Desert Escape
Seductive ideas from a Southwest retreat
Santa Fe modernity

Traditional and contemporary blend in an eco-friendly design

BY PETER O. WHITELEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA ROMEREIN

“My client requested an adobe house that was visually quiet in the landscape,” says architect Beverley Spears, whose Santa Fe practice is noted for its subtly modern approach to regional design and landscape architecture. Though just three years old, the 3,100-square-foot house looks as if it has always been part of the sloping, piñon pine-dotted site. Its singular Southwestern style derives from the 2-foot-thick adobe walls covered in mud plaster and the simple hipped roof shading four deep porches. The roof is made of corrugated Corten steel—a contemporary, fire-resistant material that oxidizes to a rusty orange appearance. (The roof’s
Age-old energy efficiency

The mud-plastered adobe walls are ideally suited to the high-desert climate. When combined with the shade of the roof, their thick mass is slow to warm and provides protection from the intense summer sun and heat. In winter, the walls’ mass keeps out the cold and stores the gentle heat radiating from a hydronic floor system. The north wall is filled with Styrofoam insulation to stop heat loss. A corner fireplace in the living room further warms the space.

Crisp outline is visible above left.

The four porches add more than 600 square feet of outdoor living space while naturally ventilating the home. The largest porch acts as an extension of the living/dining area and kitchen: A bank of five bifold French doors stack to either side of the 15-foot-wide opening for a sweeping view west across the Rio Grande Valley. This expansive porch vista—unbroken by posts—is made possible through the use of long para-lam (laminated) beams, a manmade substitute for beams made from single large trees.

Rustic elegance

In contrast with the rough-hewn walls, the interior uses a few contemporary finishes—stainless steel, bright enameled surfaces, cast-concrete sinks, double-wire low-volt lighting—to punctuate rooms with unexpected color and form. It’s an eclectic blend of sophistication and simplicity, best expressed by the contrast of a bright Chinese red–enameled backsplash in a kitchen with knotty-pine plank floors.

The T-shaped house contains intimate areas, such as a short hallway that doubles as a library, as well as lofty spaces like the main living room with its almost 20-foot-high ceiling. Off the central space lies a wing with a textile studio and the master bedroom and bath. A smaller set of French doors opens the bedroom to a covered porch so the bed can be rolled outdoors in good weather. From her al fresco bed, the owner can view the rolling hills to the south, look out onto her garden, and watch her horses gambol in the corral beyond.

**Design:** Spears Architects, Santa Fe (www.spearsarchitects.com)

**Interior Design:** Stephen Watkins Design, New York (www.stephenwatkins.com or 212/645-3406)