

Space is tight in Nicole Fitzgerald and Rick Steil's 290-square-foot ADU, where the Murphy bed extends to the kitchen island when in use. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

## HOW A TEENY-TINY ADU COMPLETELY TRANSFORMED THEIR L.A. YARD

BY LISA BOONE STAFF WRITER DECEMBER 13, 2022

Nicole Fitzgerald was 25 when she and husband Rick Steil bought a 1926 bungalow in Pacific Palisades on a tree-lined street graced with similarly romantic Spanish Colonial single-family homes.

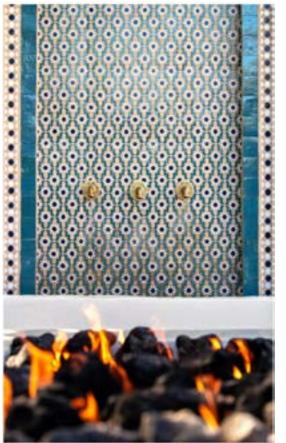
In what they now describe as a leap of faith, the young couple from the Midwest purchased the fixer-upper for 430,000 – an unimaginable purchase price in Los Angeles today, where the high cost of housing has made it unaffordable for most first-time homebuyers.

"It felt like a risk given that I was working as a freelance fashion photographer at the time," said Steil, now 63.

"My father was a banker and he cried. He begged us not to buy it," Fitzgerald recalled recently with a laugh.

second-guessing espite themselves, the couple made it a home. They raised two boys, now 25 and 28, and managed to make updates over the years including a yard for their sons (before they took up surfing), a great room for the family (which trashed the aforementioned yard during construction) and a new kitchen for Steil, who is a gourmet cook.

Cooking is my passion," said Steil, who teaches photography at a Los Angeles high school and has been known to hop on his electric scooter and deliver freshly baked frittatas to his "farmer friends" at the Pacific Palisades Farmers Market on Sundays.



On the spa wall, the designers chose zellige tile that complements the palette and aesthetic of both the main house and the ADU. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)



A flexible pull-down Murphy bed helps to maximize the tiny space. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

**\**oday their neighborhood has changed. Even though many of the street's original homes are now dwarfed by \$4-million faux farmhousestyle spec houses, the couple remain committed to preserving their home's original character.

"She's a beautiful soul and has housed us and loved us for 29 years," Fitzgerald said of their longtime home. "She's 96 years old and funky but I identify with her. We have done a lot of updates over the years, but we have always tried to stay true to our home's original design. It was important to us to not to change her soul and the integrity of the property."

s they have aged along with the house, the couple said they dreamed of having a studio in their backyard that could be used as an office, guest unit or rental.

So when the city of L.A. relaxed permit guidelines for building accessory dwelling units, or ADUs in 2021, the couple asked interior designers Kristen Gundersen and Jenna Richter of Studio. Ashten to help them design an accessory dwelling unit about 30 feet from the family's home to serve as a retreat, potential rental (it is currently occupied by a family friend) and office space. "We both love to travel," Fitzgerald said. "I can see us renting out our house and traveling the world and keeping the ADU as a home base for us."

At just 290 square feet, the ADU incorporates all of the elements of a single-family home in a tiny footprint: kitchen, living room, dining room, bedroom and bathroom.

To help create what Gundersen describes as "a lighter, brighter interpretation of the main house's Moroccan/Mediterranean design," the designers outfitted the ADU with a soothing material palette including Arabescato Corchia marble countertops from Italy, a dusty terracotta Clé tile backsplash and earthy gray lime wash on the millwork from Portola Paints.



Terracotta Clé tile and lacquered brass accents add warmth to the tiny kitchen. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)



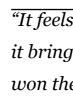
In the bathroom, the designers sourced an inexpensive marble slab that they used for the vanity top, shower bench and the curb. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)



Inside the tiny ADU, the bench lifts up to provides added storage. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times



(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)







In addition to an ILVE range, the kitchen features a terracotta Clé tile backsplash, gray millwork and a marble-topped island. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

*"It feels like the house grew by 20%...* it brings me so much joy. I feel like we won the lottery."



The courtyard features an outdoor living area and fire pit, right, barbecue, left, and outdoor shower hidden behind the wall. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

n In the center of the ADU, the To add warmth and glamour in the kitchen, the kitchen from the living area, which overtime, a Venetian plaster hood, pendants transforms into a bedroom when the from Foundry Lighting and a 30-inch ILVE Murphy bed is in use. With space at a Italian range in antique white with brass premium, the bed nearly touches the trim. White oak flooring helps to open up island when it is pulled down, but it can the interiors and floating marble shelves just as easily be disguised between a wall provide storage and display space while of custom Shaker cabinets. "It's the coziest giving the ADU a spacious and airy feel. space," Richter said of the versatile bed.

to Steil, the couple wanted the kitchen to be both functional and beautiful. "We needed a decent kitchen," Fitzgerald said. "That's the reason for the aesthetics – we wanted to have something that would bring us both pleasure in a tiny space."

marble-topped island serves as a bar the designers installed lacquered brass and cooking surface and separates accents that add brightness and will patina

In another space-saving move that provides Because cooking and food are so important flexibility, the banquette can be used for dining or as a sofa, and lifts up to provide storage. (Although there is no washer and dryer in the ADU, there is a communal laundry room at the back of the property.) Taking cues from the main house, the



The backyard and garage before it was redone. (STUDIO.ASHTEN)

A view of the ADU as seen from the main house. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

designers outfitted the ADU to mirror the family – including an outdoor dining many of the characteristics of the original room that is shaded by a black bamboo bungalow, including Douglas fir windows canopy with UV coating from Backyard and doors, white plaster exterior and red X-Scapes in San Diego, a fire pit anchored by tile shingle roof. Windows are strategically a sofa and chairs and a fountain backed with placed to provide privacy - there are no a zellige tile mosaic handmade in Morocco. A windows overlooking the backyard – while new three-quarter wall adds intimacy to the twoskylightsandFrenchdoorsletinsunshine space and provides privacy for the outdoor and provide easy access to the courtyard. shower located just behind the partition.

Outdoors, the interior designers, along with In the wake of the coronavirus, the Danielle Casillas of Verde Landscape Design, couple have enjoyed hosting al fresco added a stone patio, barbecue, beverage gatherings with friends and family who refrigerator and island for cooking. The new they said often prefer to socialize outdoors. drought-tolerant landscape adds softness to the outdoor area and creates more space for



"We had nine people over for dinner the twice what they anticipated - \$250,000. other night and I hosted a bridal shower for 20 -all outdoors," Fitzgerald said.

"The courtyard has an amazing communal feel," Gundersen added. "It's so bright and happy out there. It feels very Mediterranean. That was something that we wanted to ensure for them. Particularly if they use it as their own space later on and rent out the main house. They wanted the opportunity to use their backyard."

From the beginning, the couple wanted to keep costs low. "I thought we could do it for \$100,000," said Fitzgerald, who is used to crunching numbers as a bookkeeper. "But once we laid out everything we wanted, it was clear it wasn't going to work. Utilities were a big expense. They had to trench down the driveway to get to the garage." Finished in August 2021 after eight months, the couple ended up paying more than

Looking ahead, Fitzgerald views the ADU as a mixed-use building. "When Rick retires, we could rent out the main house or the ADU. One of us may need help later in life. If the family was in the main house one of us could definitely live in the ADU in terms of aging in place. That was one of our goals along with extra income."

But now, being able to for enjoy the outdoors, she has contends. changed their lives for the better.

"It feels like the house grew by 20%," Fitzgerald said. "Our house is not large. The ADU and backyard have opened up a lot of space for us. It has changed our lives in such a great way. The yard was like a war zone before. The garage was literally falling down. Now, it brings me so much joy. I feel like we won the lottery."

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The exterior of the ADU mirrors the architecture of the main house. (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)