

SANDIEGO HOME/GARDEN

LIFESTYLES

SYMBOL OF STRENGTH

A San Pasqual Valley Home
Rises From Wildfire Ashes



***PLUS**

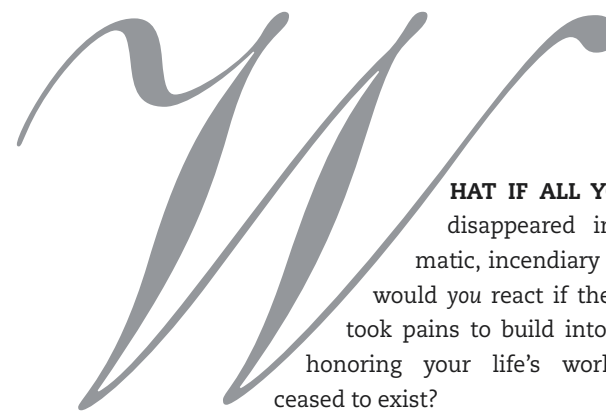
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OUT OF THE ASHES

A wildfire wiped out their rare home and valuables. But like the phoenix, this San Pasqual Valley couple is flying high, again

BY RON DONOHO • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN DURANT





WHAT IF ALL YOUR STUFF disappeared in one dramatic, incendiary event? How would you react if the house you took pains to build into a museum honoring your life's work suddenly ceased to exist?

Prior to October 2007, one of Southern California's most significant collections of African art had been amassed in the San Pasqual Valley home of Richard and Kay Matheron. Possessions are expendable compared to preservation of life and limb and the uptick in the wake of San Diego's devastating Witch Creek wildfire was that these homeowners bodily escaped the flames. But when the wind-abetted fury subsided and the area was deemed inhabitable once again, this nationally profiled house — and nearly all its irreplaceable collectibles — had been scorched out of existence.

Transformed into dust was a residence once known as "Wings," a moniker inspired by the barn owls that had previously made homes in the eaves. Erased was a masterpiece of design by acclaimed architect Norm Applebaum.

"Losing that house was like losing a child," says Applebaum.

Kay Matheron notes that the 3,200-square-foot house, in which they had lived for 17 years, had been built specifically "to show the art" — books, paintings and hundreds of remembrances of her husband's foreign service tours as United States ambassador to several African countries, including Ethiopia and Swaziland.

The Matherons had been drawn to the lot that they bought in 1981 by its similarity to an African plain. In fact, aided by a telescope, the couple could look down their hill into the African habitat built on the San Diego Wild Animal Park (hence renamed the San Diego Zoo Safari Park).

After the fire, Dick, today 84 years young, was advised to collect the insurance money and perhaps build several *pieds-à-terre* all over the country; and to travel betwixt them. He considered the idea. And condo living in downtown San Diego flashed before his eyes. But, no. They weren't going anywhere else. The goal would

not be to replicate the house, but the Matherons would most definitely stay, and aim to *rebuild* and *renew*.

FOUR YEARS LATER, "Wings" has been reborn as "Villa Tyto Alba." The new name refers to the type of white owls that once called the property home. Those specific winged creatures have not yet returned. The Matherons firmly believe that they will, and the etched-glass front door featuring two owls acts as a beautiful beacon. (In the meantime, a family of Say's phoebes is nesting on a house beam not far from the door.)

Several fireproofing aspects were worked into the new design. "They required that we site the house back 16 feet from the edge



Homeowner Richard Matheron

of the slope — the original house was hanging over the slope," says Applebaum. "And there are no eaves on the north side [where the fire approached] and all windows are double-paned and sprinkled."

There's a playful/magical quality to the home, an effect created by the way the ceilings ascend and descend. The roof height may start as low as 6 feet on the south side of the house and rise to 18 feet on the north. Or vice versa in another quadrant of the residence.

Dick says he sometimes looks out from his bedroom and tries to figure out how some angles are created, and whether what he sees in the near distance is window pane or open space.

As has been a longstanding custom, Applebaum worked hand-in-hand with the homeowners to create a house that both meshes with the physical environment and wraps functionality around the occupants' lifestyle.

The Matheron house is divided into two sides. The guest half includes a pair of bedrooms — the couple has friends visit from all over the world — and a small workout room. It can be "zoned" off from the couple's main living areas.

Applebaum's experience with building Dick and Kay's first home aided the latest effort. "In the other house, Kay's office was not next to the kitchen," says Applebaum. "But knowing them 25 years, I knew the way Kay lives is in her office and in the kitchen. So I incorporated it all into one space."

"Villa Tyto Alba" is a green home. Photovoltaic panels are on

Previous page: Richard and Kay Matheron's outdoor patio serves up a serene view of rolling hills in San Pasqual Valley.

Left: Wood is stored under the hearth in the living room fireplace.



Sifting through the rubble after the 2007 Witch Creek wildfire.

the roof, but are not obvious because Applebaum had them inlaid. The ceiling is insulated with an uncommon bubble wrap that's got a tin-foil backing on the top and bottom. There's a geothermal system in the ground that heats and cools the foundation. And the walls are insulated with recycled blue jeans.

In sunny months, the Matherons produce more energy than they consume. Kay says getting the San Diego Gas & Electric bill is a joy, and Dick observes that she goes outside to check their smart meter several times a day.

The entire home is built with wide corridors meant to be wheelchair accessible. "I don't know why all new homes aren't built this way," says Kay.

Applebaum likes to leave structural steel exposed. Concrete blocks, too. Cabinetry is clear, vertical-grain Douglas fir. It matches the rest of wood in the house, and lends an Asian quality.

A COLORFUL PAINTING HANGS in the Matheron living room, created as a gift by the couple's neighbor, Victoria Estacio Huckins, who also lost her home to the 2007 wildfire. The artwork consists of two adjacent unframed canvases. The smaller piece on the right is three-dimensional, affixed with an arrow-shaped piece of metal, part of a keepsake that survived the fire.

"It's an ax head that used to be on the end of a staff that was given to us by the prime minister of Swaziland when we left," says Dick. "It was something they used in dances."

Matheron doesn't know why he bothered picking it out of the rubble after the fire, or why he kept it. But it was considered a symbol of strength, he says. In particular, it symbolized the strength of the friendship of the U.S. and Swaziland governments.

Now, it epitomizes the strength to start all over again, to renew and to rebuild; to remember the past but to live in the present. ♦

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More photos follow

The two-piece artwork hanging on the wall makes use of a metal ax head that survived the 2007 wildfire.





"Now, it epitomizes the strength to start all over again, to renew and to rebuild..."



Clockwise from top: As dusk approaches, from the front yard you can see the roof has been inlaid with photovoltaic panels.
In an homage to the winged creatures that nested outside the former house, owls were incorporated into the front door design.
Architect Norm Applebaum knew Kay Matheron was most active in her kitchen and office, so he built them side by side.





“...to remember the past but to live in the present.”



Opposite page: The stone fireplace hearth is replicated on the other side of the living room wall, and extends outside into the back patio.

Above: Throughout the house, the exposed-wood roof playfully ascends and descends. The Douglas fir trellis at the ceiling creates a texture and an emotional feel that Applebaum has been using for 40 years.

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We're holding a party at this home, and you could win an invitation. The homeowners, architect and many of those who had a hand in this beautiful home-building effort will be in attendance. To enter: Like us on Facebook.com/SDHomeGarden, and post a comment that includes the phrase ***"I want to come to the House Party!"*** Ten winners will be randomly selected to attend.