

# Multi-Level Achievement

Carefully chosen materials help create a space that's contemporary but not cold



**By Rebecca Robledo** Some jobs can't be performed in the usual order.

This property sat on a sheer cliff, and was configured in such a way that the pool had to be built before the accompanying home's remodel was even designed. This made it a challenge to blend the pool's aesthetic with the house.

Fortunately, designer Skip Phillips had worked with the architect before and understood his sensibilities. "I knew his details had a tendency to be more contemporary," says Phillips, president of Questar Pools & Spas in Escondido, Calif., and cofounder of the Genesis 3 Design Group.

"But [the homeowners] didn't want it to look sanitized."

To satisfy this need, the team chose a textured, flamed granite for the deck as well as the grates covering the slot overflow closest to the house. In addition to being more traditional, this material adds warmth to the yard, yet still blends well with the powerful black and white details throughout. To further soften the effect, Phillips utilized

asymmetry. Rather than book-ending the pool with two identical fire woks, he only used one, balancing it with a square planter on the opposite side. Another fire element bears a different footprint and sits away from the pool.

Here, Phillips and partnering builder Gene Brown discuss the project.



A

**A) Material matters:** For the pool's interior and back of the vanishing-edge wall, the design team chose a distinctive aqua-colored glass tile. Flamed granite gave the decks a warmer feel, blended with the modern home and provided a safer surface for walking. Black and white honed granite were combined on the mid-level deck to form a yin-yang, which suited the homeowners' love of Asian symbology. Black and white composite stones were used as accents — with white on the bar's countertop, stools and catch-basin cap, and black used to outline the planters and showcase the fire elements.

**B) Space planning:** Phillips knew the tendency to pack each element tightly together when working with such a drastic slope. "When you have a rectangular home that parallels a steep, descending slope, generally you end up with a pool that's too close to the house, so you can't get any width," he says. "Also, you're then cut off from creating any destinations down below. So oftentimes you're left with just the upper area."

To avoid this scenario, Phillips positioned the pool perpendicular to the home, and placed it on the left side of the yard. Not only did this allow the vessel to stretch away from the house, but it also created a large open area on the right, which was ideal for a deck. In addition, Phillips aimed to create multiple destination spots, so he decided to use the area around the vanishing-edge catch basin for another deck. "We were able to have a much different feel than what anybody had anticipated, including the architect," Phillips says.

**C) High and mighty:** The backyard sat on a sheer cliff, and in order to make construction possible, the pool builder had to raise portions of the ground by 35 feet. "[The homeowner] walked me out to his backyard and said, 'I want to put a pool here,'" recalls Gene Brown, president of Valley Pool & Spa, based in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada. "I looked down at [the cliff] ... that was a tough one to swallow. I said, 'Are you sure? You're going to have to want it really bad.'" But, because the property sat on solid rock, Brown didn't have to utilize piers and grade beams. Instead, an engineer required that he blast the rock, build 35-foot-high retaining walls, and backfill in compacted and tested layers. This ultimately left the vessel sitting 12 feet below the house.



B



C

A



**A) Graduated slope:** This installation makes prominent use of gentle changes in elevation, one of Phillips' signatures. That was particularly important here, where the slope was so pronounced. Phillips created a generous, mid-level deck on one side of the pool to accommodate large furniture, a swim-up bar and a fire pit. But his approach also extended to the smaller details on the pool itself: Only a couple of inches separate the black planter from the bar countertop, the bar from the vanishing-edge weir, and the catch-basin wall from the deck. "It's like stacking blocks," Phillips says.

**B) Construction details:** In general, Brown prefers the inherent precision of poured-and-formed concrete. Here, the finished shell is pictured. The house-side gutter opening was eventually covered with grates cut from the same stone used on the deck. The large, box-shaped structure to the right serves double duty — it now supports a fire wok on top and houses part of the equipment vault below, with a door for entry. The bar stools were built on a shelf that serves as a resting place for users' feet. ■



PHOTO BY GENE BROWN