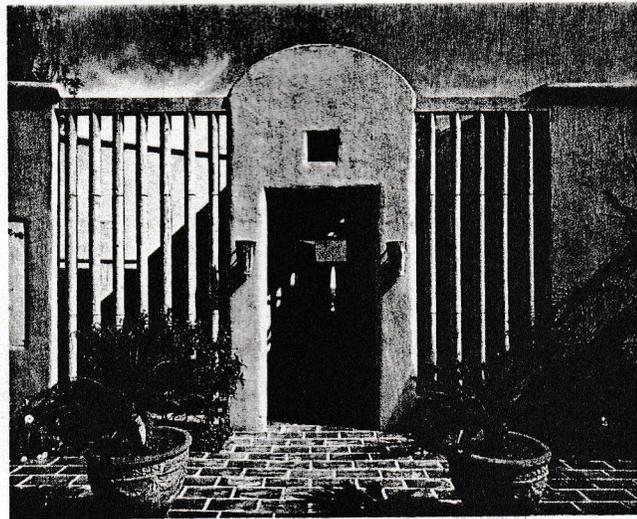


MEDITERRANEAN ECHOES

An Urban Adobe
in Santa Monica
by Architect Ruben S. Ojeda

text by Hunter Drohojowska photography by Tim Street-Porter



Architect Ruben S. Ojeda transformed a '50s-style ranch house in Santa Monica into an evocation of Mediterranean grace. **Left:** Wood columns frame the barrel-vaulted entrance. **Opposite:** Another barrel vault crowns the second-story addition, ending over the balcony off the master suite.

A formal hedge taller than most men—and architect Ruben S. Ojeda is tall enough to make the test—separates the house from the street. The lawns of the neighboring Santa Monica bungalows extend to the pavement: public gardens without people. The distinctive, towering wall of green says clearly, if organically, that the owners of this house, Ron and Lori Robinson, have rather definite ideas about the way they want to live. “We wanted to capture the front yard as part of our patio, like the backyard, instead of it being part of the neighborhood,” explains Ron Robinson.

Enclosed on three sides by the high hedge, the front yard feels like a verdant, roofless room. A visitor entering it must walk around a set-back partition of hedge in order to see the house. Many of Ojeda’s designs feature such orderly transitions—progressions of staging areas where the drama of life, of entering and leaving, takes place. “I enjoy a filtering of the entering process, through a courtyard or a sculpture garden,” he says.



Left: Owners Ron and Lori Robinson relax on the stairs to the master suite. Opposite: New French doors and transoms bring light into the living room.

Thus, a tiled walkway leads to a portico that is classical in spirit yet conceived in the materials and colors of a Mediterranean hill town, with a nod to the American Southwest. Columns of unfinished wood flank an imposing, 12-foot-high, barrel-vaulted entrance made of adobe-colored cement. The overall effect is rigorous yet warm, disciplined yet friendly, postmodern yet rustic—a fine example of Southern California Eclectic.

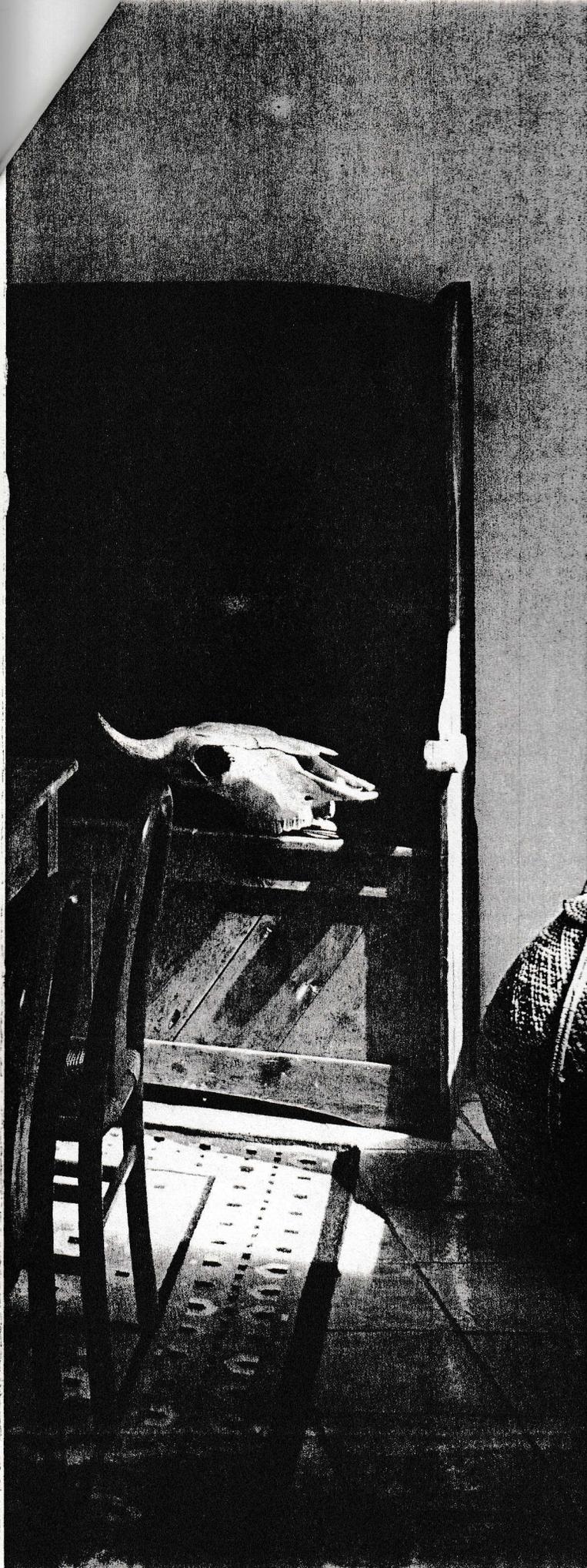
When the Robinsons bought this house nine years ago, it was a structure they didn't love in a location they did. The '50s ranch-style house was a riot of dark-stained wood, frosted ripple glass and green Formica. The interior was dim and cramped, but it had a fireplace and other nice features: a large master bedroom and an equally large master bathroom, considerably divided into his and hers. They made a few essential changes upon moving in—bleaching the dark wood paneling, converting a closet to a wet bar—then began planning for the day they would do a more complete renovation.

Both of the Robinsons work in the fashion industry: he owns a few of the retail divisions at Fred Segal on Melrose Avenue and is a sportswear executive for International News; she designs and merchandises for a French firm, Biscote. This means regular travel to Europe, where they buy clothes for their businesses and have, not inci-

dentally, assimilated the aesthetics of European architecture. Although initially interested in the budding Santa Fe look, repeated exposure to Tuscan villas and Florentine churches altered their taste. They would come home to the ranch house and dream of columns and arches.

A few years ago the Robinsons began to compile their "design Bible," a spiral-bound sketchbook filled with photos clipped from interior-design magazines and snapshots from their travels. Details of floors, windows, ceilings, moldings, the crumbling plaster of ancient Italian churches, the soft surfaces of hand-rubbed adobe, elaborate bathroom hardware—and lots of pictures of arches and columns—were taped in the book for future reference. As it got fuller the Robinsons started to search for an architect who could transform 1950s Americana into 1750s Tuscany, with a bit of Southwest flair. By this time there had emerged an entire generation of Los Angeles lifestylers who would spend plenty to retrofit their homes with '50s paraphernalia, but the Robinsons felt they had lived too long with the kidney-shaped counters, the funny room-divider grids.

Ojeda had never actually remodeled a house, but of the five architects the Robinsons interviewed he gave them the greatest sense of confidence. A graduate of the innovative



Southern California Institute of Architecture and an L.A. native, Ojeda came highly recommended by a colleague from the prestigious firm of John Burgee Architects.

He quickly pared down the stimulating variety of ideas in the design Bible. "All these things were beautiful," says Ojeda, "but if you put them together you'd wind up a fashion victim. My job was to orchestrate the elements into something coherent."

Ojeda took advantage of what he believes was an innovative structure to begin with. "The lot is quite narrow," he points out, "so the original architect oriented the house at 45 degrees." The rooms were angled off the central corridor of the residence, a design that Ojeda took advantage of. He pulled a symmetrical façade out from the original angled entrance, cut off the eaves and added a parapet to the roof. French doors, installed in the dining room on the north side of the house, open onto a patio, which, with the columns and hedge-bound yard, echoes the feeling of a terrace in a Renaissance garden room.

Inside the house, the original ceilings slanted up to 12 feet in the living room. Ojeda replaced the sliding-glass doors with a bank of French doors that open onto a small courtyard, where a curved, columned rear wall supports and separates the second story added to the back of the house.

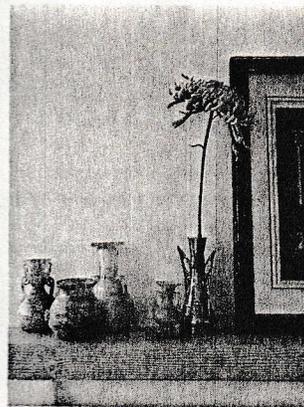
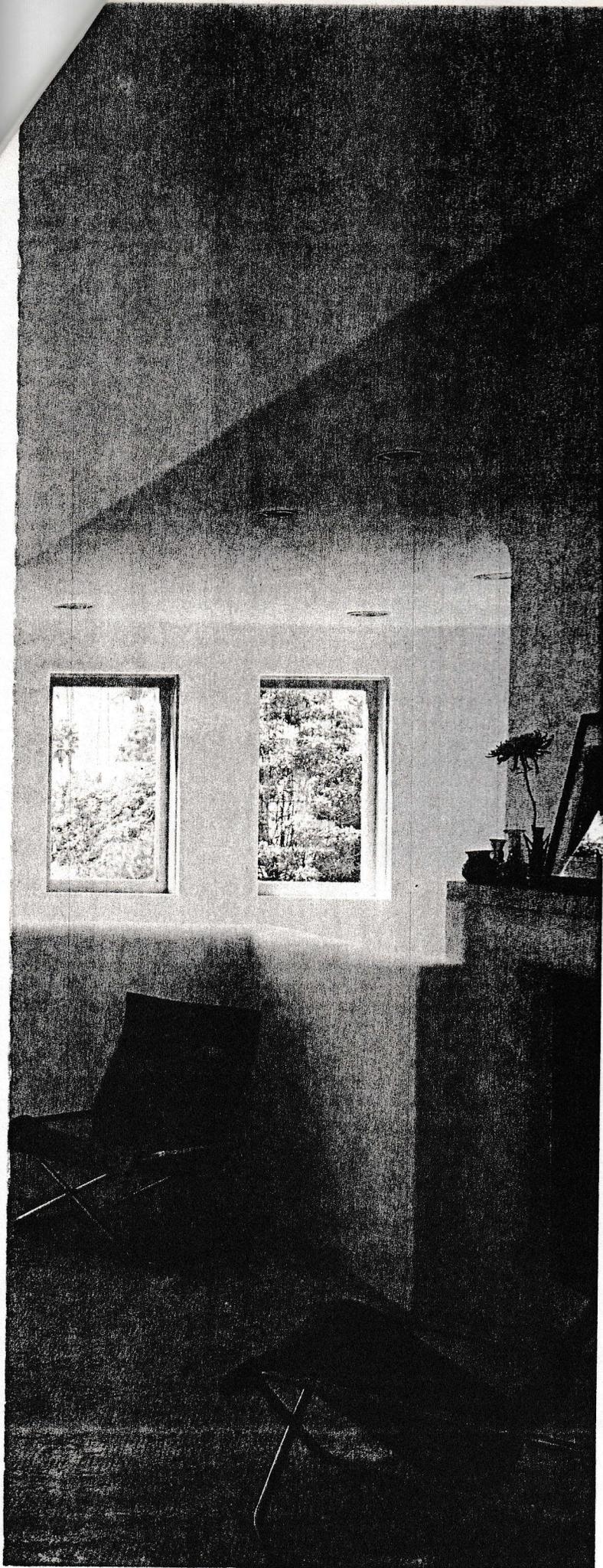
Arches replaced the '50s-style grid that once divided the living room from the kitchen, and the Formica countertops were replaced with granite. A corridor leading to the rear rooms had its ceiling raised and was extended to bisect the original master bedroom and bath, creating an office and guest room in the process.

Eleven months and many revisions later, the new, upstairs master bedroom was finished. Occupying the entire second-floor addition, it is a notably successful space. "We wanted a room with everything, a room where you might spend the entire day," says Lori Robinson. "We even thought of putting in a refrigerator so we would never have to go downstairs." Adds Ron Robinson, "Downstairs, Ruben had restrictions. I didn't want to gut it and start over. This is where he really comes out."

The result—with its fireplace, bright white walls and vaulted ceiling—is beckoning, soothing and altogether delightful. The views from this cloistered interior to the outside world were selected with a connoisseur's eye: a regal arch framing French glass doors that lead to the balcony; a view of the top branches of tangerine trees and a bougainvillea; the incomparable play of clouds and colors across a vast expanse of sky.

Ojeda stood on the roof of the original house and took photographs in every direction, to decide upon the

Diverse influences mingle easily in the dining room. French doors lead to a patio that overlooks the hedge-walled front yard.



placement of windows. The resulting design creates a constant succession of light from the smaller windows facing east and the immense glass doors to the west. He explains, "Balancing light with a graphic arrangement of windows eliminates the tunnel effect of all light coming from one end. Also, it was im-

portant to carry the continuity of the height elements of the house into the bedroom. The vault is 14 feet high. It is not just my personal height that brought about that decision. There is a sensual quality to such vertical space. I don't determine the volume of such a room by calculations; it's all intuitive."

The master bathroom, too, is commodious, with a black-and-white tile floor, sunken tub and niche designed to hold Lori Robinson's collection of antique perfume bottles. Carrying over from the original master bath, it's outfitted with his-and-her sinks and cedar-lined closets.

There is only one aspect of this that still bothers the couple, one employee they would never hire again: Ron himself, who acted as general contractor. Yes, he worked with Lori Robinson to find the right kitchen-tile. Yes, they brought most of the brass hardware—hinges, doorknobs, latches—back from a trip to Italy. Yes, he recycled roof tile for the patios and walkways and saved the ripple glass for clerestory windows in the office and guest room.

But he also had to supervise plasterers, carpenters and plumbers amid a flurry of complications and delays. Lori Robinson kept buying new clothes to keep in the trunk of her car, because her other wardrobe was covered with dust and the washing machine wasn't hooked up. Yes, the process gave the Robinsons a sense of involvement, of achieving something uniquely their own. Next time, though, someone else will be general contractor. And their advice to others? "Live someplace else while the renovation is going on." □



Left: Well-placed windows on three sides of the spacious master bedroom provide a varied play of light. Top: An arrangement of vases sits on the master bedroom's bleached-wood mantel. Above: A '20s desk lamp on an antique French metal nightstand.

For additional information, see Resource Directory.