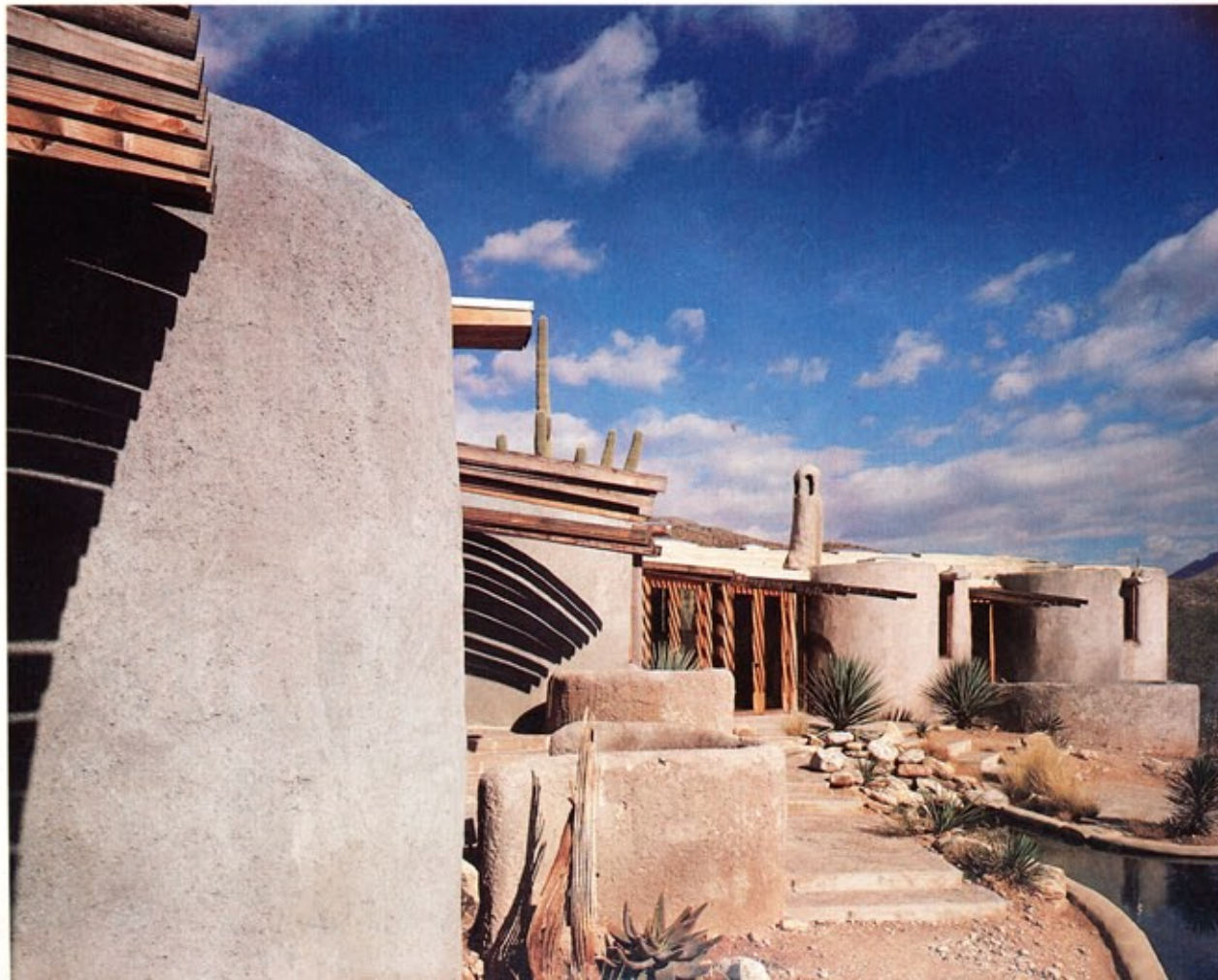


Desert Motif

Ancient Indian Forms in an Arizona Home

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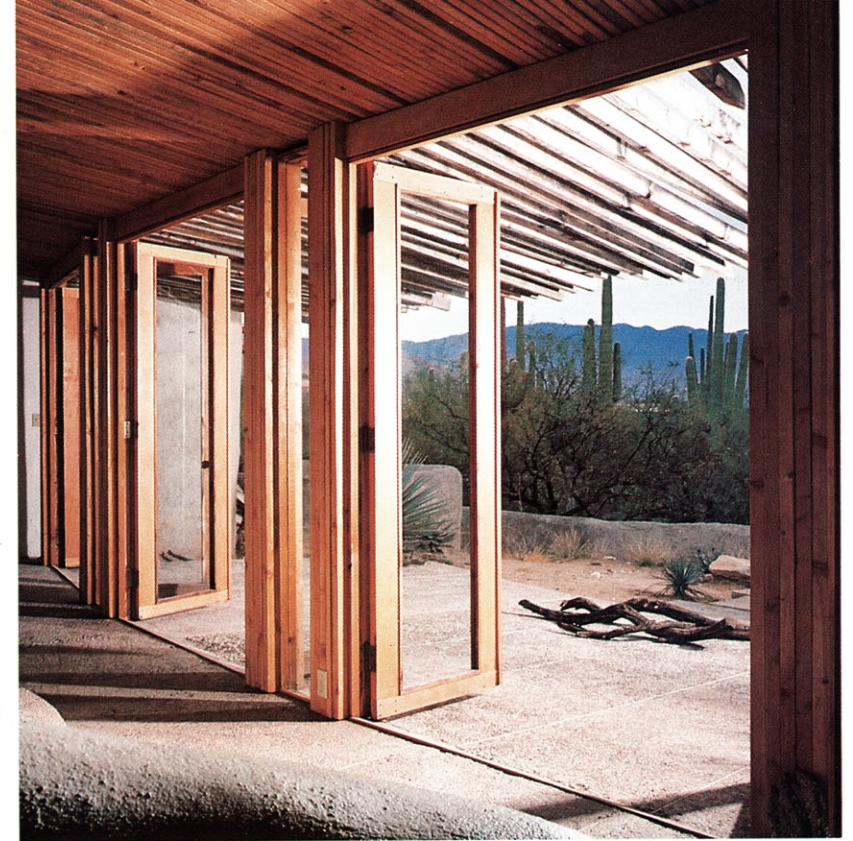
RIGHT: Cradled in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains, the Tucson home of San Francisco designer Roger Harned (left) and architect Alex Riley (right) and his wife, Karen, was inspired by traditions of the Southwest. BELOW: "The semicircular plan provides southern exposure and embraces the courtyard and pool," says Riley. OPPOSITE: Glass doors and a continuous concrete floor unite the living room with the main courtyard. The painting is by Zac Ma. Chairs and ottoman from J. Robert Scott.





LEFT: A shaded breezeway between the main house (right) and the studio overlooks the pool in the main courtyard. BELOW: Low curved walls define living and dining areas. "Furniture, accessories and art were chosen to reflect these sculptural shapes," says Harned. The mobile on the low table is by Brian Lensink. OPPOSITE: Desert light filters in from the main courtyard through a wall of double doors to the living and dining areas. The ceiling composition, which continues to the exterior, "alludes to the southwestern Indian tradition of saguaro cactus rib ceilings, sometimes covered with mud," notes Riley. OPPOSITE BELOW: A traditional beehive-style fireplace is part of the encircling wall of the seating area. The ceramic sculpture *Inner Space*, by Kevin Anderson, occupies the plaster-surfaced dining table.

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OPPOSITE: Natural colors and stones bring the desert setting indoors to the master bedroom, where a shelf and bedside tables are built into the curving wall. Ribbed cotton fabric from Quadrille; leather bench from J. Robert Scott. FOLLOWING PAGES: In the main courtyard, low, rounded, earth-textured forms—and chimney flues that repeat the shape of the saguaro cactus—relate the design to the desert. To resemble adobe but provide better insulation, the house is made of concrete sprayed over Styrofoam and steel, creating what Harned and Riley call “a contemporary interpretation of the Southwest adobe.”

FOR PEOPLE accustomed to velvety green lawns and summer afternoon rain showers, the first contact with the desert is often a shock. Interior designer Roger Harned vividly remembers the blistering August day he arrived in Tucson, where he had taken, sight unseen, a job at the university.

“My first reaction was to leave immediately,” says Harned. “I was from Minneapolis, and Tucson seemed so ungreen. It took me six months to begin to appreciate it. You have to re-educate your eye, because the changes in the landscape are subtle.”

Time passed, and the Sonoran desert around Tucson began to seem a friendlier place, richly textured with plants and astir with birds and animals. Harned became so enthusiastic that he encouraged a friend, architect Alex Riley, to move from rain-drenched Oregon. Riley too was initially dismayed, more by the city’s undisciplined sprawl than by the severity of the landscape, but today he is a connoisseur of the environment.

“This is the lushest type of desert there is,” Riley says. “The mesquites are like an orchard. You walk out there and the desert hums, because there’s almost always a breeze. Sometimes, if the wind picks up, you can hear it whistle through the spines of the saguaro like it does through the rigging of a sailboat.”

Even after Riley and Harned moved to the San Francisco Bay area in 1970 to establish their own design firm, the desert kept its allure. When they decided to collaborate on a vacation retreat for themselves in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains northeast of Tucson, they were in firm agreement that the house should

reflect and embrace its desert setting.

The first step was to create a passive solar building in a material appropriate to the semi-arid climate of Tucson, where temperatures routinely soar over a hundred degrees in the long summer and drop below freezing at night for several weeks in the winter. At first glance their solution looks like the time-honored southwestern answer: adobe. In fact, the house is a skeleton of steel reinforcement bars lined with Styrofoam and then sprayed with concrete.

“The idea came from watching a swimming pool being built,” Riley explains. “They dig a hole and spray Gunitite on the walls. Ours is a modern form of adobe, and it’s superior as an insulator.”

Thanks to fifteen-inch-thick walls, the orientation of the house toward the south, and an insulated basement filled with boulders for retaining heat or cold, the temperature inside rarely varies more than a few degrees. In a region where air-conditioners hum endlessly and expensively, this house has no need for a conventional cooling system. And though there is a furnace, it has never been used. Fireplaces warm the space when needed.

The house is actually two buildings—the main house, occupied by Riley and his wife, and Harned’s studio—that are linked by a breezeway and curve loosely around the courtyard and swimming pool. The floor plan is a serpentine of circular shapes, blurring the distinction between interior and exterior.

“The soft round forms are related to the Anasazi Indian ruins and Hopi kivas,” Riley explains. “They are also similar to the round forms of cacti

like the prickly pear. It’s an attempt to relate not just to Spanish tradition and the Santa Fe style but to something more ancient.”

The local Indian tradition of constructing roofs from the ribs of the saguaro cactus inspired the ceilings, which are made of fir two-by-fours milled irregularly to soften the edges. Outside, more upended boards fan out to form trellises precisely placed so that they provide shade in the summer but let in winter sunshine.

The striped shadows cast by the trellises on the curving white plaster walls inside were no accident. “Everything is premeditated,” says Riley. “The reason there’s no art on the bedroom wall is because the shadows are so interesting.”

The shifting bars of light and dark are almost the only pattern in the house. Like the desert outside, the interior furnishings are nearly monochromatic, covered in fabrics chosen for their earthy textures. In the living room, flashes of red appear, as fleeting as the cardinals that make occasional dives into the pool.

Harned and Riley intentionally avoided decorative elements such as Navajo blankets or Hopi kachinas that would pin the house to a particular place on the map. “The house would be appropriate elsewhere,” says Harned, “such as the Mediterranean or Los Angeles. Although it alludes to all the things that are suitable in this environment, it doesn’t scream ‘Indian house’ at you.”

Elsewhere, of course, Alex Riley and Roger Harned would miss what they have become so accustomed to now—the looming saguaros and the coyotes that yip in the night. □



