



May Day

NORM APPLEBAUM'S TAKE
ON THE RANCH-STYLE HOME



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BY DEBRA LEE BALDWIN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN DURANT

oo often, custom homes are fortresses that ignore the out-of-doors — which is unfortunate, because we live in a verdant paradise beneath cloudless skies, with a climate the rest of the world envies. Cliff May, father of the ranch-style home, understood this, as does ardent May admirer and modernist architect Norm Applebaum, who designs homes that open to their surroundings like women running into their lovers' arms.

A case in point is a 20-year-old Applebaum design, executed by Lang Contracting. It is so timeless, only the mature trees that flow through openings in its clay-tile roof reveal its age. This merging of trees with structures is an Applebaum keynote, as are an entry accessed through a sheltered garden; bull-nosed plaster walls white as marshmallow cream; and doors, ceilings and woodwork of golden Douglas fir.

"We wanted a casual house that our animals couldn't ruin," the homeowner

Norm Applebaum designed this Fairbanks Ranch home, which surrounds a garden recently refurbished by Schnetz Landscape. Rolling terrain surrounds a dry streambed; beautifully striated boulders line its banks, and tributary-like areas suggest pools.





said as Zoë, a rescue dog, now white-muzzled, bumped my knee with her nose. Applebaum is not above designing with dogs in mind; the architect — who constructs meticulous scale models — defines architecture as “working together with clients to create a functional work of art. If the function isn’t met, it isn’t architecture.”

Beneath Zoë’s lucky paws are saltillo tiles, which pave much of the home’s 4,500 square feet. Light bounces off glossy floors, and isn’t light the most important — if ephemeral — aspect of architecture? Great houses incorporate intriguing shadows and reflections, and have lines that are revealed, then concealed, by shifting sun.

The property is on a hilltop in Fairbanks Ranch, with views to the ocean four miles away, boulder-studded hills to the north, and former pastureland (now Santaluz and Rancho Peñasquitos) to the east. All rooms of the single-story home have a view, and a few also overlook a courtyard garden. Applebaum favors U-shaped houses, which harken to May, who in turn was influenced by the ranchos of early California.

The walled inner garden, by Schnetz Landscape, is semi-shaded by lacy tipu and *Koelreuteria* trees, which, when in bloom, are giant bouquets. Saltillo tiles lead through the area, from the parking area to the front door, and a flagstone pathway crosses a dry streambed consisting of “32 tons of boulders,” the

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OPPOSITE top: Pots positioned near floor-to-ceiling windows prevent visitors from inadvertently walking into the glass. Succulents, including a statuesque *Euphorbia ingens*, thrive in the warmth of the courtyard and need minimal water and maintenance. **OPPOSITE bottom:** Exposed ceiling beams, with their strong lines, lend visual interest to the home’s interior.

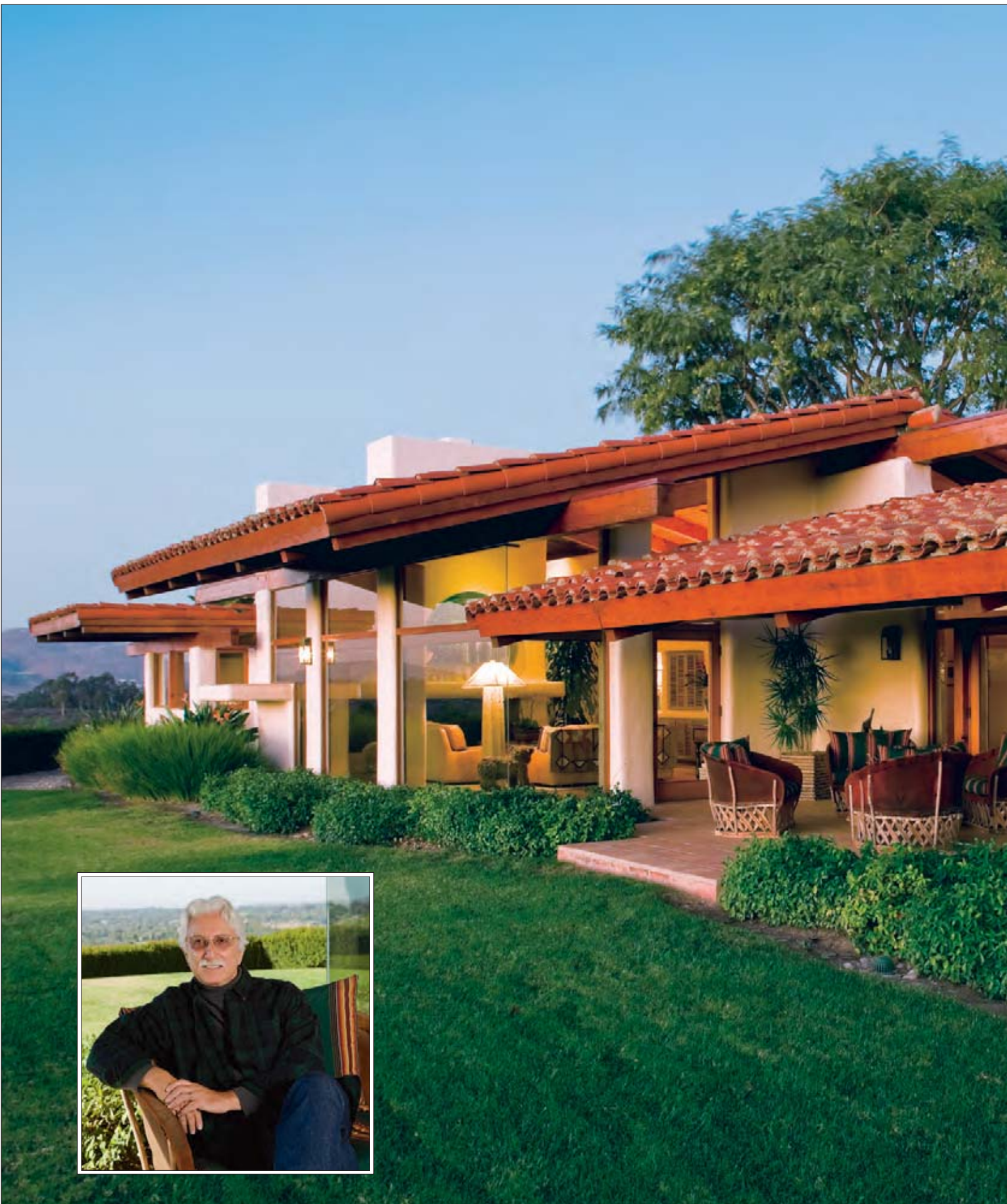
THIS page top: A fireplace facing the breakfast nook (not shown) underscores the fact that the kitchen is the heart — and hearth — of the home. **THIS page bottom:** Soft-looking yet substantial white walls define both the home’s interior and exterior.



Floor tiles and beams that extend uninterrupted outdoors make living room windows disappear.

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homeowner noted. Landscaping includes water-conserving and colorful succulents, including an *Aloe bainesii* tree. Striped 'Sunburst' aeoniums and agaves with narrow leaves fringed with curling filaments repeat the green-and-white of *Dymondia* — a no-mow ground cover tough enough for foot traffic.

French doors beyond the garden flank one of the home's two main hallways and frame a rectangular, 50-foot, disappearing-edge pool on the home's north side. Enhancing this area are assorted succulents in terra-cotta pots and in beds along perimeter walls.

The home's western exposure is all about the 180-degree view — how to frame, capture, and bring it inside. Walls of glass make the living room's cushy sofa and armchairs blend seamlessly with the patio beyond. Glass at corners is mitered, so it all but disappears, and no thresholds signal viewers they're gazing through glass. Ceiling beams, floor tiles and fireplace mantel continue outside, through the glass, enhancing the open-air feeling.

Eaves extend well over patios, "so the only sun that comes directly into the house is at the end of the day," Applebaum noted. These and other architectural lines, when viewed from the lawn, are suggestive of a Mondrian painting. Moreover, depending on the time of day, distant hills reflected in the living room's window-walls visually continue inside.

When asked how he made the open-beam ceiling appear to float above the white "pillow walls," the architect acknowledged with a smile that "it's one of those scratch-your-head things." The roof is cantilevered, he explained, and supported by strategically positioned steel beams; glass fills the space between walls and ceiling — even between interior rooms. This floating-ceiling effect is especially dramatic at

"Because of the horizontality of the view, I designed a horizontal house," Norm Applebaum (inset) says.





night, and during the day makes tree-tops visible from indoors.

May loved cubbyholes — perhaps he envisioned games of hide-and-seek — and so, it seems, does Applebaum. Niches in walls display Kachina dolls and other items evocative of the Southwest, and tucked off the living room are a nearly hidden wet bar and powder room. Off the kitchen are a large pantry, laundry room and dog nook that shelters a portable kennel; a door opposite leads to a dog run on the home's south side.

The master bedroom is in the northwest corner, and the master bath opens onto the pool patio. Conveniently, a digital thermostat on a bathroom wall displays the water temperature. Beyond these rooms, at the end of a sun-drenched hallway (with the pool on one side and the courtyard on the other) are a home office and guest suite.

Not long before he died in 1989, May visited the home and took photos. Moreover, this gem of a house led to San Diego's premier example of modernist residential architecture and the culmination of Applebaum's 37-year career: a 54,000-square-foot estate on 30 acres in Rancho Santa Fe. Its owner, who toured the Fairbanks house shortly after its completion, later commissioned three homes by Applebaum. Characteristically, each embraces its setting and celebrates San Diego's indoor-outdoor lifestyle.

"We love being home," Zoë's owner says. "Norm captured the essence of how we live." ■

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CLOCKWISE from opposite top left: Windows frame trees, the garden's living sculptures. **THE** hallway's ceiling incorporates a trellis-like design — an Applebaum signature — that blends indoors and out; **INSIDE** a house that is itself a sculpture, illuminated niches display ethnic and modern art; **THE** guest suite, in the home's northeast corner, is connected to the house yet separate from its main living areas.