

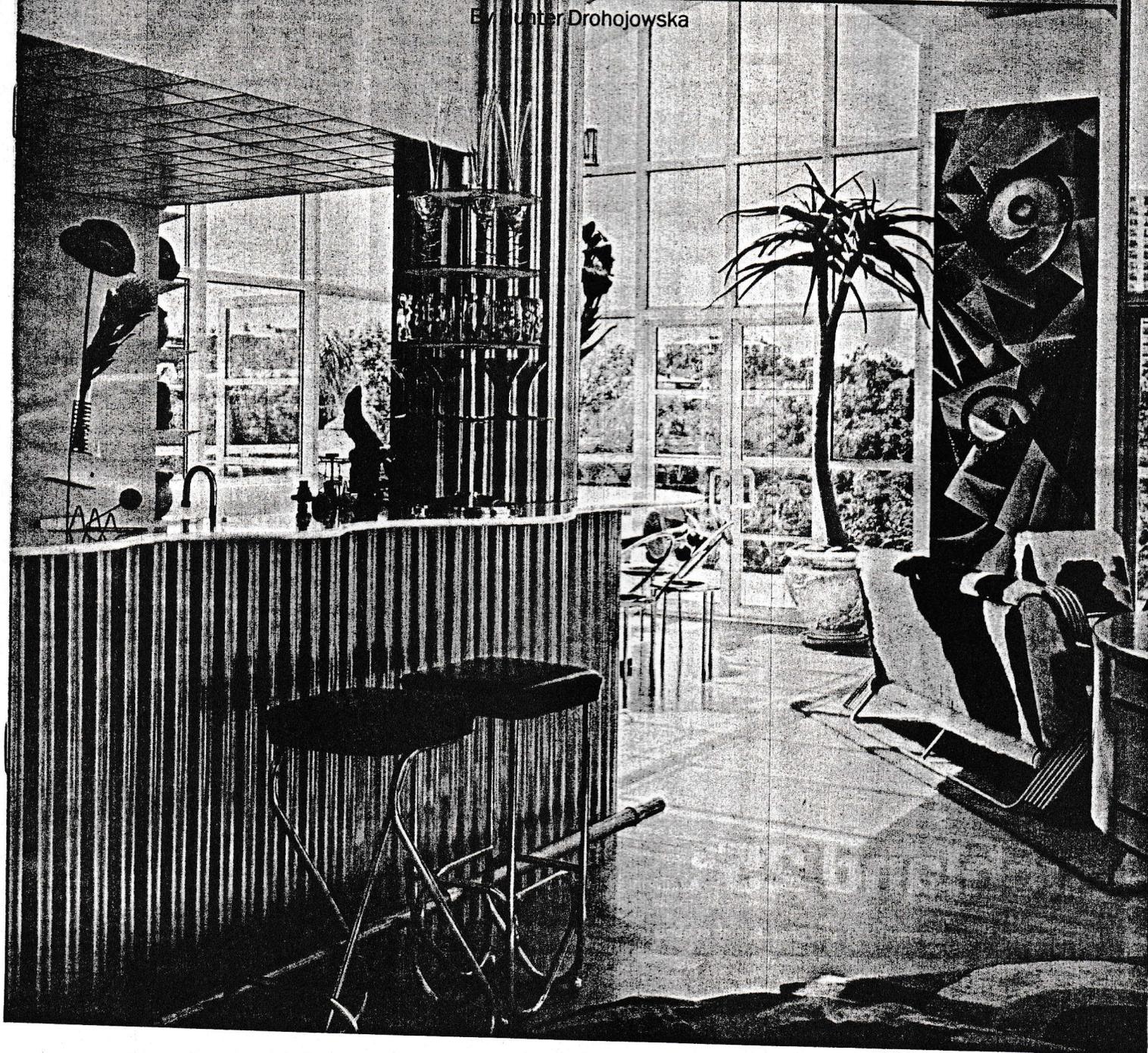
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A VIEW FROM THE TOP

High Kitsch Meets High Glamour in a West Side Penthouse

By Hunter Drohojowska



FLIGHTS OF FANCY

Designer Miriam Wosk hired architect Frank Gehry as her fellow conspirator. Together they transformed an "ugly duckling" apartment into a showcase penthouse

By Hunter Drohojowska

In a quiet neighborhood of Beverly Hills shadowed by the towers of Century City, most of the dwellings are Spanish mission-style bungalows, so a pink, three-story apartment house with a purple driveway can stop traffic. People's eyes pan skyward to the penthouse, an outrageous collection of structures in all sorts of odd shapes. The north corner is covered with aqua ceramic scales. An adjacent ziggurat shines with a gold metallic finish you'd more likely expect to find on a Cadillac. A painting studio in back is a corrugated aluminum quonset hut. The kitchen on the south side is topped by a blue stucco dome. The living and dining rooms are glassed in and shaped like a greenhouse.

This is the work of Frank Gehry, the *éminence grise* of late-modern architecture in Los Angeles. Architects usually make most of the decisions for their clients, but this penthouse's owner, Miriam Wosk, was the exception, an artist and former graphics designer whose tastes and opinions proved to be as iconoclastic as those of her architect. The result of their collaboration is a \$1.5 million pastiche of all the iconography of L.A. from high kitsch to high glamour.

Wosk, 38, leads a visitor into the penthouse's airy interior, which is every bit as extravagant as the view from the street. Outfitted in a '40s-style sunsuit revealing a dark tan, Wosk prepares iced coffee and heads for a cushioned banquette outside on the tiled terrace surrounding the entire building.

"I thought Frank Gehry was the most original person working in architecture," she says. "I had just seen his work in magazines, and I was always so attracted to the uniqueness of his shapes. But I didn't know what we wanted, except that this was an ugly-duckling apartment building."

For his part, Gehry admits that the penthouse offered him opportunities. "I like Wosk's funny taste, because it's very strong and nothing I would ever do. When she started to play with all that tile, I started to play Gaudi myself," he adds, referring to the Spanish

architect who is famed for his baroque work with plaster and tile.

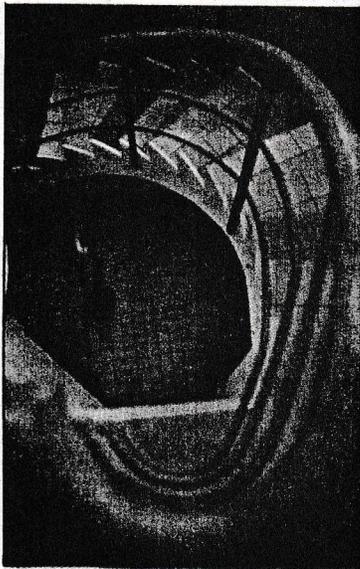
Anyone familiar with Gehry's architecture knows his penchant for using such humble construction materials as plywood, chain link fencing and galvanized aluminum. But those aesthetic decisions were often the result of a limited budget. (Gehry once said that he hated chain link, but the inevitability of his buildings being surrounded with the stuff fostered an attitude of "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.")

Wosk's apartment is anything but proletarian, however. Instead of Gehry's typical plywood, the floors are made of bleached bird's-eye maple that seems to glow with stippled patterns of light and dark. Vast, floor-to-ceiling windows on the north are supported by interior columns, not of concrete, but of iridescent green/black emerald pearl granite. "I told Frank that I wasn't in love with chain link fence or raw plywood, either. I was a client who gave him an opportunity to use materials he hadn't used before. He never had clients willing to spend the money, I guess."

Wosk spent months visiting marble yards, tile studios and vendors of custom plumbing fixtures, continually adding some fresh texture to the surfaces of Gehry's forms. "Most architects don't want anyone to tamper with their vision," says Wosk. "Frank was a big enough man to allow me to participate. He wanted my statement to be as unique and outrageous as I wanted it to be, as powerful and eccentric as his statement, to let them dance together."

This pas de deux of design took a year and a half to plan and an equal length of time to build, occasionally postponed by the reservations of the zoning department of Beverly Hills. "It wasn't too bad," recalls Wosk. "They just wanted us to pull in the terrace, and they felt the silver wall (of the studio) was too strong, so we toned it down. But basically, they let us do what we wanted."

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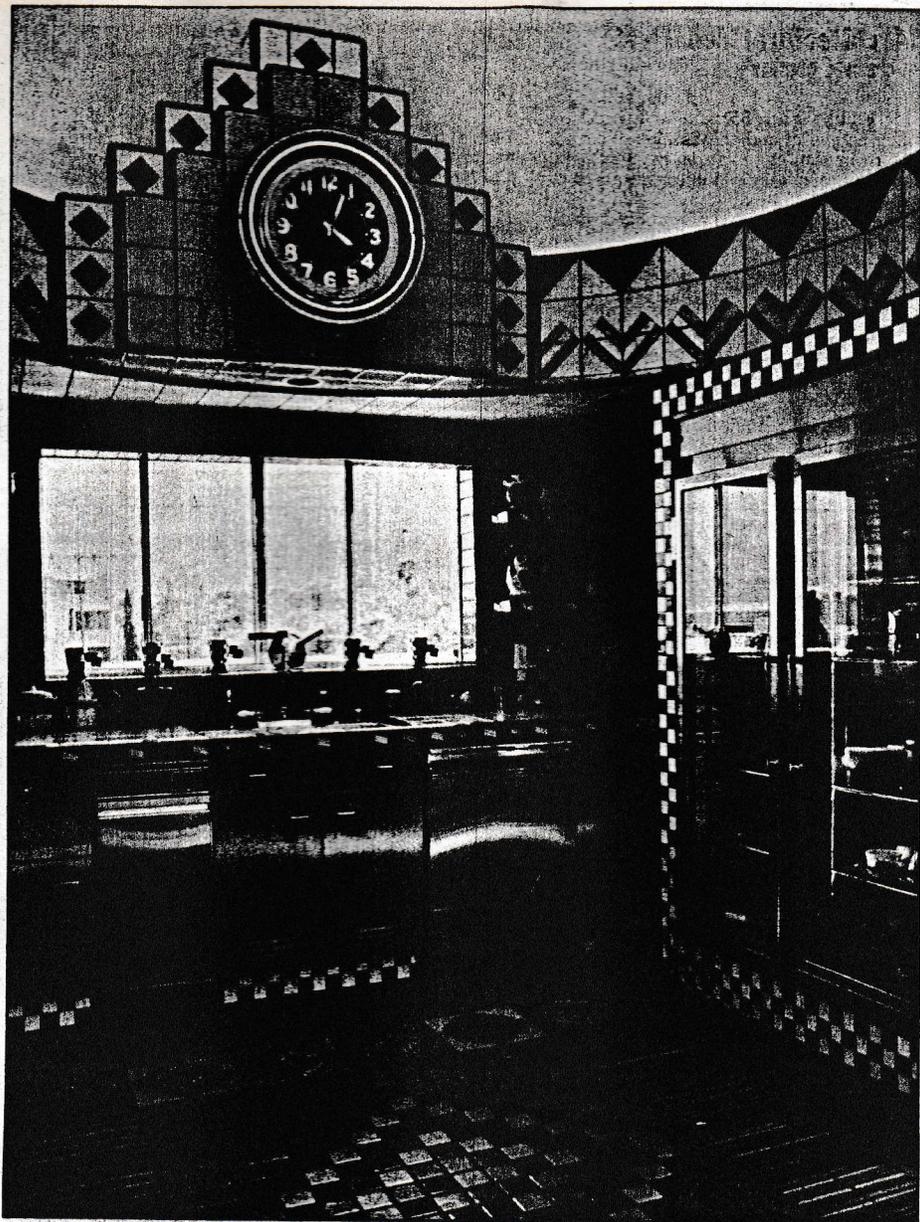
Miriam Wosk: A passion for the eclectic

Miriam Wosk moved to Los Angeles from Manhattan in the early '80s and celebrated the decision by buying a lipstick red '63 Thunderbird convertible. She had tired of the physical as well as cultural climate of New York City. "I wanted to get away from the brutal outdoors. I loved the sun and the way things look in California. It's more my style, more Mediterranean, a more visual environment."

Raised in a well-to-do family in Vancouver, Canada, she left to study at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. After graduation, she worked as an illustrator for ten years. "My career became visible. I did work for most of the magazines in New York and *The New York Times* throughout the '70s. I came here because I wanted to stop and be a painter. I needed to make a break from illustration."

During the minimalist period of the 1970s, her tastes had been considered here, but recently she has noticed a new acceptance in the art community of the sort of popular culture that had long interested her. "I love complexity. As I've gotten older, the artistic climate changed, and I outgrew illustration. I had more need to express on my own." Her painting reflects such fascination. A folding screen at the top of the stairs in her apartment is painted like a souvenir postcard with the words "Greetings From California." Each letter is made up of oranges and swimming pools.

Most of the paintings in the house are hers, though she also has graphics by illustrator friends April Greiman and Milton Glaser. For the last three years, however, her painting has had to take a back seat to the creation of her house. "It's important that my home reflect my artistic activity without seeming too pompous. It's my tongue-in-cheek approach. With the new architecture, most people take it so seriously. I like the eclectic mix and styles of all periods."



ANNE KNUDSEN/HERALD PHOTOGRAPHER

The stunning kitchen of the Wosk house is arranged in a circle. Outside, it takes the shape of a blue stucco dome. Inside, the circular effect is accentuated by rows of brightly colored tiles

custom-designed by Wosk. Prominently displayed on shelves or in the glass-fronted refrigerator and cabinets is her collection of vintage California pottery.

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In his Venice studio, Gehry guides a visitor on a tour of models for various buildings he has done since the early '60s, including his recent California Aerospace Museum. He takes exception to comments that the Wosk penthouse seems a departure from some of his earlier styles, and points out that differentiated structures

linked to one another — as at Wosk's — have been a consistent trademark of his architecture. "I like the idea of disparate forms and trying to connect them in an awkward way. You can see that in my work as early as '64 — the (Lou) Danziger building on Melrose. I work more like a sculptor. I think good architects do. I'll mess with materials and push

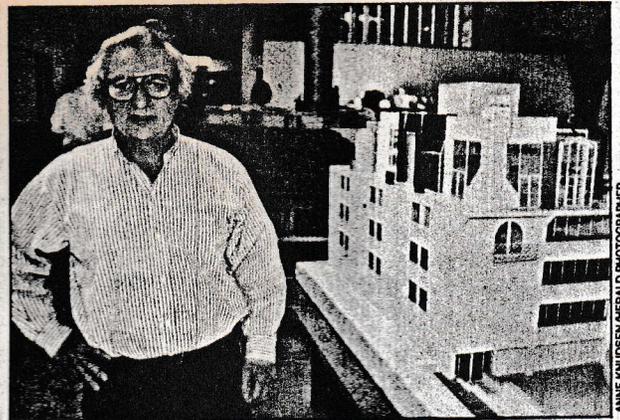
Architectural iconoclast: Frank Gehry

Frank Gehry, 55, may be an architect, but he works and thinks like a sculptor. Born in Toronto, Canada, he has lived in L.A. since 1947. He studied fine art at the University of Southern California before switching to the school of architecture. In 1952, he joined Victor Gruen's office and met even more artists who influenced his fascination with aspects of perception and minimalist form. He studied city planning for a year at Harvard University and did a stint in Paris before opening his own firm in L.A. in 1962.

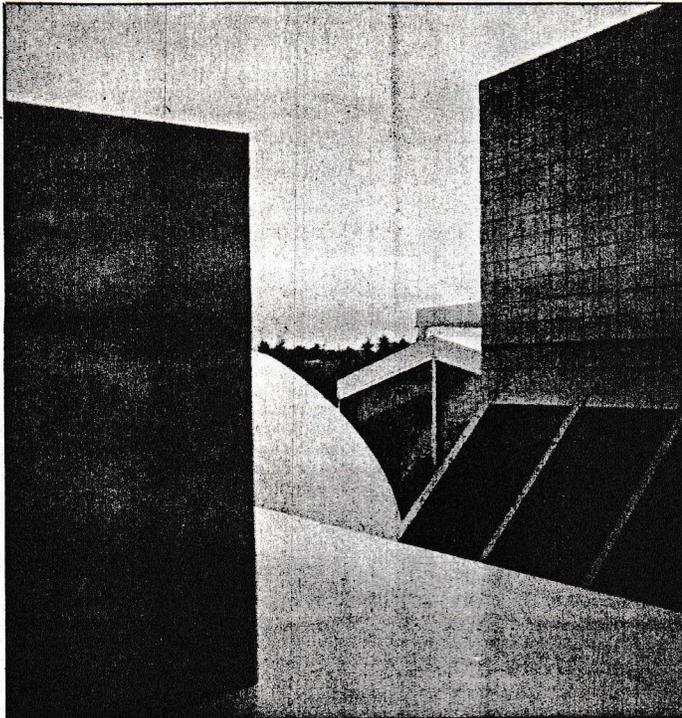
After years of designing "service buildings" and straightforward, client-dictated structures in order to pay the bills, Gehry has finally come into his own as an

experimentalist. In the last decade, particularly, he has been recognized as one of the nation's leading contemporary architects. His designs have earned him more than three dozen awards and regularly appear in prestigious architectural journals. His best-known works — including the Cabrillo Marine Museum in San Pedro, the Loyola Law School and California Aerospace Museum near downtown, a new library in Hollywood and, perhaps most publicized, his own home in Santa Monica — all demonstrate Gehry's ability to combine unconventional materials and surprising forms without becoming gimmicky or losing orientation.

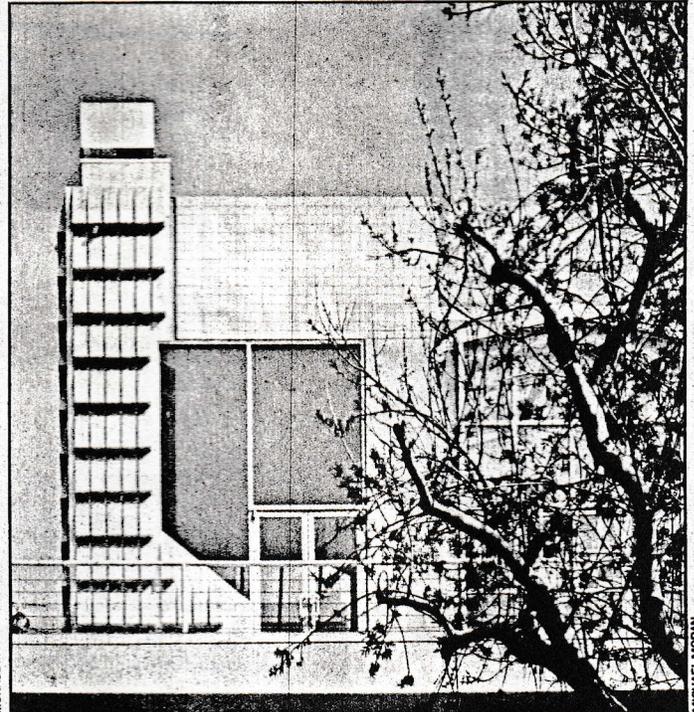
Gehry is a curmudgeonly sort, and with typically wry restraint he says of his hard-won success, "It's nice to get some work. But I don't want to talk down to people. I'm more interested in giving my best."



ANNE INLIDSEN/HERALD PHOTOGRAPHER



Architect Gehry is a master at connecting varied, individual forms. The unconventional shapes of the Wosk penthouse are covered in a melange of textures ranging from stucco to tile to glass.



From the street, the view of the penthouse is startling: Inspired by his client's interest in tile, Gehry covered one corner of the penthouse with aqua ceramic scales.

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them around until I get it. At Wosk's, you are looking through certain areas at borrowed sculptural forms of adjacent pieces. This is an idea that I've had for a long time."

Although Wosk wanted an elegant, special living situation, she also wanted a casual and comfortable style. "I wanted it to be like a big loft, all open in the

middle," she explains. The living room, dining room and kitchen pivot around a bar that is typically Gehry, with a base of corrugated aluminum, rising in a classical fluted column to the ceiling. But the bar's curved top is of white marble, selected by Wosk. The corrugated metal effectively offsets the luxury of the other surfaces. In fact, Gehry's search

for essences balances Wosk's desire for excess, giving the final product a quirky harmony.

"If a work of art is supposed to reflect its time and place, there is something about this place. When I look around L.A. today and see what a

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collage of shapes, materials, funky motels, hot dog stands and street signs (it is), I see that configuration of elements reflected up here. This is a lot of little buildings drawn together, but all different, like a little street scene. The blue domed kitchen is like the Ali Baba Motel; the gold ziggurat is Aztec; the glamour and facades are the influence of the movies. But I also think this house is very personal. A reflection of who I am as an artist and as a person."

Wosk used her talents as a visual artist to design most of the etched deco-style glass and geometric tiles in her house. In fact, one could reasonably call this the House of Tile, since nearly every surface is covered in custom ceramic tiles designed by Wosk and fired by Malibu Tile.

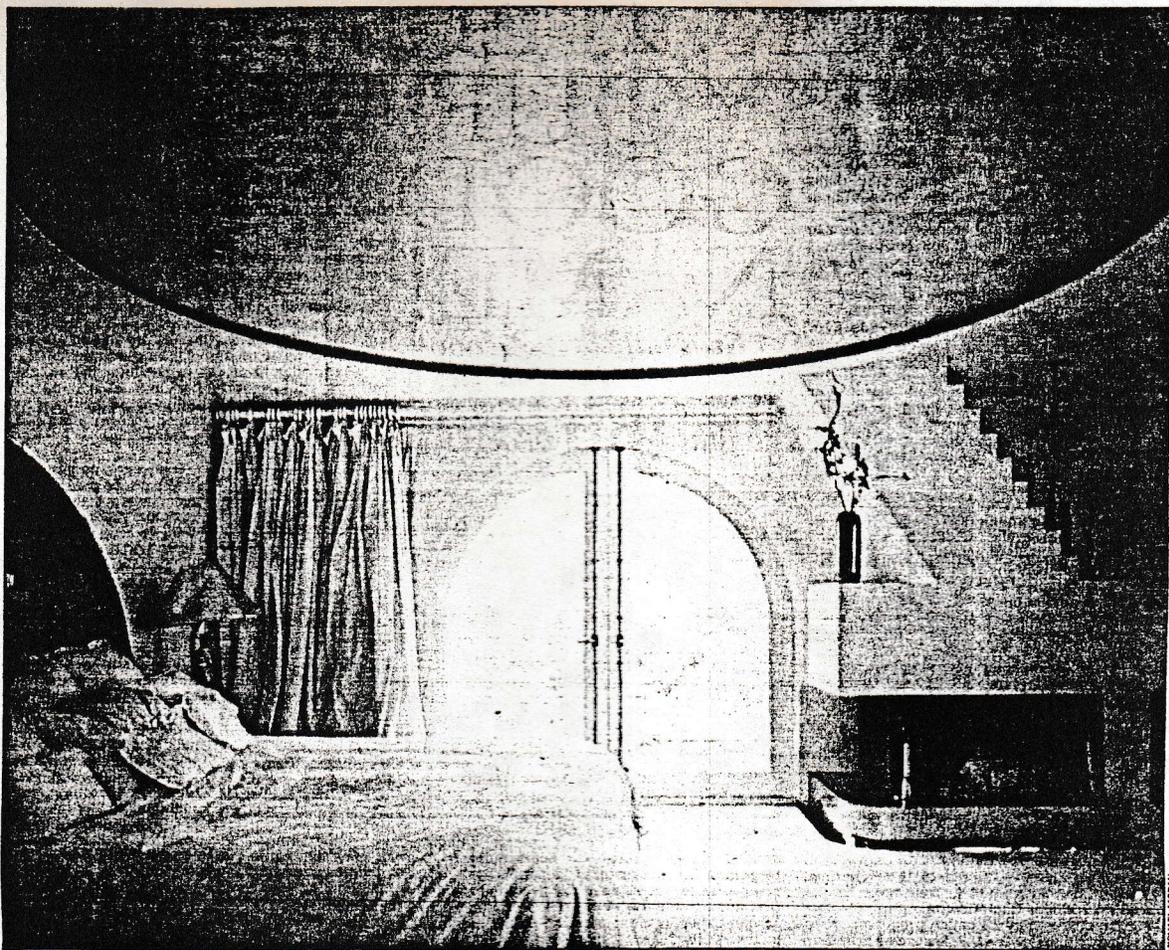
The kitchen is done from floor to ceiling in what Gehry calls "Mexican restaurant tacky," tiles in fruity Latin colors and geometric motifs topped by a stained glass skylight in the domed ceiling, also designed by Wosk. The ambience is of an extravagant kaleidoscope of color. A brilliant contrast is provided by cabinets and a refrigerator of stainless steel fronted with glass to reveal appetizing arrangements of glasses and plates, bottles of champagne and fresh fruit in rose, yellow or blue Bauer and Fiesta Ware bowls.

"I think food is like flowers," Wosk says, "I love to display it, use pretty bowls and all that stuff. Everyone always ends up in the kitchen, consequently, I thought it would be nice to have it open and in the center of the house. This room is where people always come, to stand around the bar, under the dome."

The adjacent living room is filled with streamlined art deco and art moderne furniture collected by Wosk over the years, complemented by geometric rugs created from designs by the cubist artist Juan Gris and suprematist Sonia Delaunay. In the corner, a black glass fireplace with teapots by Peter Shire on the mantelpiece rises in exaggerated geometry, referring to the skyscrapers in Century City beyond.

Of her affection for the deco and moderne periods, Wosk says, "It's the first time everything looked so modern, so streamlined, so clean. I love the simplicity and elegance, the glamour of Hollywood." And a *soignée*, refined glamour is most apparent in the downstairs bedrooms, which are reached by brightly tiled steps and a pair of amethyst enameled railings.

Here the festive atmosphere changes to that of glorious old Hollywood, to rooms that might have been lifted from the set of "Sunset Boulevard." In the master bathroom, white swans swim on black tiles around the edges of a black oval tub. The sinks



Wosk planned her bedroom as a retreat from the bright colors prevalent in the rest of the house. Over the bed she has painted a pastel skyscape that, at night, is lit with a ring of pink neon. The circular form is repeated in the blue

mirrored headboard etched with geometric patterns designed by Wosk. Gehry designed the zigzag fireplace chimney, where Wosk displays a collection of statuettes from the 1920s.

are brass with exotic handles. Art deco-inspired designs by Wosk are etched into frosted glass in the bathrooms and on the blue glass mirror of the hemispherical headboard, while the bed is covered in frothy white lace.

Overhead, Wosk has painted a

circular skyscape ringed in pink neon, sort of Tiepolo without the angels. "This is a nice refuge, quiet and white," she says. The room is a study in femininity, appointed by a gold-leaf dressing table from the '20s and statuettes of lithe nymphets parading up the stepped chimney of the

fireplace.

"The great thing about Frank is he's like a psychologist," she comments. "He figured out what my fantasies were and gave them back to me, and then some of his own as well. It was totally different from anything he had done before. So many people

have begun imitating what he was doing that he came up with something totally new. He's an artist, willing to take a chance and explore the unknown." ■

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about the arts for the *Herald*.

MICHAEL MORAN