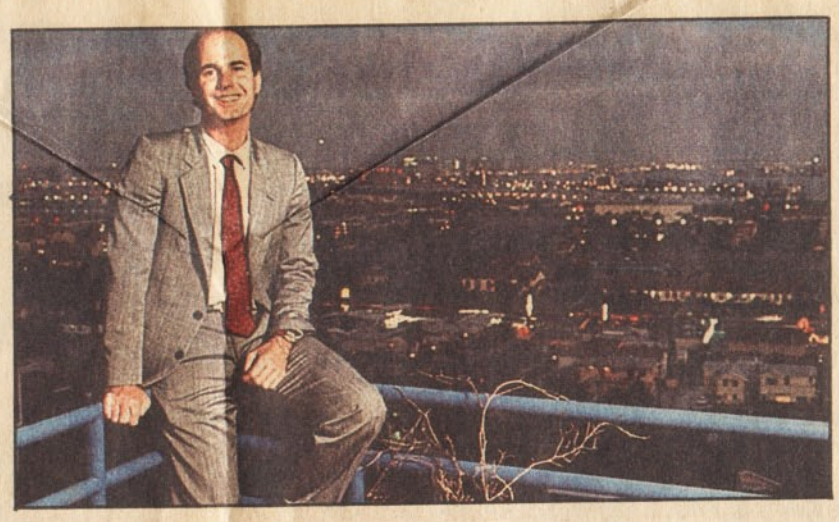
5-7-89

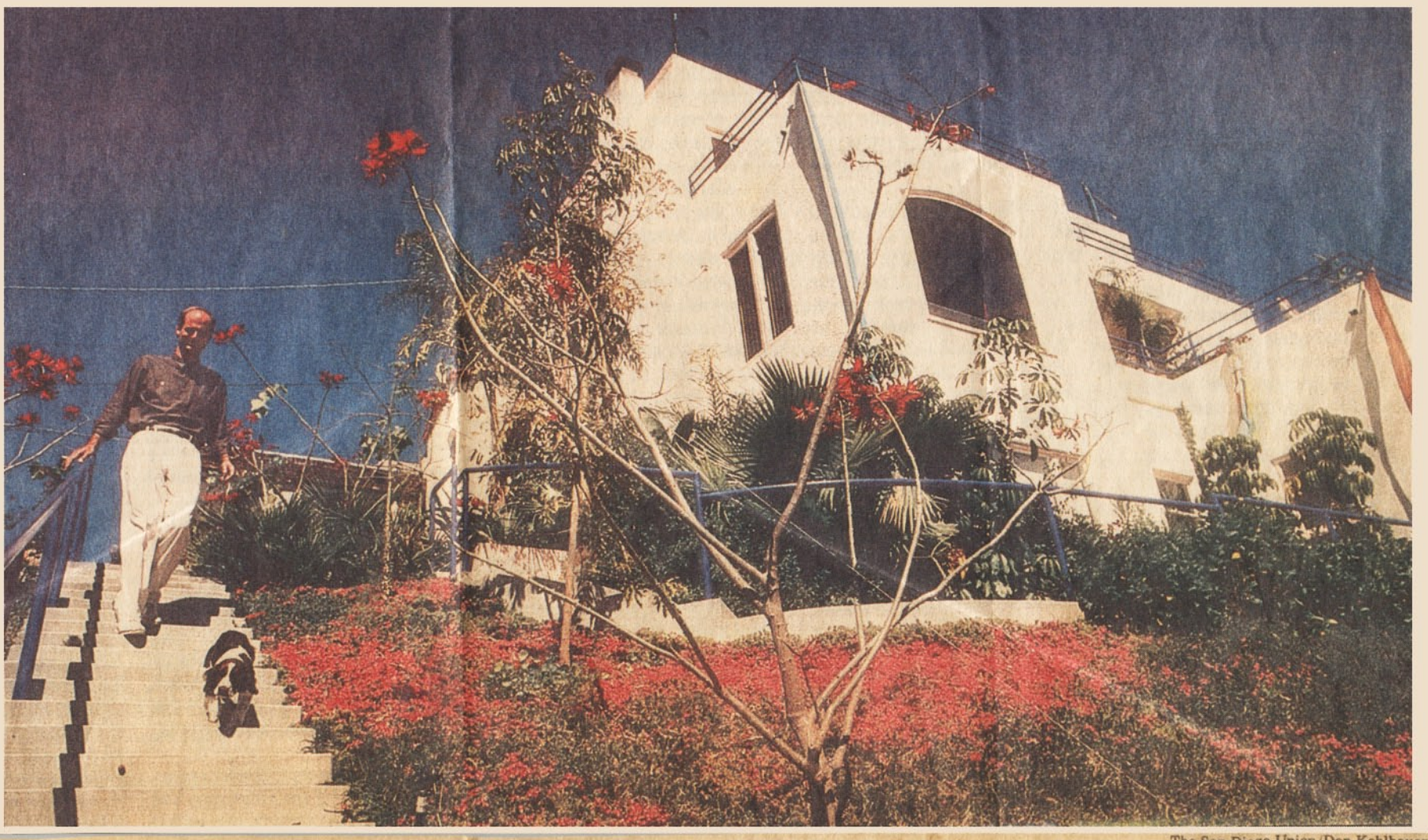
The San Diego Union
Sunday, May 7, 1989

Homes



At left: Gary Walker relaxes on his Point Loma balcony with the nighttime cityscape behind him.

POINT OF VIEW



The San Diego Union/Don Kohlbauer

Above: Walker descends the custom-landscaped hillside — 'a stepped effect . . . inspired a little by the Babylonian gardens.'

Creative face-lift lovingly restores a battered beauty

Home sweet home

Carol Olten

Gary Walker has found paradise on the point.

His house is one of Point Loma's battered old Spanish Mediterranean beauties, which has been streamlined into a contemporary archetype without losing any coziness.

The gardens are lush with exotic flowering trees and shrubs. The views seem to go on forever. At night, brilliant orange sunsets are reflected in the downtown skyline across the bay. In the morning the sun rises sharply, casting the house in a white, bright light evocative of a Greek island.

Living here, Walker said, "I always feel I'm part of some beautiful, distant world. The Coronado Islands sitting up there in the view so far away look like atolls that may just as well be Tahiti. And the ships coming and going could just as well be in the Bay of Napoli."

When Walker and his realtor business partner Richard Redlin bought the property about two years ago, the setting seemed somewhat less idyllic.

The house, one of the first built on Point Loma in the 1920s, was slowly sliding down its steep hillside site toward the bay it overlooks. The landscape was overgrown and had been left untended for years. Although the ¼-acre property was located off a secluded cul-de-sac with one of the most extraordinary views from Point Loma available, it had sat on the market for more than a year with no buyers in sight.

No one had lived there for years. The place had the worn, aged look of the setting for a Somerset Maugham novel.

"Everybody thought there was a good deal of risk involved in whatever you might want to do with the property," Walker recalled. "One of the corners of the house had started to sag and at least one structural engineer thought the damage was irreparable. But, in actuality, we were able to jack the house up and put in reinforcement rods and concrete to make it solid as a fort."

After extensive exterior renovation, the house also has become almost fort-like or castle-like in appearance.

Stepped up on the hillside on three living levels, it is squared off at the roofline to give it more vertical mass.

"I wanted everything to have a clean upward thrust," said Walker, who acted as his own designer and general contractor on the project while subbing out electrical and other contracts that required licensing.

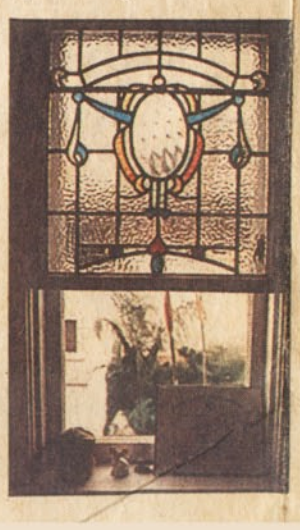
The castle look is reinforced by banners hanging from each corner of the building and by five custom-designed iron flagpoles that shoot upward from the roof.

To further emphasize the vertical lines of the outside of the house, Walker removed a Spanish-style red tile roof and overhang, replacing one enclosed area with an open deck to take more advantage of the view. He also removed wood mullions and replaced small glass panes with long panels of clear glass to give the exterior and interiors a more linear feeling.

The greatest changes in the property, however, have been made in the landscaping. When Walker and his partner bought the property, they had the option of splitting the acreage and selling off a lot. Instead they chose to plant gardens on the empty space with a replica of the famous "Mermaid of Copenhagen" fountain."

The plantings themselves are unique. While living in Morocco and the South Pacific, Walker became interested in unusual plant life. He wanted some of these singular species in his own gardens, but was inexperi-

See **Point** on Page F-6



At right: A delicate stained-glass pane decorates Walker's home office.

Above: Walker's puppy rests in the main living room. The space features a Victorian fireplace mantel, which Walker added.

At left: Original hand-painted lilies adorn tiles in master bathroom.

Point

Continued from F-1

enced in planting and growing them, he said.

"What I did was to sit down for hours with garden books researching everything about each plant — how tall it would grow, the textures of its leaves, the aromas the flowers would have, what it needed to grow in terms of shade and sun. Then I began to think of the whole house and landscape as an Impressionist painting.... The colors of the plantings and how they were placed with each other came from the ideas in the paintings. I also wanted a stepped effect on the hillside inspired a little by the Babylonian gardens."

Walker began by radically altering the slope of the hill so that it would step down gradually. Ribbons of colorful ground cover, including African daisy and ice plant, were planted on the hill, interspersed with exotic plantings of blue hibiscus, African tulip trees, Japanese black pines, orchid trees, plumeria, gardenias, silk trees and Hawaiian ginger. On the fence at the bottom of the hill, Walker placed red, pink and bronze bougainvillea with yellow jasmine.

To carry through the tropical theme, Walker used dozens of different palms in various plant groupings around the house. "And they all were placed so that when they grow very tall, they won't interfere with the panoramic views from the house," he said.

The San Diego Union/Don Kohlbauer

A whimsical ceramic fish swims along the wall of a greenery-draped lap pool.

In addition to the new landscape on the hillside, Walker put in a tiled lap pool surrounded by greenery at the back of the house. The pool's tile work is especially attractive, particularly a wall filled with a school of three-dimensional ceramic fish.

"One of the things that appealed to me about the house originally was how really finely crafted it was in terms of woodwork and artistic use of materials," Walker said. "I wanted to continue that in what I put into the renovation and keep the very best of the old. Even in historic cities like Boston I've already seen too many renovations that simply destroy a classic piece of work."

In the master bathroom, for instance, Walker was able to keep the original hand-painted tile, with its delicate water lily motif, by installing new plumbing around it. He also took care to design rooms and small work spaces around other original features, such as built-in wood cabinets with finely designed glass pulls.

But while the interior structure was kept intact, many changes were made to transform a dreary living space into one alive with freshness and light. Wall surfaces were painted white. Hardwood oak floors were refinished. Recessed door panels were removed and replaced with glass to allow light to enter rooms at interesting angles. Walker has also added some antique architectural details, such as stained glass panels and a Victorian fireplace mantel, which he collected while living in Boston.

The entire 3,000 square feet of living space was also replumbed and rewired.

"Essentially, we now have an interesting old house with modern guts," said Walker, who spent eight months working on the project. "I got going and couldn't stop. I meant to spend three months and a lot of zeal on the place and ended up taking off from work and spending eight months and more zeal than I thought I had to start with. After a while, friends of mine started calling this 'Gary's Sistine Chapel.' "