

Texas Architect



Subtle Layers

by Heather McKinney, FAIA

Project Torcasso Residence, Santa Fe, N. M.

Clients Rick and Cynthia Torcasso

Architect Page (formerly PageSoutherlandPage)

Design Team Lawrence W. Speck, FAIA; Daniel Brooks, AIA; Chad Johnson; Justin Sabatini; Bruce Loethen; Wendy Dunnam Tita, AIA

Photographer Robert Reck



Once Rick and Cynthia Torcasso found this property and made the commitment to move from Dallas to Santa Fe, they went scouting for an architect who shared their interest in fitting a house into the dominant landscape. Conversations with Lawrence Speck, FAIA, principal at Page (formerly PageSoutherlandPage), convinced them that they had found a kindred soul. The ensuing design and construction process is a saga of high collaboration between owner, designers, craftsmen, and artist driven by the goal of producing a refined dwelling that both blends with its setting and allows its inhabitants to fully experience the ever-changing panorama of sky, mountain, and desert around it.

Most architects both aspire to and dread the idea of working in Santa Fe due to its infamous architectural ordinances inspired by the traditional, small-windowed adobe houses in the historic core of the city. The Torcassos' land was further constrained by tight neighborhood architectural restrictions written into the property deed. Colors and materials were prescribed and

very limited. Equally confining were the requirements to break down the form into smaller perceived components by articulating the wall planes or by actually constructing multiple smaller buildings on the site. It is commendable that

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this house bucks the stereotypes and yet succeeds in doing what the rules were designed to accomplish: It fits within its setting without distraction.

The first major move in the design was to position the house below the ridge of the hillside. Entry to the house is either via a side slither along a narrow courtyard drive, or via a dramatic exterior stairway, which extends from the high cul-de-sac down into a secret garden. The first approach lines one up with a spine that drives the length of the house and introduces all the major material themes. The second approach sweeps one through

Previous spread *The Torcasso residence in Santa Fe has exceptional rammed earth walls and sits inconspicuously on the hillside.*

This page clockwise from top *Ipe deck and shade structure overlooking mountains. Exterior staircase descends from street to sequestered garden and house. View of the stair from the garden.*

Opposite page from top *The dining area is defined by the Margo Sazeyer art walls. The central living space of house communicates with exterior stair to the right and ipe deck to the left.*





the glassy middle of the house and sets up the dramatic framed vista of mountain and sky.

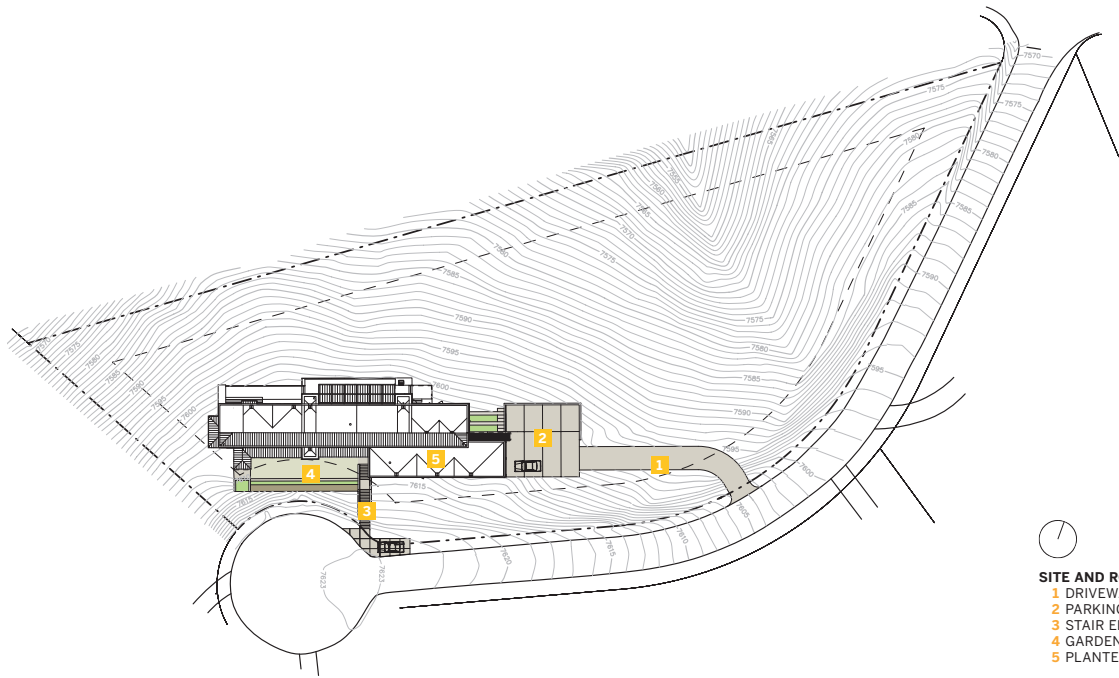
Rick Torcasso is an avid gardener, and so the siting of the house was also designed to provide him with three landscape palettes: subtle augmentation of the natural vegetation surrounding the house; rooftop meadows that welcome the eye from that uphill stairway; and the sequestered garden that is carved from the space between craggy hillside and house. This garden,

The second approach sweeps one through the glassy middle of the house and sets up the dramatic framed vista of mountain and sky.

in particular, is a feast of unusual drought-resistant plants. In its contained ribbon of space, it is a perfect foil to the exploded openness of the opposite side of the house — a garden of delight for quiet meditation. As for the rooftop meadows, the architecture literally disappears. In the case of the secret garden, the house forms a strong complementary wall to the rock cliff, riffing off its open face with the horizontal striations of wood and rammed earth.

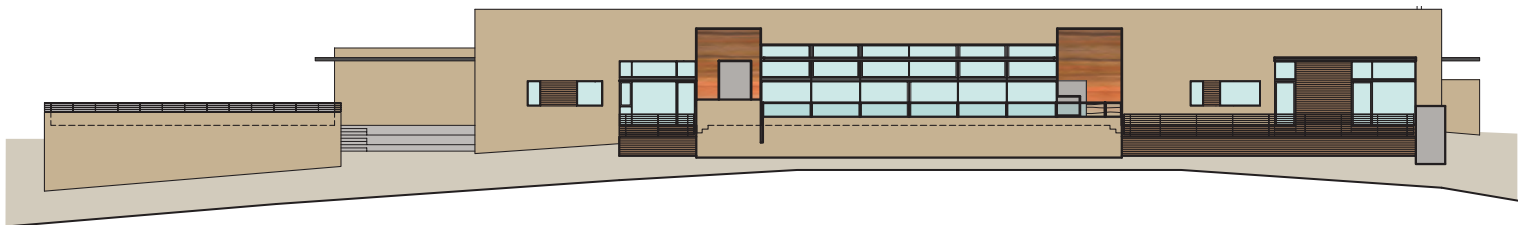
The second major design move is these two rammed-earth forms, set perpendicular to the long spine of the house. These forms do so many things eloquently: They solve the Santa Fe requirement to break the linear rectangle of the house. They transmit sun warmth into the interior and mitigate diurnal temperature differentials. In plan, they enclose the “ser-





SOUTH AND NORTH ELEVATIONS

- CONCRETE
- GLASS
- STUCCO
- HARDWOOD SIDING
- RAMMED EARTH





vant” (in Louis Kahn’s lexicon) spaces. Most powerfully, they are a sensual interpretation of the landscape beyond.

The layers of color come from earth on the property and in the region. Finding and selecting the material was a project for the subcontractor, Speck, and Bruce Loethen, manager of the construction administration for Page. Mock-ups fine-tuned the color selections and the layering order. The result is a silky, banded surface that begs to be touched and requires no other embellishment. The perfection of the surface texture comes from

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reusable steel formwork and the embedded metal plates that reduce the expansion joints to imperceptible seams. The craftsmanship is the work of a relatively young guy who, according to Speck, had apprenticed with the very best rammed-earth master in the region. “His teacher came out of retirement to give sage advice on this project, and the new generation came through with flying colors,” noted Speck.

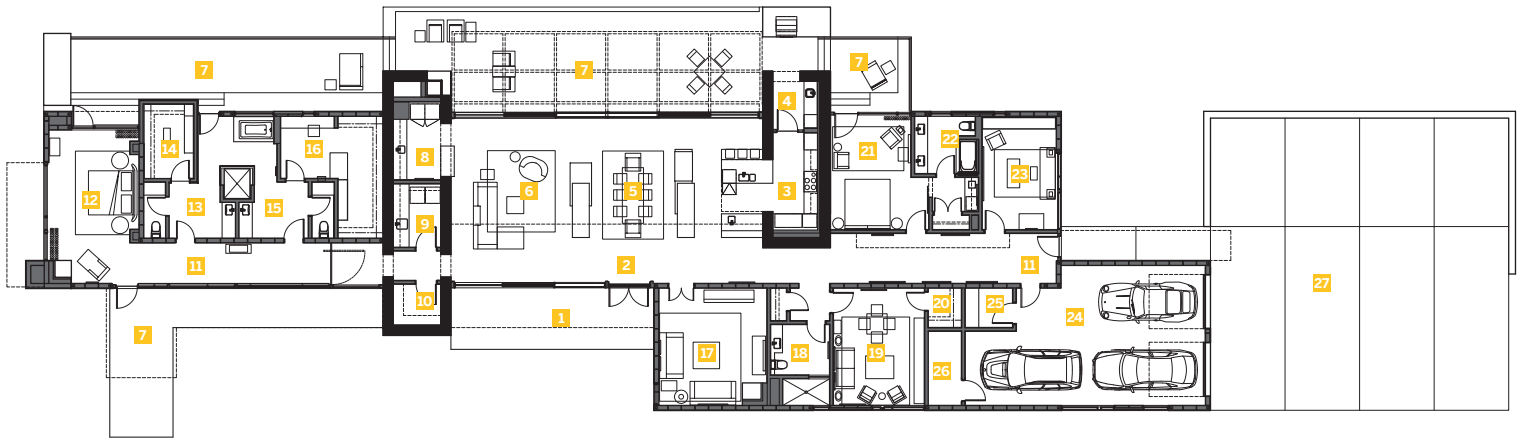
The house is consistent in its material choices. The striped ipe wood, diamond-polished concrete floors, Venetian plaster walls, and neutral glass-tiled bathroom walls are soothing and textural, as are the fabrics and furnishings, which were designed and coordinated by architect Wendy Dunnam Tita, AIA. The exquisite interiors bring us to the third major move of the design, the bold Margo Sawyer-designed/Mark Maček-built art compartments, which delineate the living room space. Sawyer and Speck collaborated on an earlier iteration of these stacked-cube forms in their Discovery Green project in Houston. Independently, they both had experimented with similar constructs earlier in their careers and found that their mutual fascination came from admiring Donald Judd’s work. Speck commented: “Margo and I have worked together enough now that we can



Opposite page *Images from above looking down into garden.*

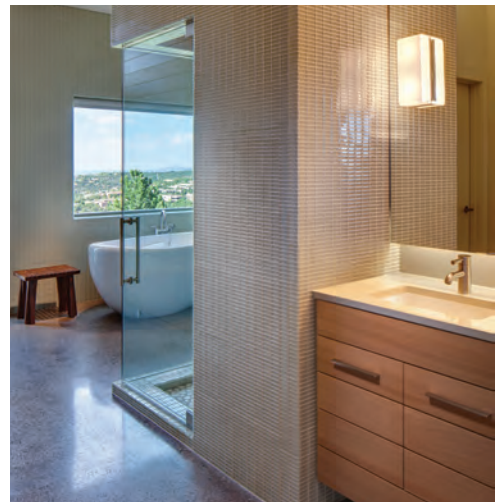
Top *Portion of rooftop gardens with dormant native grasses (a wildflower meadow in spring, summer, and fall).*

Bottom *Early photo of the garden before native species matured.*



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

- 1 ENTRY COURT
- 2 ENTRY
- 3 KITCHEN
- 4 OUTDOOR KITCHEN
- 5 DINING ROOM
- 6 LIVING ROOM
- 7 TERRACE
- 8 BAR
- 9 LAUNDRY
- 10 STORAGE
- 11 GALLERY
- 12 MASTER BEDROOM
- 13 HIS BATHROOM
- 14 HIS CLOSET
- 15 HER BATHROOM
- 16 HER CLOSET
- 17 MEDIA ROOM
- 18 POWDER ROOM
- 19 LIBRARY
- 20 CLOSET
- 21 GUEST BEDROOM
- 22 GUEST BATHROOM
- 23 OFFICE
- 24 GARAGE
- 25 STORAGE
- 26 MECHANICAL ROOM
- 27 PARKING COURT





easily communicate intuitively as well as verbally. We have a mutual trust and respect for each other’s capabilities that makes a collaboration much deeper than could ever be achieved in an initial teaming.”

In this house, light animates much of the space, and the Sawyer compartments create a balance by inserting color where there is the least amount of natural light. Sawyer has a mastery of color, and she looked for inspiration in the wildflowers and the broader landscape. Although this was a very dif-

A singular example of the attention to detail is the immaculate deck overlooking the mountains.

ferent palette than she was accustomed to, Sawyer, Maček, Dunnam Tita, and Speck produced mock-ups that confirmed the power of the mix. Like the rammed-earth walls, these art pieces double as storage compartments, with their boxes invisibly hinged by Maček. As the design for the house and landscape developed, Sawyer was asked to complement these art pieces with colored light boxes strewn in the secret garden.

It is a testament to the clients that they set the tone for the house — it is highly resolved with no unnecessary details cluttering the view. This attitude permeated the design and became the touchstone of the construction. A singular example of the care and attention to detail is the immaculate linear ipe deck overlooking the mountains. The decking is invisibly joined by metal disc splines, rather than surface screws. At the end of the project, driven by his own anxiety that a random board-end might warp fractionally over time and ruin the elegance of the surface, superintendent David Campbell of J.M. Evans Construction, returned to the house to personally screw down the ends and cover the countersunk screws with ipe plugs.

The house is masterful — and masterfully subtle — in its landscape. As one stands on the deck at sunset, a pinyon wood fire in the corner kiva, the house is one with its hillside and the glow in the sky.

Heather McKinney, FAIA, is principal of McKinney York Architects in Austin.



Opposite page clockwise from top Photos show the master bedroom, master bath, and guest room with its serene rammed earth wall.

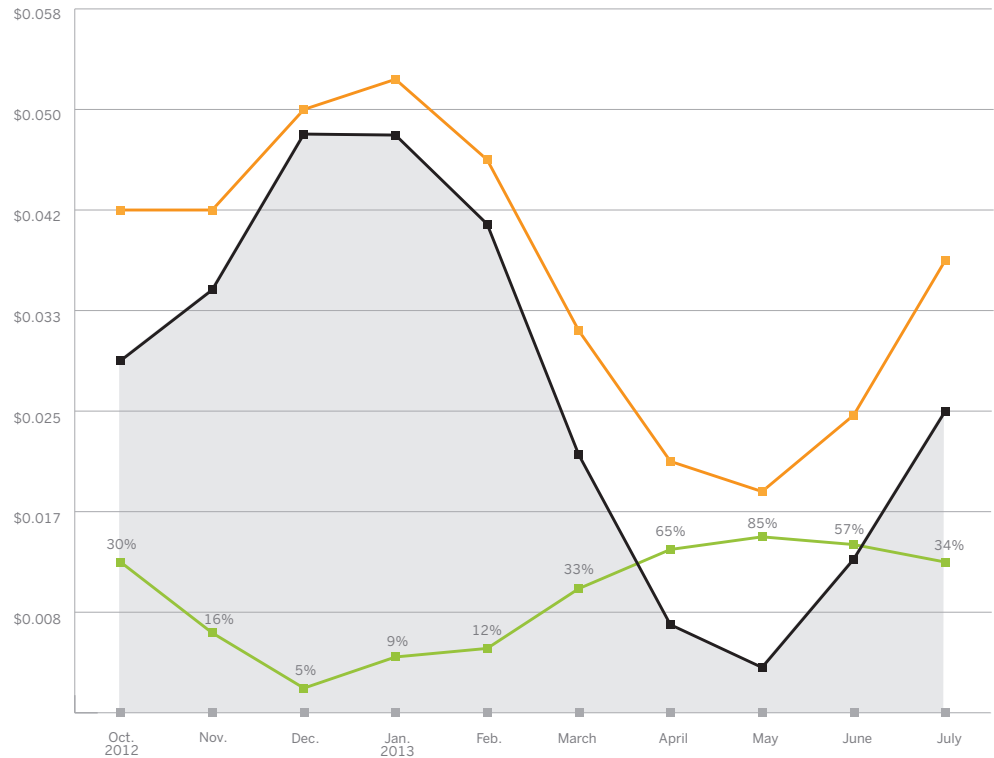
This page clockwise from top Images capture sunset on the deck, the gallery spline with Venetian plaster walls, and the living room.



Optimizing Energy Conservation

Over the course of the first year in their new home, Rick and Cynthia Torcasso have been experimenting with optimizing the building's energy consumption. They immediately noticed a significant difference in the overall cost of energy: When they compared the monthly bills for the Santa Fe home (see graph to the right) to those of their similarly-sized home in Dallas, even after taking into account any difference in local rates, they were saving a considerable amount of money. During the period from October 2012 to July 2013, energy costs for the Santa Fe residence were half the costs of the Dallas house during the winter months and less than one-sixth the costs of the Dallas bills during the summer.

The couple went through a process of figuring out how to best take advantage of the thermal properties of their rammed earth house. In July 2013, Santa Fe's high temperatures were in the 90s and lows were in the 60s. The house was consuming a very minor amount of energy for air conditioning, but they knew that this energy would be used most efficiently if the cool night air were allowed in, as much as possible, in the summer. Beginning in the middle of July, the Torcassos started leaving the big sliding glass doors in the living area open at night. The circulating air allowed the rammed earth walls to cool down much more quickly, and they tended to stay that way, keeping interior spaces cool even when it got hot the next day. By the end of the month, their air conditioning consumption had dropped — to zero. ■



TORCASSO SANTA FE RESIDENCE ELECTRIC USAGE

- TOTAL CONSUMPTION (DOLLAR COST PER SF)
- TOTAL BILL WITH SOLAR CREDITS INCLUDED (DOLLAR COST PER SF)
- PERCENTAGE OF ON-SITE SOLAR CONTRIBUTION

Actual costs for electric usage at the house have been consistently reduced notably during the spring months.