

Custom Designs, Textures Offer Oasis

Lifestyles: Bringing the feel of the Pacific and a touch of Yosemite into backyards, John Crystal makes dreams come true. By Lisa B. Leff - Special to the Times

Northridge- John Crystal is in the business of making the California dream come true. He does it with wheelbarrows and Bobcats plaster and rebar colored concrete and paving stones, electrical wires and PVC piping.

The dream, of course, is the backyard swimming pool. During his twenty-three years as an independent pool contractor, Crystal estimates that he has completed more than seven hundred pool projects in San Fernando and Ventura counties and neighboring environs. None of the pools exactly alike in appearance or the challenges they presented.

He has worked gravity-defying pools into hillside, dug pools by hand in yards too small to accommodate excavating equipment and used real sand and a specially designed filtration system to give a pool's owners the feeling that they were wading into the Pacific.

His most towering achievement may be the forty-foot waterfall that he erected four years ago behind a Glendale estate out of river rock imported from the Sierra Nevada near Yosemite. Yet he is equally proud of the petite pool and Jacuzzi he squeezed into a thirty-foot long yard of a home in Marina Del Rey last year. Despite the yard's Lilliputian proportions, the owner wanted to be able to exercise in the pool so Crystal installed a "swimming system" that generates an artificial current.

"One of my subcontractors has a saying 'We are building a better tomorrow'. And as corny as that sounds, I think it's true," Crystal said. "If we have done our job right, the end result of our work is we have made our customers' lives more enjoyable and exciting"

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Crystal, who now commutes by private plane from his home near Newport Beach to his Northridge office, got his start in the swimming pool business by cleaning pools while a student at Pierce College. After learning how to repair filters and heaters, he founded his own pool service company. He sold that company and launched John Crystal Pools at twenty-five, when he obtained his pool contractor's license. Due to his experience Crystal age forty-eight is today one of the most sought-after custom pool builders in the region. He gets loads of referrals from theatrical agents and other members of the entertainment industry, and his celebrity clients have included author Michael Crichton and rocker Tommy Lee.

He also works closely with landscape designers, and one of his projects was featured in a recent issue of Sunset Magazine. But he says his biggest single source of new business is mothers who decide they want to take the plunge after seeing their children splashing about in a classmate's pool.

Business is so good right now that Crystal says he cannot take all the jobs that come his way, even with his typical six and half day workweek and full-time staff of five. With the relatively low interest rates on home-improvement loans helping to put new pools within reach of more homeowners, and demand for remodeled pools heating up as many Valley homes settle into a frumpy middle age, this spring has been Crystal's busiest ever.

"It's beyond belief to me," he said. "I would say on average, I used to get three or four leads a week. Right now I get anywhere between six to twelve a week." Crystal "plane pools" or shares piloting duties, to his Napa Street office five days a week, flying his Cherokee Warrior from his home in Orange County to Van Nuys Airport at seven A.M., and then making the short drive to his office in industrial area of Northridge. But he's not in the office for long. He spends the first couple of hours of his day returning and taking phone calls from customers, scheduling jobs, lining up soil, geological and building inspections, and receiving progress reports from his employees and subcontractors. He spends the rest of the day driving from job to job in his Chevy truck with cellular phone clipped on his waistband.

"We need to be hands-on, so our office is really in the field," he said adding that in a typical month he logs 3,000 minutes on his cell phone. On this day, his first stop is a stately Colonial style house near the Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank. Crystal was hired by Jonathan Sidy, a

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landscape designer, to remodel the home's existing kidney-shaped pool and Jacuzzi, which sit in the middle of a terraced yard.

The owners had contacted Sidy about simply building a built-in barbecue, but he convinced them that the whole yard, pool included, would benefit from a major face-lift. Crystal, who estimates that half his projects are remodels of older pools, says this job is typical. The existing pool is what he derisively refers to as a "classic Motel 6 style"; a drab concrete hole in the ground rimmed with tile coping, surrounding by bricks and concrete.

Sidy's plan is to give the yard a more natural look by restoring a waterfall and pond above the pool that had been landscaped over. He also wants to raise the edge of the pool and Jacuzzi so it appears as if the pond is flowing into them. The pool's shape will be softened with boulders. Rustic stone pavers will replace the brick and concrete patio, and the pool's bottom will be covered in black pebble coating to make it appear more like a natural body of water. As a pair of laborers busts up the pool's edge with sledgehammers, Crystal and Sidy work out the details as in how many filters the pool will need, where the lights will go, whether the stairs can be salvaged as a foundation for the rock perimeter, and how the waterfall will work.

All of that, of course, while keeping the project within the budget. While driving to the next site, another remodeling project designed by Sidy for the new owners of a South Pasadena home, Crystal explains that pool technology has improved significantly since they were stamped out across the San Fernando Valley about forty years ago. "We are basically able to create any size, shape or color you want, and it will look like the pool was supposed to be there all long," he said.

Even so, building and restyling a pool is still an expensive and emotional enterprise. Minor cosmetic improvements such as replacing tile, coping and plaster can be done for \$5,000 to \$8,000, but adding a spa can easily boost the price tag up another \$12,000. With new masonry and landscaping, the average remodel Crystal handles ends up costing between \$60,000 and \$80,000. A new pool can be had for \$25,000-\$30,000 depending on the demands of the site, but it's not unusual for his customers to spend between \$70,000 and \$12,000 transforming their empty yards into resort-worthy vacation spots, he says.

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Popular features for pools are sloping “beach entries” in place of stairs, “infinity” edges that look like they are disappearing into the landscape horizon, a modern water slides. For Crystal and his clients, common sources of friction come from the limitations of building materials and people’s ability to

visualize what a finished product is going to look like. “The biggest nemesis of our whole business is concrete,” Crystal said. “Occasionally, there are cracks and we have to explain to the customer who is looking at this crack in the patio that we did everything humanly possible to prevent it. Or the texture is not what they expected.”

On balance, though, Crystal says remarkably few horror stories given his longevity in the field. “There’s an old saying that for every three customers who call you to complement you on a job well-done, there will be eleven who call you to complain. In my experience, it’s been just the opposite,” he said. Crystal said the South Pasadena project is especially challenging. The existing pool is a behemoth three times larger than the one at the Burbank house. Its shape is dominated by severe right angles that give it a Roman Empire feel.

Again, Sidy wants to soften its lines with rocks, while improving its scale in proportion to the rest of the home’s yard. Demolition crews have spent four weeks removing the concrete patio.

The last site he visits is a home in the Hollywood Hills, where Crystal is designing and building a new pool, arbor and patio in a sloping yard now filled with weeds. To the untrained eye, it is difficult to visualize how anyone could build an urban oasis here. But Crystal says he can do it. The home’s owner is an MTV executive from New York, and he has sketched out his dreams on a tablecloth from a Mexican restaurant. “He is a likely candidate for a pool,” Crystal said. “He says, ‘I want the lifestyle here in L.A.’”