

Claire Thomas balanced old-world European and California-cool elements in this new Los Angeles home as part of a “story” she developed to focus the design process.

A big sectional might have been the obvious choice for the open living room, but Claire prefers a mismatched approach for character. “A collection of couches and seating is more curated and fun,” she says.



ONCE upon a time in L.A.

Every home tells a story, and designer *Claire Thomas* considers herself a visual storyteller. Find out how she sets the plot, follows the thread, and crafts a layered narrative—one sofa, light fixture, and tile choice at a time.

Follow Claire’s lead to pull a room together in four steps.

1 Start with an anchor piece
Here, it’s a green velvet sofa the homeowner loved. “Every piece of furniture you put into a space is an opportunity for self-expression,” Claire says.

2 Add texture
The cream sofa with nubby fabric and cane detailing acts as a neutral counterpoint to the rich velvet sofa.

3 Draw the eye
Black paint plays up the built-in bookcases as an architectural feature. “It’s like putting a bull’s-eye on them,” Claire says. “It forces people to take notice.” If black isn’t your thing, she says any punchy color has the same effect.

4 Define the space
An oversize light fixture punctuates the sitting area. “In general, err on the side of bigger than smaller,” Claire says.

In an open layout, Claire limits the drama to a single statement-making area. Her “it” spot in the main living space is the kitchen’s range wall with its colorful hand-painted tile backsplash and inky blue cabinets. “Swing big—once,” Claire says. “We let the kitchen be the wow moment then made sure the adjacent dining and living rooms had more simplicity.”



Claire Thomas has had an active imagination for as long as she can remember. “If you sat me in a corner when I was a little girl, I would just daydream and get lost in my imagination,” she says. “My mom would always say ‘Claire is off with the fairies.’” That ability to drift off and conjure up stories in her mind led the self-described “hyper-curious nerd” on a path as a Los Angeles filmmaker and director. In recent years, interior design has become her muse and a natural segue for more creative expressions. “I see design as a storytelling opportunity,” Claire says. “When you have a story line for a

space, it’s so much easier to stay on track and not muddy the narrative. It keeps you focused. It’s like a gut check: This is what we’re doing; this is the mandate.”

With that in mind for one of her recent projects—a new home for the young family of a custom builder—she developed this scenario to drive the design: “Old-world Europe lands in Westside Los Angeles.” When Claire signed on, there was still time to add architectural details before choosing colors and surfaces. Arched doorways and built-ins, exposed ceiling beams, and colorful tiles expressed the old-world part of the

Rescue Mission

No pedigree, no problem. This mantel mirror is a dumpster find; she spruced up the frame with paint.



Claire’s goal with every room, especially in an open-concept space, is to define it. An area rug is an easy solution because it naturally unites furniture pieces. Another is lighting, like the large chandelier Claire says creates a sense of geography.



1 Counters
Dramatic veining in the marble countertop brings pattern into the dining room.

2 Built-ins
“Black is a wonderful backdrop for built-ins. It makes displayed objects appear curated and purposeful instead of cluttered,” Claire says.

3 Entryway
Claire scopes out areas to create “islands of interest.” With a bench, accent table, and artwork, the front entry hall has a defined spot for shoe changes. Black and white marble floors nod to the home’s European influences.

4 Living room
A consistent neutral palette (white walls, creamy linen curtains, dark floors) makes an open space cohesive; intentional hits of color, like the green velvet sofa, work in personality without overwhelming.

5 Dining chairs
The mod West L.A. vibe comes through in furnishings like the midcentury-style dining chairs—with tapered gold legs for a bit of glam.

6 Personal statement
Claire, *left*, says everything in a home—including color choices and details like books—is telling. “It’s a really easy shorthand for understanding someone,” she says.

narrative. Those features also delivered the warmth the couple wanted. Limestone flooring, large black-frame windows, and a clean aesthetic reflect the L.A. angle. “All the elements of the story layer in to pull the design together,” she says.

For Claire, there’s a difference between designing with a story versus simply having a theme. For example, “midcentury modern” (theme) implies a specific era and style, compared to “the Eameses go on vacation in Acapulco” (story), which gives a wink to midcentury but adds whimsy and a world traveler slant. “Themes are more limiting,” Claire says. “Stories have depth; they have themes, but it’s a layering of themes.”

And for those who don’t have quite as active an imagination? “Simplify,” Claire says. “The easiest thing is to start with the emotion. What do you want to feel when you walk into a space?” If you want a soothing and organized home, find photos of rooms with calming colors and natural light, then start narrowing down whether your favorites veer Scandinavian, Japanese, or something else. Another option: Build a story line around a single item you love, such as a painting, which can help you set a color palette and a style direction. “If an object becomes your design security blanket, there’s nothing wrong with that,” Claire says. “Whatever it is—an object, an emotion—consider it your North Star to guide your decisions.”





High Lights

Pendants sub for space-hogging table lamps and establish interest above the nightstands.



With her experience in film and commercials, Claire is driven by what looks good through a lens—and what doesn’t, such as stark white ceilings in rooms that have color on the walls. “They truncate a room,” she says. She’s a fan of carrying the wall color onto the ceiling, as she did with the rich sage in this bedroom. “The continuous color makes a room seem larger and the space complete. It allows your eyes to float upward.” Touches of wood, such as the ceiling beam (a reference to old-world style) and on the bed and nightstands, are an important element in many of Claire’s rooms. “Natural wood is the blue jeans of design—it goes with anything,” she says.



Green and black are two “hero colors,” as Claire calls them, that thread throughout the house. In the bathroom, she tiled walls and the shower ceiling in green, confident that the calming, timeless color was a safe choice. Because the room gets lots of natural light, she flipped the typical white tub and surfaces to black. “Black creates crispness,” she says. “It’s like when you’re drawing with pencil and things are soft and muddy, but then you come in with a pen and the image comes into stark relief.”



Drama Queen

A luxe black soaker tub anchors the bathroom and flows into the deep color of the floors.





→ Lined Up

A painted design like these black stripes brings enough energy to a room so that no other art is needed.

●
In the girls' bedroom, Claire played off the spindles on the twin beds with painted stripes climbing the wall and sweeping across the ceiling. The graphic design integrates the beds and ceiling fixture into the room. "I love spaces that have a dialogue and seeing an idea ping-pong around a room," Claire says. The design and the black "make the pink bold and chic, not princessy," she says. The color combo and a chinoiserie chest used as a nightstand remind Claire of 1920s Paris and whimsically nod to the European story. ■

Screen Test

A quick trick Claire learned from being behind the lens: Pull out your phone and take photos of the room you're decorating. "You can look at a photo and tell if something is wrong more easily than if you're just standing in a space," she says.