A Modest Hacienda



In New Mexico, owners pitch in to create an up-to-date home with old-world charm

BY CAROLYN ARCURE



As Joseph and I left the real-estate agent's office that afternoon, we could barely believe what we had done. It was 1998, and we had been visiting friends in the mountains of southern New Mexico. Driving along a back road, we came upon an old cattle ranch that had been divided into 5- and 10-acre building sites. Most of the lots were scattered across the juniper-covered hillsides, but one of them was at the bottom of the ridge, in a narrow canyon. We parked on the roadside and clambered across a bridge made from a flatbed railroad car to discover a south-facing home site with mountain views, pinyon pines and plenty of privacy. Along the southern boundary, dressed in a long belt of cottonwoods, ran the Rio Bonito.

This river, an ancient trail once traversed by Mescalero Apaches and the U. S. Cavalry, seemed layered with history. And even though we lived in Michigan, we had a powerful urge to add another layer to it. Joseph and I had occasionally talked about living in another place, and in a heartbeat, the time had arrived to decide if we had found that place. If we were going to buy this land, we had to do it that day. Incredibly, we did.

The next morning, as we waited at the Albuquerque airport for our flight back to Ann Arbor, I found a small volume of Spanish proverbs in the bookstore. I opened to one that said, "Believe the wind." Translated colloquially it means, "Trust in an instant without thinking." We took it to be a serendipitous endorsement of our unfurling adventure.

Long-distance architect hunt

Back in Michigan, the complexity of the situation began to sink in. How do you give birth to a good house when you're 1500 miles away from the site and don't know anyone there? Our first task was to find an architect who could design the kind of house we wanted: a modern house that nevertheless respected New Mexico's tradition of earthen homes. Fortunately, we learned of Robin Dorrell at ADC Referral Ⓢ ("Sources," p. 103), a service in Santa Fe that links prospective clients, builders and architects. She made several recommendations, and after a few phone calls, we set up a meeting with Jon Dick of ARCHAEO Architects in Santa Fe.

We met with Jon on a snowy Santa Fe morning and were immediately relieved to see some familiar books in his office. To learn more about what we wanted in our house, we had been studying Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language* and Sarah Susanka's *Not So*



Enter through an arched passageway. *The entry leads to the courtyard, which includes columns of peeled oaks felled from the site. Simple gabled structures, arranged in a U-shaped footprint, enclose the courtyard. Photos taken at A on floor plan.*

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Sunlight in the morning. *Under an arched opening, a dining alcove notched into the east wall of the kitchen makes the perfect setting for the day's first mug of coffee. Photo taken at B on floor plan.*

Heirlooms in the kitchen. *Placed back to back, the top and bottom halves of a tansu, a Japanese chest, form a base for the kitchen island. Above it, an antique garden gate finds new use as a pot rack. Photo taken at C on floor plan.*

The east wing of the house includes the kitchen and a sunny alcove for breakfast.



Big House. Both books were on Jon's shelf, and we took that to be a good sign. We were also impressed with his ability to dive into the topo map of our site, experiencing in a three-dimensional way what looked like an incomprehensible tangle of squiggly lines. He was already siting the house to maximize solar gain and to take in the view of Sierra Blanca, a mountain sacred to the Mescalero that dominates the landscape.

The following spring, we visited the site with Jon and made the fundamental decisions that shaped the house. We wanted the house to have conservation and sustainability in mind, and in our opinion, nothing impacts those goals as much as the size of the house. We kept the spaces appropriate in size, generous in spirit and minimal. All told, the house has 2565 sq. ft., including the *casita* (guest house), arranged in a U-shaped courtyard plan (floor plan below).

Separated from the house by a covered entry called a *zaguan* (photos p. 98), the guest rooms provide office and studio space for the two of us, plus a full bath. The east wing of the house includes our bedroom and bath, the laundry and the kitchen (photos facing page). The living room acts as a gallery to connect these six primary spaces. Except for the garage, where Joseph has a workshop, that's it.

Books are an important part of our life, so a library was at the top of our wish list. Jon sketched an elevated window seat after one he'd seen in a Mexican convent (drawing p. 102). This little thronelike alcove, right in the middle of our library and open to the view of Sierra Blanca, became the cornerstone of our house (photo p. 102).

We chose a steep gable roof (photo p. 99), reasoning that if it was good enough for Fort Stanton, the cavalry outpost a few miles down the river, it was good enough for us. Almost monastic in its simplicity, the house would have deeply recessed doors and windows with splayed openings to reflect New Mexico's shimmering light.

The character of old adobe, cast in modern materials

Although we were attracted by the look and feel of authentic adobe construction, we had to temper our attraction with reality: We couldn't find one local builder willing to touch adobe blocks. But we did find one who was game to try Perform Wall, a panelized system of insulated concrete forms that become

NARROW ROOMS FOR PLENTY OF LIGHT

Facing south to gather the sunlight, the Arcure house is centered around a courtyard that creates a tame garden on a wild hillside. A wall along the south side connects with the three wings of the house, which are 15 ft. wide, to enclose the courtyard.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 3

Bathrooms: 2

Size: 2565 sq. ft. (2030 main wing; 535 guest wing)

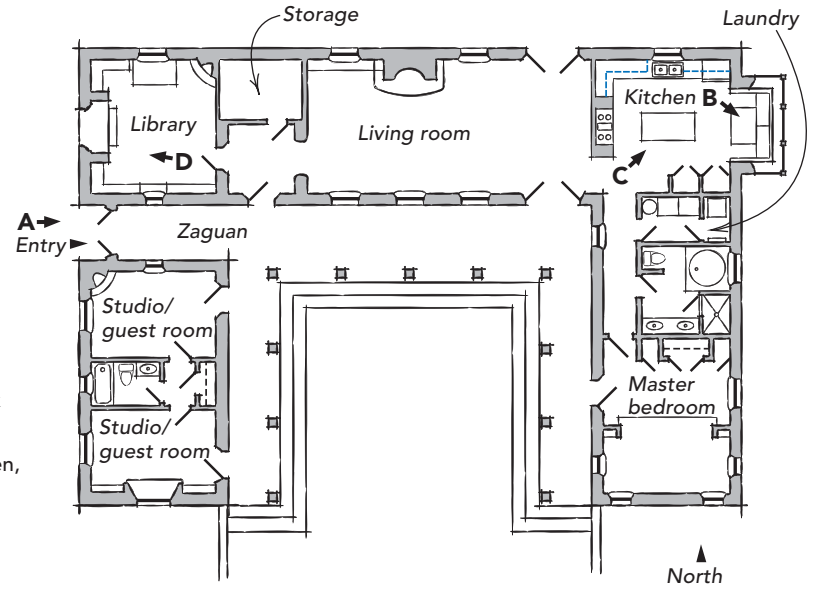
Cost: N/A

Completed: 2002

Location: Southern New Mexico

Architect: Jon Dick at ARCHAEO

Builder: Ed Cillessen, EFC



Photos taken at lettered positions.

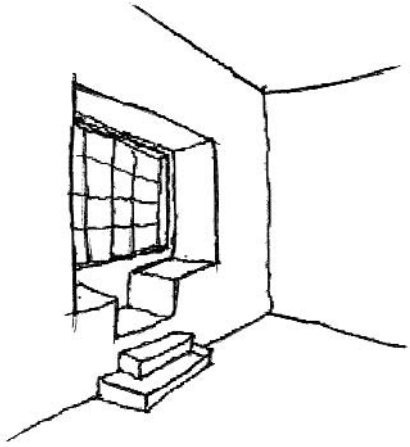
ONLINE CONNECTION

Tour this house on our Web site at www.finehomebuilding.com.

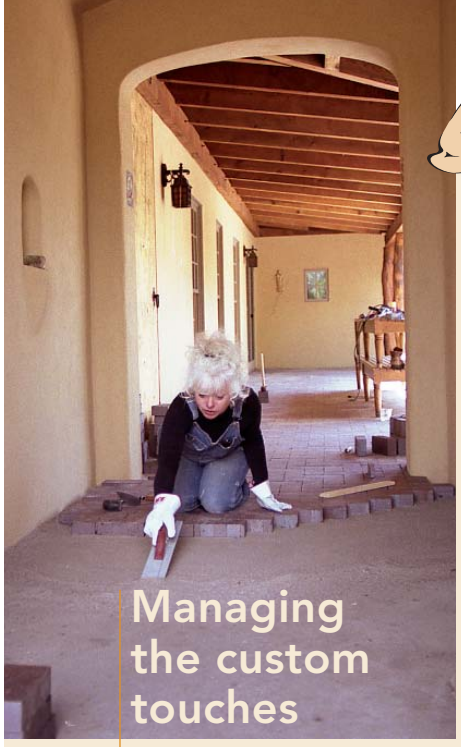
Floor-plan drawings: Paul Perreault

The library window seat is an introspective space with a view of distant mountains.

A sketch done on site led to the signature detail in the library: the elevated window seat. The seat enjoys a view of 12,000-ft. Sierra Blanca Mountain, while the oculus above spills sun and moonlight into the room. Photo taken at D on floor plan.



Drawing this page: Jon Dick



Managing the custom touches

If we wanted to get the level of detail we desired at a price we could still afford, we had to oversee many of those details. This meant ordering and tracking materials that weren't available locally and, in some cases, rolling up our sleeves and installing them ourselves. Here's an annotated list of some of those products and how they worked out. *—C. A.*

FEEDBACK

◆ PATIO BRICKS

It took 6,000 bricks to pave the courtyard steps and walkways. Because we get plenty of freezing temperatures here, we used bricks rated for severe weather. Ours were made in Kansas from a clay that gives them a bluish tint that goes with our metal roof. Joseph and I installed all the bricks, and our knees still hurt.

◆ HARDWARE

We used LaForge door hardware. Their passage locksets, at about $60 a set, are the best deal we've found for the type of hand-tooled knobs and escutcheons that look correct in this kind of house.
www.laforge.com
(415) 252-9898

◆ WINDOWS

Sierra Pacific windows and doors were recommended by our architect as a good value because they are sold factory-direct, with no middleman. Our builder was reluctant to order them because they weren't available at his local supplier. So we took a chance and were impressed. Our doors and windows got here on time, only one sash needed replacing (it was slightly warped), and it was replaced at no charge.
www.sierrapacificwindows.com
(800) 824-7744



◆ COUNTERTOPS

We selected green Fireslate counters for the kitchen. The counter sections came on time, but one was upside down. A replacement came in a timely manner with no extra charge. We love these counters and apply a coat of tung oil every six months.
www.fireslate.com
(800) 523-5902

◆ ANTIQUE WOODWORK

We found authentic architectural details, such as beams, doors and a garden gate, at Wilson Clements Antiques. Their stock comes from dismantled Mexican buildings, which have joinery details that are different than those found on buildings in most of the United States.
www.wilsonclements.com
(830) 995-5039



◆ KIVA FIREPLACE

Prefab kiva fireplaces have arrived in New Mexico-style houses. We used two of them from Adobelite. Advantages are a light weight and roughly half the cost of a mason-built kiva. We chose to not use one of the stock plaster shapes that come with the insert. Instead, our plastering crew made chicken-wire armatures for each and plastered them in place.
www.adobelite.com
(505) 291-0500

◆ TILE FLOORS

For floors, we chose Kezako terra-cotta tiles, and finished every one of them with a stain of colored beeswax. In some parts of the house, the tile patterns are accented with intaglio inset tiles. And yes, Joseph and I lopped the corners off all those tiles to make space for the insets.
Tile: www.annsacks.com
(800) 278-8453
Insets: www.countryfloors.com
(212) 627-8300
—C. A.



an integral part of a thick, monolithic masonry wall. Ed Cillessen had the crane necessary to erect the Perform Wall panels, and he also was willing to let us work alongside his crew. Ed's wasn't the lowest bid, but his impeccable reputation persuaded us to sign him up.

In the world of old adobe houses, 15 ft. is a common yardstick. That's because 15 ft. is a common span for *vigas,* the log rafters that support the roofs. We too wanted this width for our house, as a way to achieve the intimacy of the old houses and to make it possible for the winter sun to reach as much of the house as possible. This reasoning didn't impress the crew members, who eventually declared that our house would be easier to build, and a lot less expensive, if we would simply join together a series of double-wide trailers.

As we got deeper into the detailing of the house, it became clear to us that we wanted a higher level of finish than is typical in this part of New Mexico. So we singled out projects that we thought we could better afford by doing them ourselves, and ordering products and materials that can be hard to track down (see "Feedback," above).

Planting for the future

Southern New Mexico isn't always arid. In fact, it gets torrential storms during the summer. Dealing with the runoff is important for any house, but especially so for a courtyard house. Luckily, we learned about author Judith Phillips, professional plant grower and southwestern-landscape designer. She advised routing runoff from the roof into underground channels of scoria, porous chunks of cinderlike lava that soak up the runoff and then slowly discharge it, encouraging deep roots in the planting beds. Beyond the garden wall, we've installed a buried tank to collect any water that doesn't go into the scoria bank.

After moving tons of brick, rock, tile and flagstone on our way to completing our house, we were ready for some gardening. We began this adventure in an instant, but now we get to know this valley and our place of gratitude within it gradually. □

Carolyn Arcure and her husband, Joseph, are settling into their new life in southern New Mexico. Photos by Charles Miller, except where noted.

Sources

- Design and construction referral service: www.adcreferral.com; (505) 474-8388
- Insulated concrete forms: www.performwall.com; (800) 761-8590

Photo left this page: Joseph Arcure