



# A Courtyard House in Old Mexico

In a historic village, two California architects build a two-story refuge that wraps around an outdoor living room

BY CATHI AND STEVEN HOUSE

**W**e have always looked to our travels as a source of inspiration and creative growth because it is on the road that we are renewed. After years of travel, however, we began to think how nice it might be to have some familiar things while we are away—our tools, materials and books. So we tucked away a little fantasy that some day we might have a house in Greece and that the perfect life might include a couple of months a year there. We never imagined that our fantasy would come true south of the border.

We discovered San Miguel de Allende quite by chance ten years ago while searching for quarried stone. San Miguel is a 450-year-old Spanish-colonial town in the heart of Mexico, the Central Highlands. It is rich in ancient churches, cobblestone streets and crumbling walls cloaked by flowing vines. On one hand, San Miguel is a vision of Mexico stopped in time, with its ancient cultures and traditions almost untouched. On the other hand, it has become a center for contemporary arts and culture.

After that first visit, we have vacationed in San Miguel many times. On one trip, chance



**Built to the lot lines.** Houses in San Miguel de Allende abut one another at the sides and are built hard against the sidewalk. This front wall of the authors' house has been rebuilt to carry a second floor, but the original front door remains. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

led us to a real-estate agent. We had no interest in buying property but thought it would be entertaining to spend the afternoon with someone who could get us past the mysterious walls that conceal so much. The agent showed us many interesting properties, and we had a wonderful time speculating about each.


When we saw the last property, a precious, tiny ruin, something captured our hearts and would not let go. We were confused and intrigued. This place seemed to be an opportunity that we could not pass up.

## Honoring the original house

Conscious that we would be foreigners barging into a neighborhood where families had lived for generations, we met with the neighbors and asked if they minded our buying the property. They gave us their blessing and encouraged us to buy the house.

That was a good sign, but we tried to remain rational about our impulses. All indications were that construction would probably be a nightmare, as it is for so many who build in Mexico. Everything is different. The culture, materials, construction methods, lan-





**Plain on the outside, complex in the middle.** Swirling patterns of slate and ochre stone pave the central courtyard, and stone columns support the roof that shelters the walk to the bedrooms and studios. The entry to the street is through the arch in the center of the photo. Photo taken at B on floor plan.



**Color and light everywhere.** A fireplace divides the dining area from the sitting area in the high-ceilinged great room. Photo taken at C on floor plan.





guage—all are different. But somehow we could not focus on the negatives. After trying our best to rationalize ourselves out of it, we bought our little ruin.

We started with a crumbling adobe wall with a beautiful old door (bottom photo, p. 100). It led to remnants of buildings on a piece of land that measures a mere 37 ft. by 52 ft. (drawing left, p. 104). Out of respect for the history of the site, we kept everything there in one form or another. The entry door remains exactly as we found it. The wall it enters needed repair, so we had the wall reinforced with concrete to carry the new roof and the second floor.

The footprint of the old house can be found in the new one (floor plans p. 104). For example, the footprint of the outhouse is incorporated into the new master bath, and the storage shed, refurbished with a new foundation and roof tiles, became a studio.

The spaces of the new house fit together like a village of discreet rooms built around and connected by a central courtyard (photo p. 101). Courtyard houses are a beautiful Mexican tradition that we fully embraced. The open center allows air and light to pour into every space. Rooms are filled with huge windows yet are completely private.

At an altitude of 6,300 ft., the climate in San Miguel is cool in winter, comfortable in summer. Circulation through the courtyard eliminated hallways, allowing all the rooms to flow together through the garden. Instead of halls, covered paths shelter the passage between rooms from the rain.

We placed the rooms and windows so that little sun enters the house in summer but so that in winter it shines in just enough to take the chill off the living room. The morning sun touches the walls we see from our bed, but it does not shine into the bedroom.

The office and lower studio, intended for periods of introspection, open onto the courtyard, where the splashing of a pair of fountains provides a sensual background that masks the sounds of the street. The upper studio, on the other hand, is open to external inspiration. It looks to a distant view and the church towers.

The main living spaces are in an L-shaped room on the lower level (photo facing page). Guest quarters and a terrace (bottom photo) find their place on the second floor.

### Recasting traditional details

We decided that in our home, we would celebrate every material and process—every hand that touched any part of it—and that we would use only local materials and details. There is an admirable frugality to the



**Focus on the courtyard.** The kitchen has its own door to the courtyard and a pass-through window over the sink to an outdoor counter. From above, daylight punches through square openings in the ceiling. They are capped on the roof deck with glass blocks. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

**Rooftop terrace.** Flagstone pavers finish the roof over the living room, creating an elevated patio with a view of the city. The alternating-tread stair leads to the water tank mounted on the guest-room roof. Photo taken at E on floor plan.



**Building on tradition.** Built along nearly the same lines as the original house, the new one encloses the northeast corner of the site and expands the plan to two stories. A central courtyard and a rooftop terrace encourage outdoor living in the mild climate of Mexico's Central Highlands.

## SPECS

**Bedrooms:** 2

**Bathrooms:** 2

**Size:** 1,800 sq. ft.

**Cost:** \$55 per sq. ft.

**Completed:** 1996

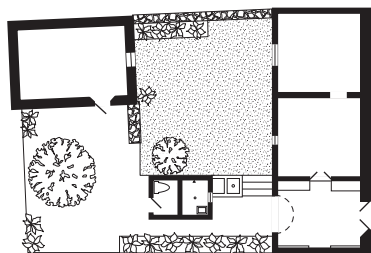
**Location:** San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

**Architect:** Cathi House

**Builder:** Guadalupe Gonzales Morales

## ON-LINE CONNECTION

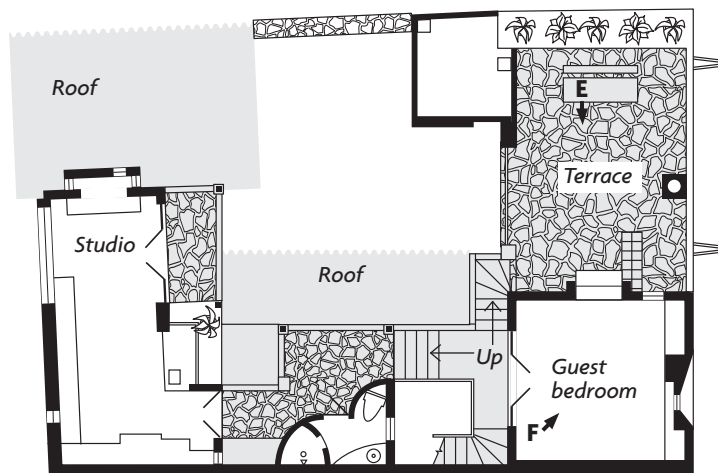
Tour this house on our Web site at [finehomebuilding.com](http://finehomebuilding.com).



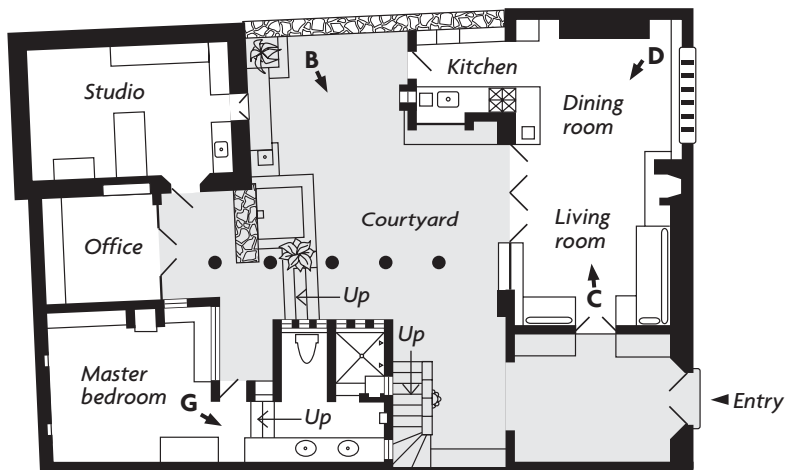
Original house



Photos taken at lettered positions.



Second floor



Ground floor



**Brick ceiling defies gravity.** An arched roof called a boveda springs from the walls of the guest room. Photo taken at F on floor plan.

way Mexicans build their homes. Nothing is wasted, and anything that can be recycled (right down to the nails) is reclaimed for a new purpose. And this is true of our house.

Reclaimed roof tiles keep out the rain. We reused the stone paving and kept the old brick floors in the new living area and studio. All the plants that lived on the property live there still, except for a peach tree that now grows in the garden of one of the builders.

The brick railings and the brick boveda ceiling in the guest room (photo left) are traditional masonry details. Steel railings, hardware, hinges, doors and furniture were forged in fire and hammered into shape by a blacksmith who lives just down our street.

Because stone got us into this situation, we decided to let it be a prominent part of the house. We laid broken shards of black slate from nearby mountains on edge for most of the courtyard paving. It surrounds swirling shapes of ochre-colored stones we hand-collected from a dry riverbed just outside town. Columns of black cantera stone carry

the roof bordering the courtyard. The stones for these columns were delivered as boulders. After our mason chiseled them into cylinders, he hollowed them to fit over the rebar strengthening each concrete-filled column.

Strong colors are typical in San Miguel, where the air is thin and light sparkles intensely. We used color to layer the forms of the house against each other, sculpting compositions to define spaces. The crew, led by our wonderful builder, Guadalupe Gonzales, used pigmented washes to color the masonry surfaces. We followed local tradition by using colored concrete counters in the kitchen and master bath (photo facing page).

Even now we can't really say what it was that drew us to this little plot of land with its remnants of sheds and a crumbling stone wall, but there was some magic there that lives there still. □

Cathi and Steven House are partners in the San Francisco architectural firm House + House. Photos by Charles Miller.





**Jewels in a concrete counter.** In the master bath, glass beads twinkle from their setting in the dark-blue vanity top. Cabinets colored with aniline dyes and hand-rubbed metallic paints support the weighty counter. Photo taken at G on floor plan.