



# Designing Woman



(Pictured, top) "Before" pictures of Sturdywood, the first home built in Bel-Air, and "after" shots showing Claridge's home improvements.

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**W**ell-known as a successful Valley developer, interior designer, building contractor and restoration expert, Gail Claridge often surprises those who first meet her. Over the phone, she is a soft-spoken, no-nonsense businesswoman, cutting through financial jargon to the straight facts of a project. In person, the petite redhead is lovely and gracious—the ultimate in feminine charm. It's an appearance that belies a gutsy entrepreneurial spirit and tough business-management skills.

Some 20 years ago, Claridge was living in a small house in the San Fernando Valley, wife of an L.A. policeman and mother to three small children. Like many housewives in her position, she decided to do a little decorating to fix up the place. Unlike most everyone else—and, in spite of having no formal design training—she discovered a rare talent that would lead to a million-dollar business and an enviable reputation as an expert in renovation and period design.

Her own little decorating project sparked a few more for friends, and eventually she was being asked to transform mansions in Beverly Hills into grand English or French

country estates. Claridge has also been called upon to redesign and restore such showplaces as the 55-year-old Bel-Air landmark, "Sturdywood," and the historic John Huston estate. Her own 7,000-square-foot home in Chatsworth, designed in the style of a 17-century English manor, has been used as a showcase for home furnishings catalogs, as well as a television series and numerous commercials.

Claridge modestly credits her successes to simple hard work, an ability to learn from mistakes and relentless attention to detail. Not content to research and steep herself in period design during occasional trips to Europe, she has become equally knowledgeable in construction techniques and holds a general contractor's license. She is an active member in professional organizations such as the American Society of Interior Designers, the International Society of Interior Designers and the American Institute of Architects, and often speaks on the subject of renovation and property development to both professional groups and the public.