

remodel home



The front yard underwent a dramatic transformation from a shady enclave with concrete sidewalks (right) to an inviting courtyard with a turreted tower and cobblestone paths. Michelle modeled the wrought-iron gate after an antique one she saw in Provence, France.



The villas in a homeowner's native Vietnam inspired her to create a French Country-style estate at the base of the Flatirons.

Ooh là là!

By Lisa Marshall

Born into a family of nine children in Saigon at the height of the Vietnam War, Michelle Khong was no stranger to hard times as a child.

Her father, a powerful politician, and mother— heir to a hospital company—had once lived in a fine French Colonial-style villa in North Vietnam. But as Communism took hold and his political career slipped away, they moved south, leaving everything behind. By the time Michelle came

along, the war was in full swing, the family was living in a cramped one-bedroom home in Saigon, and all that was left of the family fortune was photo albums and stories.

But Michelle could dream.

“There are a lot of quiet streets with big tall trees and French villas in Saigon,” recalls Michelle, now 44. “I used to ride my bike past them on the way to school, and it really inspired me. I always wanted to live in something like that—like what my parents once had.”

PHOTOS BY RON FORTH



Before

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BEFORE PHOTOS COURTESY THE HOMEOWNERS



The homeowners wanted the great room to be an intriguing space, “so our architect came up with all the interesting, intersecting angles in the ceiling,” Michelle says.

Today, Michelle and her husband, Rob Eisenhuth, are doing just that, having transformed a modern-style '80s-era home in the Devil's Thumb neighborhood into a French-Vietnamese-inspired villa, complete with stone turrets, wrought-iron balconies, climbing bougainvilleas, and possibly the best Flatirons view in all of Boulder.

A diminutive 5-foot-tall engineer with a deceptively soft-spoken manner, Michelle ran the entire show, sketching plans on engineering paper, clipping magazine photos and collecting antique French chandeliers in preparation for the day her villa might materialize. But it was a long time coming.

After the fall of Saigon to Communist rule, Michelle's father was, tragically, killed for his anti-communist views. Michelle and her siblings eventually slipped one by one



Originally, this room's low-angled ceiling and window placement (left) didn't make the most of the views. The remodel went up and outward to bring the outdoors in. “I spend most of my time here practicing and playing the piano,” Michelle says. The remodeled music room easily accommodates her grand piano, as well as guests who enjoy the music and the views.



The homeowners wanted a curving wrought-iron staircase from the get-go. Their architect, Eric Smook of Denver, designed a double staircase (top photo) with winding stairs viewable from the top landing to the basement.

out of the country, some on foot through the jungle, others by boat. Michelle eventually arrived in Boulder, where she studied engineering, got a master's degree from the University of Colorado and landed a job as an electrical engineer at StorageTek, where she met Rob.

For years, Rob—an avid hiker with his own dream of living near open space—scoured the Devil's Thumb neighborhood looking for “For Sale” signs. “Homes in this area just don't go up for sale too often,” he says.

Then in 2003, Michelle saw an online photo of the back of a 3,800-square-foot home with unparalleled Flatirons views. When the couple arrived to check it out, they discovered a home a few centuries too modern for their taste.

“It was very blocky, with not enough windows for a location with such a fabulous view,” recalls their architect, Eric Smook, who previously designed an award-winning Tuscan-style house in Denver. “It needed a pretty radical transformation.”



Michelle always wanted a step-up tub, so their architect designed this Roman-style one.

Voilà!

Pull up to that home today and you're instantly transported to the cobblestone streets of France—or Saigon, which the French occupied for a century. The once-gray exterior is now cheerful, antique-yellow stucco framed by a country-style courtyard ablaze with orange poppies and purple lavender. A cobblestone path leads to a wrought-iron entry gate and passes a water fountain before depositing you at the front door, which is made of fir so stout it feels like you're entering a fortress.

Inside, the stone turret caps a circular foyer, while an inviting wrought-iron staircase leads to the living area.

The foyer alone cost Michelle sleep throughout the two-year construction project. In the early architectural designs, a large post in the foyer interfered with the flow, but removing it while maintaining structural integrity was an engineering feat. "It kept bothering me, so I tried to solve it myself," laughs Michelle, proudly gazing down at the wide-open foyer free of that pesky post. "Everyone was ignoring me at first, but once it was done, they agreed with me."



The views from the master bedroom make it a favorite space for the homeowners. Rob and Michelle kept the room's original configuration (left), but installed taller windows.



Above: Michelle's eight siblings and mother all immigrated to the United States from Vietnam. "We needed a big kitchen for holidays and family reunions. We often have three or four cooks in the kitchen preparing different dishes at the same time, and this kitchen was designed with that in mind," Michelle says.

Left: The hall with the mural used to be a play area off the kitchen. "This whole area was really changed around," Rob says. Michelle commissioned a Frenchwoman to paint the lavender fields, "because we wanted a mural that reminds us of our last trip to Provence."

Michelle tackled the whole project—from the design and décor to the landscape—with the same perfectionist approach.

"Michelle definitely had a strong vision, so my job was to help her achieve it," says landscape designer Scott Willhite of Stillwater Design in Boulder. When Willhite first came to the project, Michelle had already implemented part of a previous landscape plan, "but it wasn't the look she was going for," which was a European country garden with both French and Italian influences. "In fact, it was looking like a fairly typical Colorado landscape, so the key to making her vision work was to be truly authentic." Willhite made sure that everything—from the plants and materials to the mulches—appeared European. "We even ripped out a bunch of steel edger because it looked out of place," he says.

Now Michelle's landscape has a variety of garden spaces with different themes, including a fountain courtyard in front,

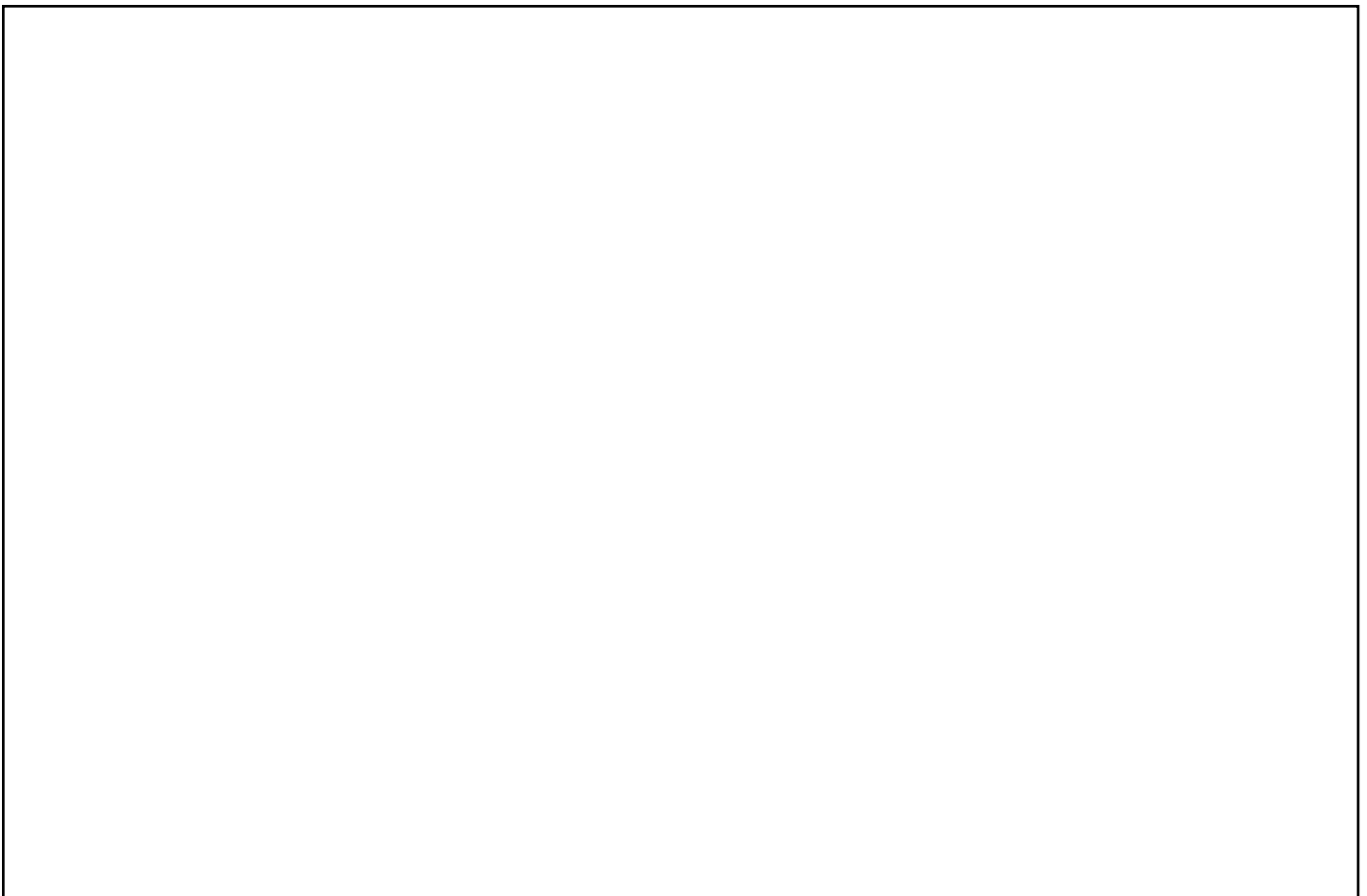




The homeowners kept the dining room's original shape (above), but added panels around the windows to dress them up. They also gained 8 inches of ceiling height by removing the old joists and installing fewer, doubled joists. Michelle added the vintage 1900 chandelier she'd collected to "give the room an older feel."

rose-covered arches along the sides, and a courtyard garden in the back with only pink and blue flowers. "My favorite space is the real lavender field we created in the backyard," Willhite says. "We made it look as close as possible to a mural of lavender fields painted inside the house."

For her part, Michelle says the whole house—inside and out—"was almost like an engineering project for me—a big puzzle."

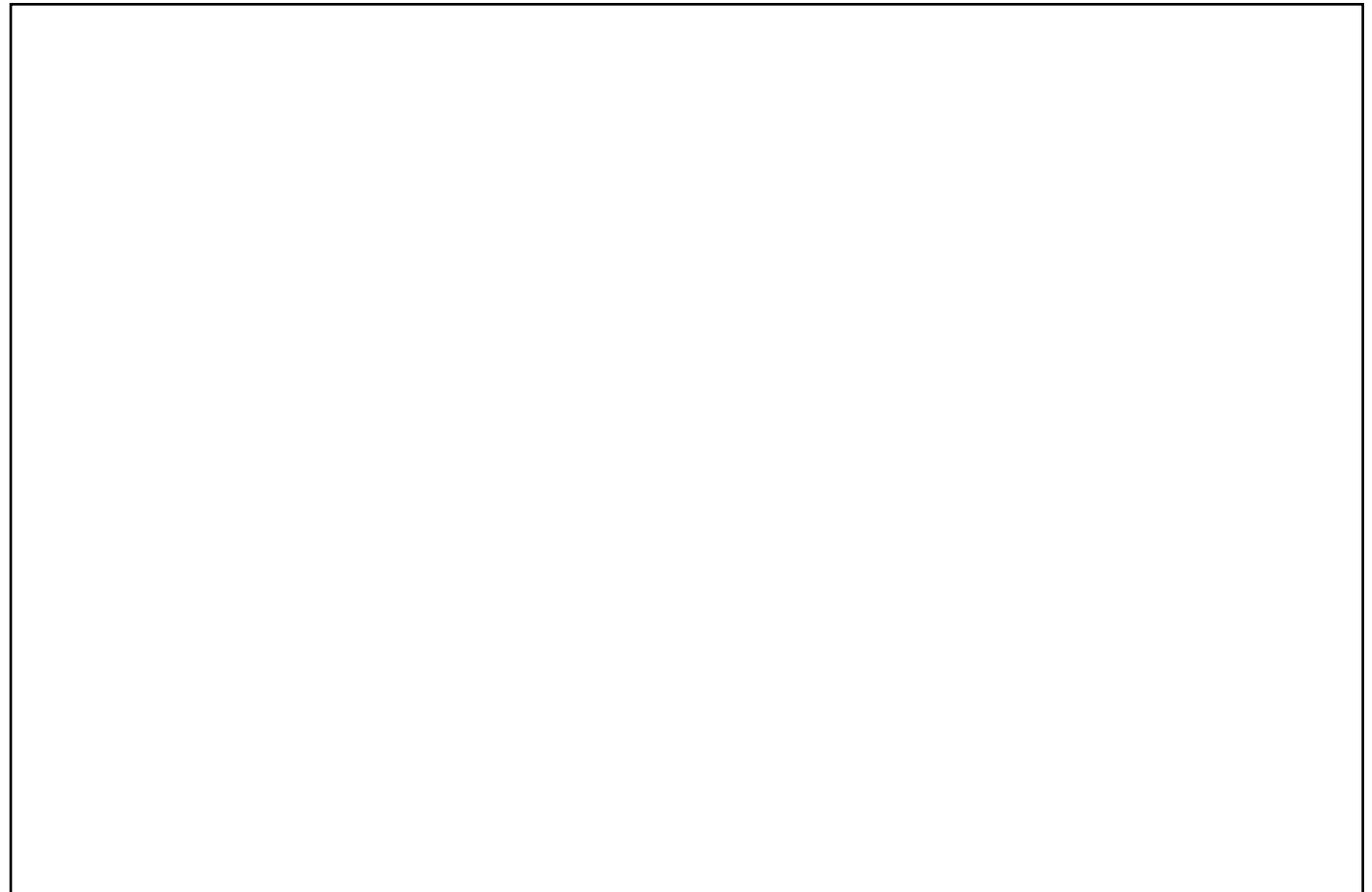




Formerly lawn (above), the newly landscaped backyard has a patio for great alfresco meals. The fire pit keeps everyone warm, and a water feature adds burbling ambience, but it's the views that entrance diners.

One with a million pieces she put together beautifully.

In the great room, for example, where a low-angled roof once seemed to shrink the space along with the views, 18-foot walls and west-facing windows now provide an airy feel. An antique, sage-colored grandfather clock ticks in the corner, lit by one of many antique French chandeliers Michelle collected over the years. Nearby, a glorious oil painting of Shakespeare's





The European-style conservatory is home to Michelle's orchids and bougainvilleas. An avid gardener, she practices her avocation year-round in the conservatory. The room also serves as a breakfast and dessert nook.

Ophelia adds to the room's Renaissance flair, as does the wrought-iron balcony overlooking the space from the master suite. In the new European-style conservatory, glass-paneled walls with ornate frames bathe Michelle's bougainvilleas and orchids in morning sunlight.

"Raising orchids is like an art," notes Michelle, an avid gardener who boasts nearly 40 plants in her orchid collection.



This arbor leads to a backyard pond. In the growing season, the arbor is covered with blue wisteria and sky-blue 'Perle d'Azur' clematis.

For Rob, the glorious views from the master suite serve as a constant reminder of why they bought the house. "You can lie here at night and still see the Flatirons," he says, standing in the modest-sized, rounded room with seemingly 360-degree views.

But the home's epicenter is undoubtedly the kitchen—especially when Michelle's mother and siblings come to visit. The wall mural of lavender fields adorns the hall leading to the kitchen. Painted by a Frenchwoman named Eve, the mural portrays the gorgeous countryside of Provence. Passing it on the way to the kitchen often inspires Michelle's family to prepare a big, French-Vietnamese meal.

"We once had 22 people sit down for a five-course French meal in here," Michelle says, standing near the cozy wood stove that warms the kitchen during lively family gatherings. "I was making pastries over there, my brother was stuffing chicken over here, somebody else was making sauces over there. It was quite a scene."

And though that scene is four decades and 8,000 miles removed from where she started in Vietnam, Michelle is home at last. 🏠