

S B L S

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A PLACE IN THE SUN

Something Old,

There's more than meets the eye at this historic Ojai estate restored by Allen Construction



Something New

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A quick drive down California's scenic Casitas Pass leads to a picturesque valley with an alluring charm. The Ojai Valley is a lush and cozy conglomeration of nature, simplicity, refinement, and history. The town is quintessentially central coast, and like any California community, there's far more to Ojai than meets the tourist eye. Nestled deep within its winding roads and flourishing foliage lies an enchanting estate with a paradoxical disposition—it's a historic landmark yet a beacon of modern technology, operating on net-zero energy.

The El Toro estate, originally built in 1926, has taken on a new life over the course of the past few years. Originally built by famed architect Arthur E. Harvey, creator of the Château Élysée in Los Angeles, El Toro is one of Ojai's historic landmarks. This presented quite the challenge when it came into the hands of its new owners who wanted to honor the home's history but also convert it into a modern and sustainable property. A complex endeavor that called for nothing short of expertise, Allen Construction rose to the challenge.

The Santa Barbara based custom home construction and remodeling company specializes in historic home restoration projects, a perfect fit for the task at hand. Working on a property that houses a bounty of historical artifacts is no small feat, but one step onto the estate proves that the years of hard work that went into this restoration surely paid off.

The home is a work of art. In its entirety, the property is a living breathing organ, expansive and open with a distinct energy about it. I am accompanied by a palpable calmness as I roam through the halls of the outwardly luxurious yet inwardly humble main house, guided by the new owners. In a hallway, a melange of candles flickers atop a rustic wooden table. Step into the kitchen and onto the Juliet balcony and you'll find a serene view of the shimmering pool and expansive green lawn capped by the airy pool house, a new addition to the property. Although the pool house was built almost a century later, it blends seamlessly with the estate's original home, a testament to the informed precision of Allen Construction.



Built in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, the El Toro estate mimics California's Spanish missions with its arched entryways, gleaming undecorated walls, and exquisite iron adornments. The property's palatial complexion at present makes it hard to believe that just a few years ago it was bordering on decrepit. "We bought eight acres of dead land and a house that was falling down," says the owner. When they purchased it, the estate had been more or less untouched since its original construction. Its condition was questionable, but the vision was there.

Their goal was to honor the home's history and revive it to its original historic state, preserving as much authenticity as possible. To do so, the experts at Allen Construction left no tile untouched—literally. During the restoration process, they discovered an abundance of collectible and valuable handmade historic tiles, which they promptly preserved with immense care. To achieve the goal of maintaining as much of the home's original authenticity as possible, the Allen Construction team pulled from the original design blueprints and brought on an architectural historian.

The tasks involved in this project included restoring a decaying wooden ceiling while somehow preserving its original intricate paintings. "The color schemes and textures echo the original as much as possible," says the owner, pointing to the ornate ceiling. "They relied on a forensic paint consultant to ensure that fresh paint throughout matched the original color palette." This remarkable attention to detail can be found throughout the property's nooks and crannies, amounting in a space that nods to history but embraces modernity. It's a splendid dichotomy of old and new, elegant, understated, and at the same time monumental.

What's so remarkable about this property, apart from the exquisite architecture and historic prominence, is its efficiency. A major goal for the project was to make the house net-zero energy and self-sufficient in its landscaping. With the profound plant knowledge of permaculturist Connor Jones, life was breathed into the hills that surround the estate.

"It started out with bare soil. Save for one orange tree, everything was dead," says Jones, peering out over the foliage he knows so well. Today, the estate's eight acres of land look like a modern Garden of Eden, brimming with vegetation and produce. We waded through the trees and shrubs on the estate's terraced

garden, a farming method implemented by Jones to retain the water that runs off from the slopes. As we do so, he points out the various crops growing on the property, with a list that sounds like the menu of your local juice bar: goji berries, guavas, bananas, figs, papayas, grapefruits, mulberries, apricots, plums, and avocados.

When neighboring farms lost two sets of avocado crops in last year's heat wave, the trees at El Toro remained unharmed. He explains that a particular tree, the tipu tree, was planted surrounding the fruit-bearing trees to create a closed canopy in order to shade the fruit and protect them from the harsh sun that hits the valley. "These are ancient systems being revived in a modern context," says Jones. He points to these age-old systems as the reason for the baffling prosperity of the vegetation at El Toro.

Using farming methods that foster self-sustenance and mimic nature, the landscape is now a sea of abundance. "It went from completely dead earth to bursting with unbelievable amounts of produce in one year," says the owner as she picks a ripe mulberry for me. "Connor allowed the property to come to life."

Now the garden produces a profusion of crops which the owners donate to local food banks. "Our mission is to grow as much as possible and donate as much as possible to local shelters," explains the owner. Additionally, the property hosts weekly farm work days in which visitors are invited to contribute to the harvesting of the farm's crops, which are used either to feed the attendees or given to local food banks. "Our philosophy is unconditional love," says the owner. "Something that's inherent in unconditional is abundance. Our garden gives people a feeling and sense of abundance."

To date, the El Toro estate has hosted over 27 events including weddings, architect tours, green tours, and community events. It's truly an exquisite place that underwent an ambitious transformation, and the owners' goal for combining preservation with modernization was made possible by the dedication of Allen Construction. "Allen built our architect's vision. Everything was restored. It looked as if nothing happened," says the owner. "Every single thing they do is of the highest quality. It's almost emotional to think about it, to have companies that care that much and have the talent they do."

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