he wouldn’t be fetishistic about doing a dry, straightforward period piece, which is what most people are inclined to do with this sort of house.”

Aside from offering advice on ways to maximize the efficiency of the tight floor plan and adding splashes of color through the use of materials like blue grass cloth and vivid red paint, Fortune’s primary contribution to the project was in helping to articulate David’s vision of orthodox modern architecture enlivened by unexpected decorative flourishes and a few strategically deployed off-notes. Both decorators cite the Menil house in Houston, with architecture by Philip Johnson and interiors by the couturier Charles James, as an exemplar of the spirit they wanted to achieve.

“With this kind of thing, it’s all about restraint,” Fortune declares. “David has great style, but sometimes his inspirations were too grandiose for a house this regimented and compact.

You can have a few touches of whimsy, but you don’t want to be tripping over ormolu stools and porphyry vases every time you get up.”

And what, you may wonder, was Elizabeth’s contribution to the collaboration of Netto and Fortune? “Liz is a great editor. She was never afraid to say what she loves and what she hates,” says her husband. “She’s very much in favor of less posing and more comfort, so she kept an eye on the both of us.”

Elizabeth, who recently set up a new business in baby DVDs, seconds the notion. “I love this house, and I love living in Los Angeles. After growing up in New York, it all seems very exotic and glamorous in a suburban kind of way. We still get excited about palm trees and In-N-Out Burger.” So it turns out to be a fairy tale after all. □



They maximized the tight floor plan and added splashes of color through the use of materials like blue grass cloth and vivid red paint

PRIMARY SCHOOL David Netto’s office, with artwork by Gregory Crewdson, Al Held, Michael Muller, and others. The sofa is by Zanotta. **TOP LEFT:** The designer and his wife in the living room. **BOTTOM:** Netto gets into a water fight with his daughter, Kate, six.

Photo and styling: Mars Lomax for photography.com