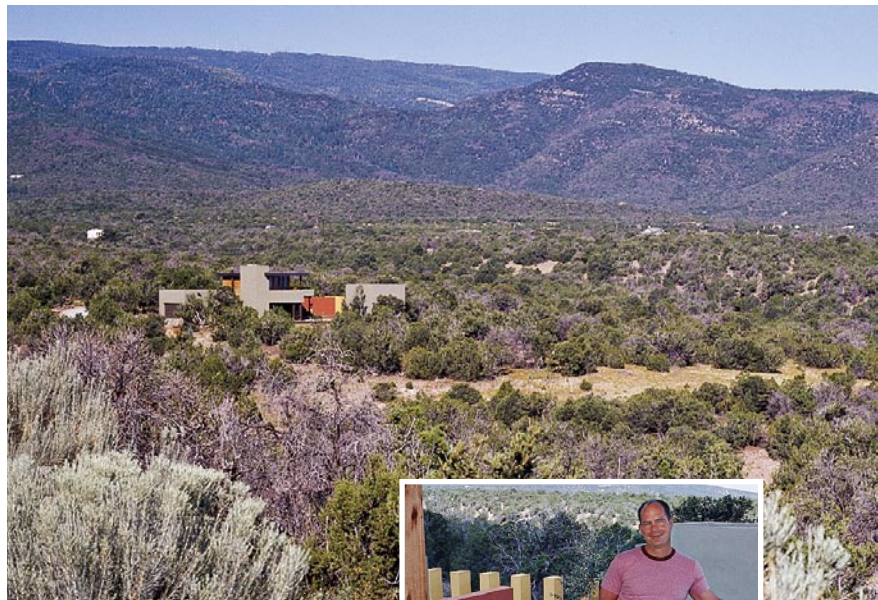


At
Home
in the
Southwest

BY MARIA LAPIANA

How plans for a “faux adobe” house evolved into a modern desert getaway



When in Rome, you live as the Romans do, in chilly but charming apartments on narrow cobblestone streets. When in New Mexico, you build flat-roofed, stucco-sided, ancient-looking, Pueblo-style houses and plant cactus in your yard.

At least you're supposed to.

But Ross Slotten and Kevin Murphy found out it didn't have to be that way. Ross and Kevin are well-traveled Chicago physicians who had been visiting the Santa Fe area regularly for 15 years when, in 2001, they decided to build a second home there. They naturally assumed it would be a pueblo-style house. But when they consulted architects Laura Van Amburgh and Antonio Parés, another more appealing possibility emerged.

It helped that they shared the architects' inclination toward modern design—and that Ross is also a writer who, at the architects' request, was able to put into words the couple's vision for their much-longed-for getaway.

The home they built is anything but a vernacular “faux adobe” so common in the Southwest. It's clean and contemporary, reflecting the couple's personalities, their travels to faraway places like Bali and Africa, and the way they like to spend their time off.

It may not be made of clay, but it honors the New Mexico landscape that surrounds it.

DESERT COOL Pictured on the terrace off the master bedroom, homeowners Ross Slotten and Kevin Murphy were drawn to New Mexico for its wide-open spaces and magnetizing views. The contemporary living room (facing page) is simple and spare yet richly textured.



SUN AND SHADE You enter the house along a colorful colonnade (right) and through a sheltering courtyard (above). Over the patio, a “traditional” pueblo latilla is supported by light industrial steel poles.



Designed for peaceful contemplation

Ross and Kevin’s primary residence is a three-story contemporary house in the heart of Chicago. “The furnishings are eclectic but with a Southwest flavor,” says Ross. “We do not have a spectacular view.”

The New Mexico property—all 13 acres of it—has breathtaking 180-degree views, so any house they built on it would have to take full advantage of them.

The architects, drawing on their interest in the materials of the region and their desire to reuse them in modern ways, designed a small “primitive modern” house that forges a deep connection with the outdoors.

Simple, straightforward, and geometric, the house is a modest 1,790 square feet, wrapped around a courtyard, with an additional, separate 380-square-foot studio. There are both public and private spaces.

November 12, 2001

Dear Laura and Antonio,

We've been coming to the Santa Fe area for the last 15 years. There are only a few places that are as magnetizing to me as the Southwest: St. Bart's, Bali, and parts of Africa. I don't think they have anything in common except their effect on my imagination. I love St. Bart's because of its quiet sophistication. I love Bali because art is intrinsic to the existence of the Balinese. And the appeal of Africa is the savanna, with its abundant wildlife and huge skies.

As for the house itself, I like to think of it as an oasis, a sanctuary. I prefer privacy. Within the house there should also be sanctuaries. I think it's important that Kevin and I have separate spaces—not so much to get away from each other, but spaces where we can indulge our individual interests. I would like a place to think and create, a space separate from the main house itself. Since Kevin is an excellent cook, we need a good-size kitchen, with an expansive work area. The living room should also be large, but the dining area can be small.

Views are important, and the fireplace should be a main focus of the room. The master bedroom should be cozy—but no fireplace. Finally, we think that there should be a den—a TV room that can double as an office and another bedroom for guests. The house should be no larger than 2,500 square feet. Finally, we like a mixture of materials: stucco, copper, steel, glass, flagstone, painted concrete. I like the idea of multiple courtyards, small and large but always private.

I hope this gives you a good sense of what we're looking for. We'd like to give you free reign with the interior and exterior design. I'm curious to see what you guys will create.

Sincerely,
Ross

THE EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA

The land Ross and Kevin own is situated between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, so they felt compelled to build a home in the vernacular Southwest style.

They don't dislike the style; in fact they appreciate its "earthiness" and harmonious connection to the environment. They were eager to build, so they contacted the firm of Van Amburgh+Parés within months of closing on the land.

The architects took their prospective clients to see a contemporary house they'd designed, one that used "sustainable technologies in artful ways" and had lots of built-in features.

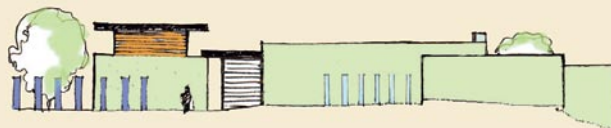
The clients connected with it; "once we saw what Laura did, we were converted," Ross remembers. The next step, says Van Amburgh, was to get personal and "probe the new clients for hidden talents and aspirations as a way of engaging them in the design."

"We asked Ross to write about the most profound experiences he and Kevin had had together in the environment," says Van Amburgh. And the architects took it from there. "After reading Ross's letter [excerpted at left], we responded with three schemes," she says. "The Pura Desa was inspired by the Balinese connection to nature and creativity; the Barthelemy plan is an island in the sea of pinons, keeping lower to the ground; and the Acacia scheme captured Ross's comments about the 'abundant wildlife and huge skies' in Africa by opening up the house to the outdoors with large and small views of nature and wildlife."

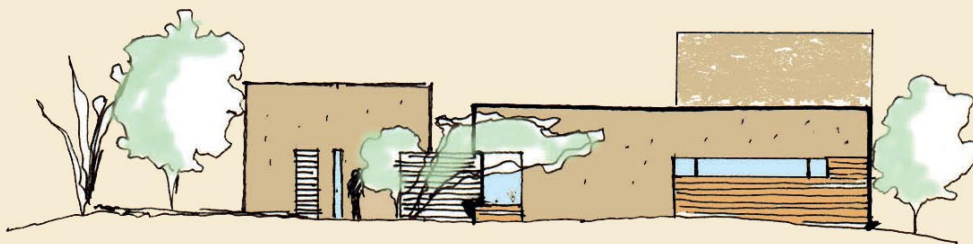
"Laura designed houses based on our descriptions of our favorite places, and in that sense it was a collaboration," says Ross. "In the end, we chose the Acacia, because it was the design that best suited our tastes." —M.L.



Pura Desa



Barthelemy



Acacia

THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM Of the three schemes the architects designed, Ross and Kevin chose the Acacia, with its strong indoor-outdoor connection.

ARCHITECTS THINK ALIKE BUT DESIGN DIFFERENTLY

I was designing a steel, recycled-timber, and mud-plaster art center outside Santa Fe when a friend suggested I call Antonio. He needed help designing a small home and studio using local stone, steel, and unpeeled saplings.

I got in touch with him, and we discovered we shared a mutual passion for honest materials in the heart of the “faux adobe” world of Santa Fe.

We’re now partners in business (our firm is Van Amburgh + Parés Architects)—and in life. But we approach our work differently.

Antonio tackles design problems with an interest in architectural history, pulling books from our library as reference material. His love of early California modernist works by Schindler, Neutra, and Irving Gill shows up in both forms and details.

I hunt through our materials library for fresh combinations, approaching design problems like a collage. I have used painting and collage as my primary form of expression since childhood.

When our two design processes come together, the results are always surprising. The layering of our individual visions brings a spontaneity and an opportunity for the growth of something new. In crossing modernism with a painterly appreciation of local forms and textures, we have taught each other new ways to see the world.

We design using the standard media of architecture—models, sketches, and measured drawings. But we feel our projects beg for a unique exploration that is integrated into the process, such as photography, sculpture, or in Ross and Kevin’s case, writing.

It worked well for the homeowners, and it allowed us to keep the process of creating architecture fresh.

—Laura Van Amburgh



A MODERN SENSIBILITY prevails, but there’s an unmistakable collagelike feel to the home. The architects paired contrasting finishes, smooth surfaces with rough textures, and neutrals with eye-popping brights.

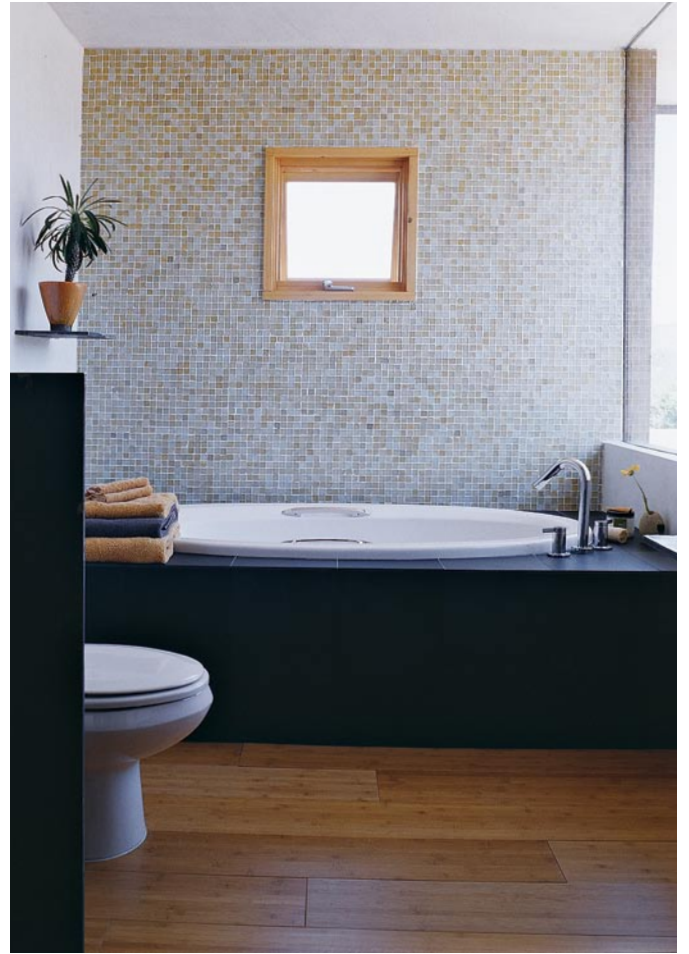
Because Ross wrote that he wanted “to think of the house as an oasis and a sanctuary,” says Van Amburgh, the courtyard is a very private, serene place. “We intentionally kept the landscaping to a minimum,” she says. “It sets the stage for the amazing views they have.”

The kitchen is spacious, and the floor plan is wide open. Says Ross: “Kevin’s a fabulous cook, and there’s nothing like a great dinner party. It’s wonderful to have guests, but, honestly, I like privacy. I prefer quiet, and the house is suited for quiet contemplation.”

Long, enchanting vistas at every turn

Ten years ago, Kevin bought a landscape painting of the exact view from the living room. When he and Ross were looking at land, and he turned around and saw the vista, he says he knew this was where they were meant to be.

The view to the north is of the Ortiz Mountains, which look almost prehistoric, says Ross. “In the early morning,



FUNCTION MEETS FORM in both private and public spaces. Above, the master bath is serene in its simplicity, with a full wall covered in glass tile; and below, the kitchen's earthy palette is punctuated by just enough stainless steel.

on a crystal-clear day, the sky glows—saffron, amethyst. From the terrace, I feel like I'm in Africa."

In the winter, they spend more time in the living room, while in the summer they prefer the terrace off the master bedroom. "It's a great place to have a martini," says Ross, "especially during a thunderstorm, when you have a fantastic show to watch. It's like being at the opera or the theater."

But close-up views are important, too. "We focused the view near the fireplace toward the ground to change the scale of the view and to create a very different connection to nature," says Van Amburgh.

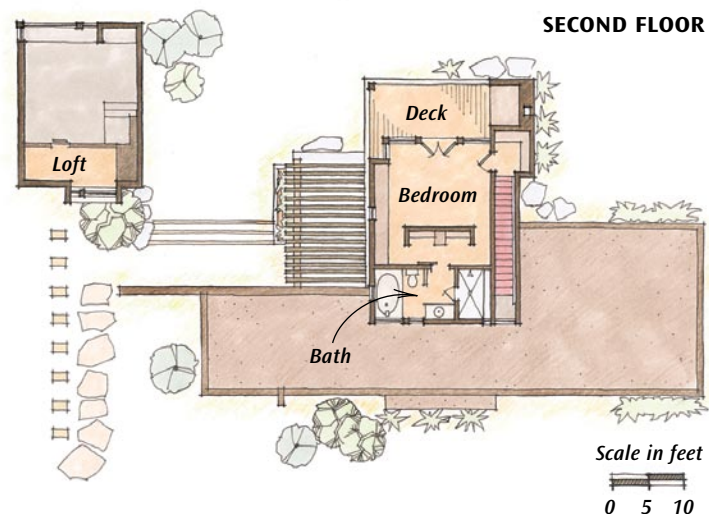
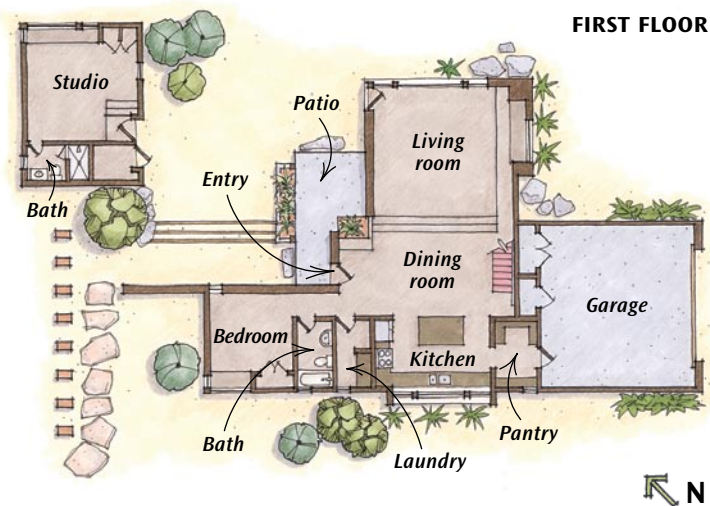
Though Ross and Kevin requested a "cozy" bedroom, Van Amburgh says they incorporated floor-to-ceiling glass with the ceiling plane extending out to the deck, to create the feeling of a larger, outdoor room.

They wrapped the glass at the corner of the living room to achieve the same effect. "We wanted to create different experiences with the landscape," she says.



FLOOR PLAN FITS A CASUAL LIFESTYLE

Compact yet open, the floor plan encourages movement through rooms and into the outdoors.



COZY, WITH VIEWS The homeowners wanted a scaled-down master bedroom, but doors that open to the terrace make it appear much larger than it is.

Creating a contrast with mixed materials


One of the things Kevin says he loves about contemporary architecture is the use of “basic materials, like concrete, natural woods, and metal.” Van Amburgh and Parés knew their clients wanted to use a wide-ranging and dramatic mix of textures and raw materials, but their budget was limited. So the architects created contrast wherever they could and added deep, rich color where they couldn’t.

They used mud plaster, raw steel, and stucco inside and out. They specified some floors of poured concrete, while others are smooth bamboo.

With a nod to pueblo style in the courtyard entry, they built a “traditional” pueblo latilla out of steel supports and covered it with rough-hewn poles. To create a more intimate feeling inside the entry, they covered the ceiling and walls with birch plywood, which extends into the kitchen.

The fireplace surround was fabricated from rolled steel, as was the stairway support and handrail. The wood treads were stained red for dramatic effect. “I like this space because of the colors—the red stairs, the yellow couches,” says Kevin. “I love to sit on the banco next to the fireplace and look out to our Zen garden.”

Even with its light-industrial elements, the house feels natural and organic. From a distance, it blends in with its surroundings, which is exactly what the homeowners hoped.

“What I like about the house is that it looks more like a work of art than architecture,” says Ross, “and yet it is in perfect harmony with the landscape.” 

Maria LaPiana is an associate editor.

For more information, see Resources, page 86.

A BRILLIANT IDEA The open staircase with its simple iron rail appealed to everyone's taste for sleek, modern design. But the homeowners say the color—a brilliant red—steals the show.

TRUSTING THEIR ARCHITECT

The clients wanted one house; their architect championed another. What made Ross and Kevin change their minds?

For starters, they respected Laura Van Amburgh's talents, and they liked her work. Then, they enjoyed sharing their memories and ideas. Finally, they sensed she was truly committed to the project.

"After seeing some of Laura's work, the adobe house was forgotten," says Kevin, "but there was no 'letting go,' because we were completely involved in the development process.

"Our confidence in Laura and Antonio's skills and vision developed in the initial brainstorm sessions as they encouraged us to visualize our most memorable travel destinations."

The clients also appreciated Laura's involvement: her on-site management style and her choice of skilled contractor Andy Sherwood, who brought far more than code compliance to the table.

Adds Ross: "Laura has strong views, but she didn't railroad us into a particular design. We could have scrapped her conceptions, but we like everything she does. I suppose we're 'easy.' But we wouldn't have worked with her if we had radically different views. From my perspective, it was a perfect fit." —M.L.