

A HOUSE WITH A VIEW

Combining land and structure, architect Kevin O'Brien creates a modern adobe home

photography by Benny Chan



■ **Below** The setting sun washes the native dry-stacked stone of the west terrace. The exterior “portale” or porch structure helps protect the interior from the sun’s intensity.

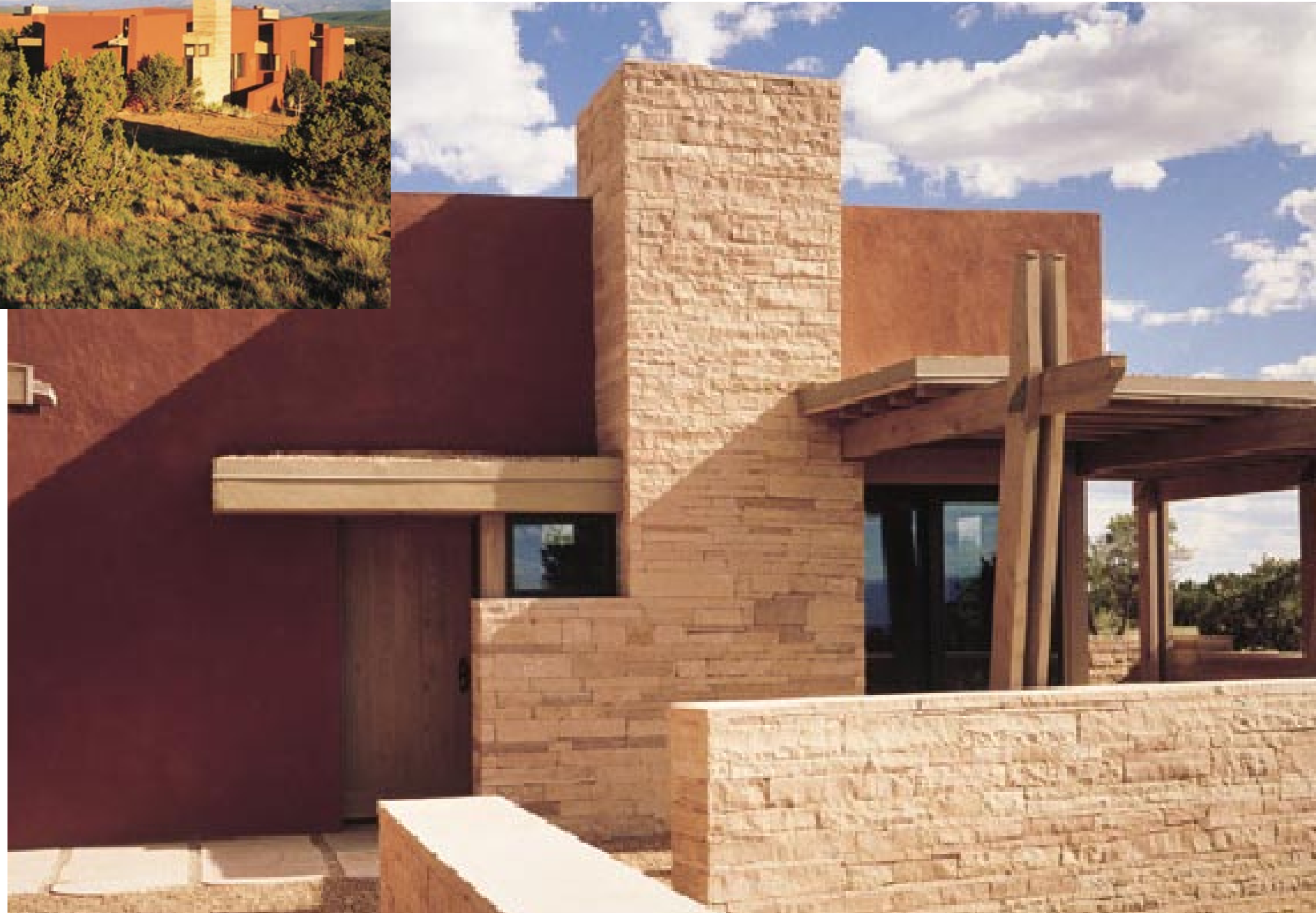
■ **Inset** The morning sun bathes the house in the idyllic New Mexican light. An exterior palette of native sandstone and deep red stucco walls compliment the natural desert colors.

At first glance, the flat, low plains of Middle America have little in common with the spacious mountains of New Mexico. But for architects and designers, there is a distinct similarity—two regions that are ripe with opportunity for eroding the barrier between interior and exterior.

Much like Frank Lloyd Wright fused his prairie homes with the Midwest landscape by creating an architecture of long, low lines, architect Kevin O'Brien blurs the edges by turning windows into picture frames in the Las Campanas home he designed for native Midwesterners Frank and Barbara Batsch, who now spend their summers in Santa Fe and migrate to Florida for the winter.

“We began to think of the building as an armature for framing the experience of the landscape. This led to ideas about how the building can split apart and dissipate at the edges, to create different ways of seeing the landscape,” says O'Brien, who emphasizes how lucky he was to be involved with the client in the selection of the site. “The value of the ‘view’ in this case is in the quality of the framed composition, not merely in the quantity of what can be seen.”

The house resides on a 2.5-acre lot with an abundance of open space around it. As a result, O'Brien was able to give the Batsches their first wish—waking up in the morning with a view of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and sunlight hitting their bed. To

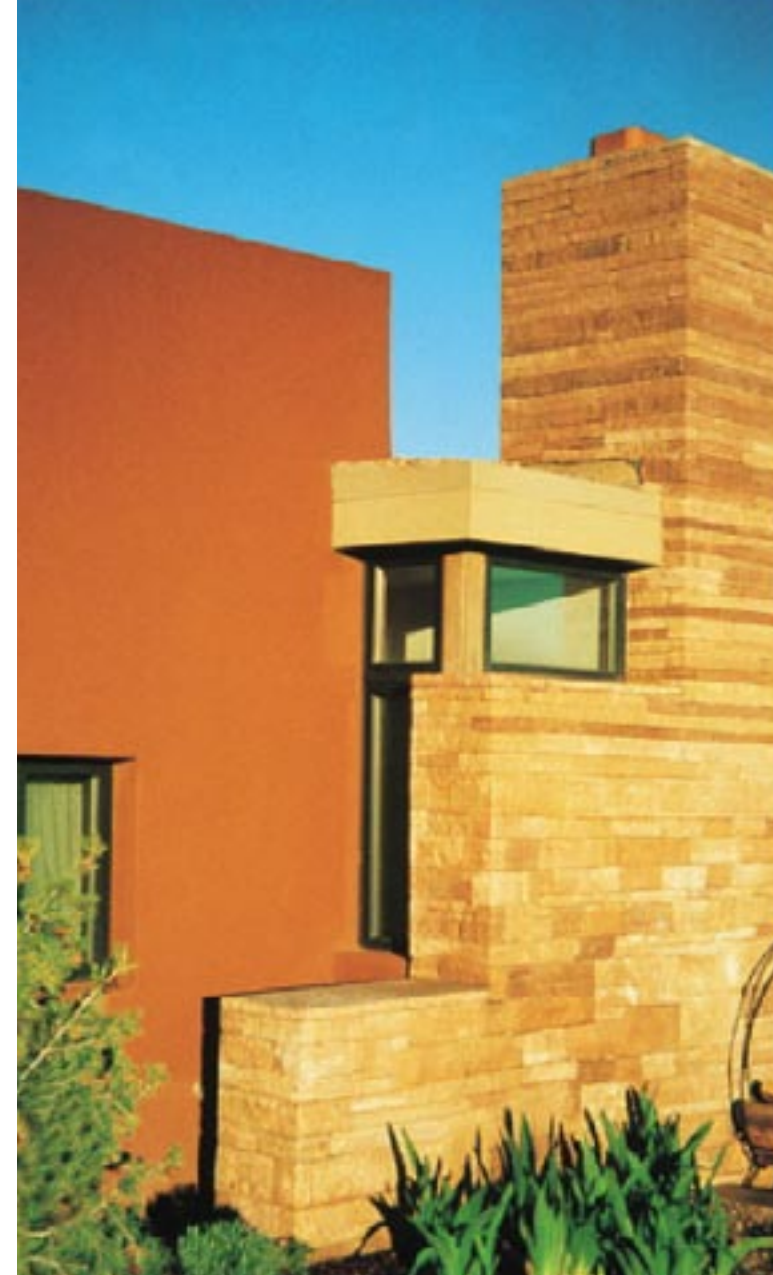




accomplish this, O'Brien determined the latitude of the property and then researched the sun azimuth angle of the sunrise during the course of the year. The master bedroom was then oriented to this direction, and the large window was located by determining the site line from the proposed location of the bed to the range of annual sunrises.

The owner's wish list also included enough light and display capabilities to accommodate a large art collection, the necessity for a private master suite, a desire for the main living, dining, and kitchen to flow into each other, and space for a guest room.

Some solutions were easier to implement. To accommodate the large art collection, an integrated art light system and a no-nail track system were installed. The guesthouse became a separate entity when the Batsches said they loved visitors but still wanted privacy. This became a practical consideration, as well. When there are no guests, there is no reason to condition the additional space, thus reducing cost. Other solutions took more time to be discovered. "Rather



■ **Opposite Page Top** In the master bedroom, the owners can watch the rising sun from the bed or enjoy an evening fire in the cowhide covered chaise. The fireplace combines a concrete mantle and hearth, Anasazi sandstone, and a pearlized plaster wall finish.

■ **Opposite Page Below** The open kitchen is an extension of the great room, which allows for flexible entertaining opportunities. The custom cabinets use a light maple finish with cherry trim; a mobile serving cart tucks away under the counter when not in use.

■ **Above** At various corners, the house opens up to allow light and air to enter in various unexpected ways and provides carefully framed views of the landscaping and the mountains.

than immediately codify some of these requests into a list of rooms and numbers, we decided to let the project gel around these aspirations, and to allow them to evolve through the design process," says O'Brien. "The program was treated like a narrative, with the clients as characters."

According to O'Brien, the house's origins can be traced back to the ancient Anasazi where the foundation of the current Santa Fe architecture lies. Ancient Anasazi architects are known to have integrated the needs of the building with the potential of the site, including defensive positioning, sun and wind protection, solar heating, and ventilation. Through the Anasazi, O'Brien discovered a relationship of form, light, and materials that is most similar to his own. "Anasazi builders seemed to possess an innate understanding of the unique southwest light quality, and the way this light caresses architectural form."

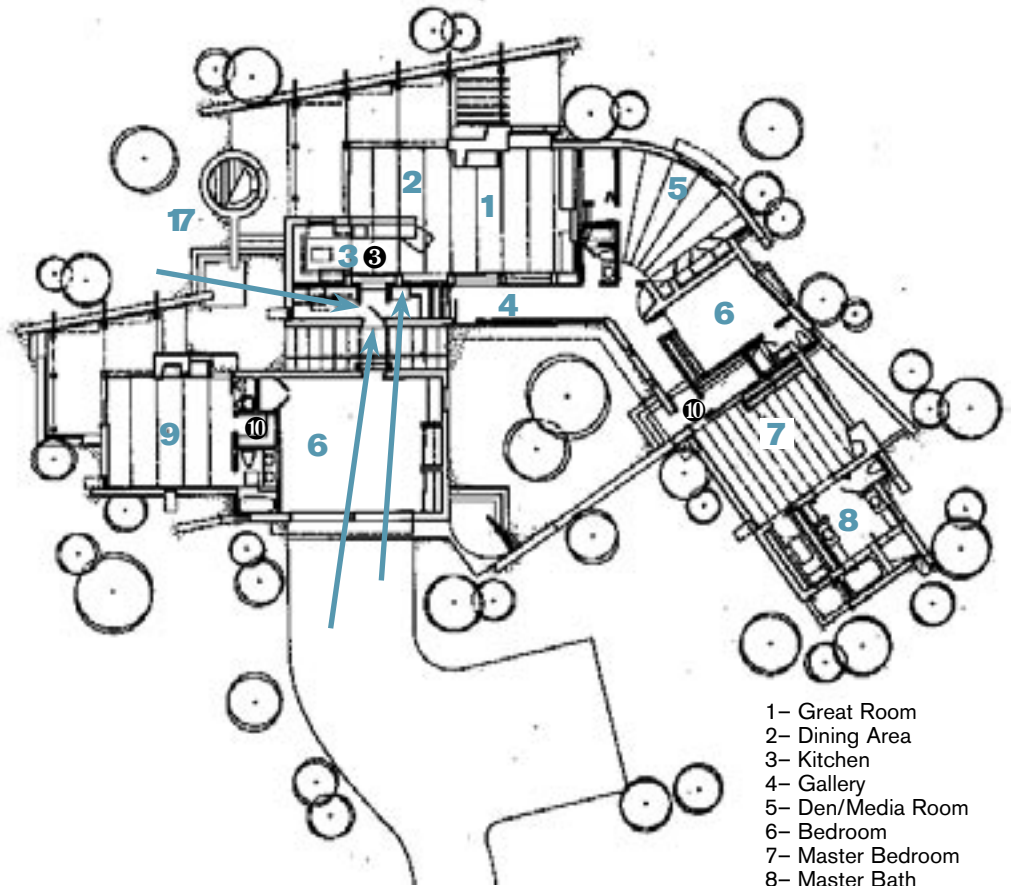
To create this modern adobe house, O'Brien investigated alternate construction systems to the traditional adobe. Through his research, O'Brien discovered an experimental concrete wall system called Rastra that was made of 10-foot-long lightweight blocks that are stacked to form a wall. When combined, these units have a two-way cell system that allows placement of Rebar and grout to make an exceptionally strong wall. O'Brien saw that, as a result of the bearing and shear strength of these walls, he was able to "crack the box open, so to speak" and allow light and air to enter the building in several ways.

"At the great room, the entire corner, normally a necessity in adobe construction, is removed to capture the evening sunset. At the master bath, the corner disappears to form a small grotto planter and lightwell, which gives the sense of bathing outdoors with complete privacy," says the architect. "Although this was antithetical to the molded cubic forms of the 'Santa Fe Style', it seemed entirely sympathetic to the original intent of the early builders."

One challenge O'Brien encountered is the involvement of the local Design Review Board. The intent of the Design Guidelines is to encourage a homogenous architectural style for the area; restrictions ranged from specific height and massing constraints to color limitations. "Rather than approach this relationship as adversaries," says O'Brien, "we became collaborators in the process. Working closely with the Design Board,

we arrived at an understanding of the spirit of the rules and worked within the limitations imposed.” The color was carefully chosen by bypassing the short list of acceptable colors and experimenting with the allowed reflectivity and chromatic saturation values. The Design Board allowed this type of experimentation, and even conducted tours of the house to demonstrate what is possible within restrictive guidelines.

Recently, O’Brien returned to Santa Fe to visit the Batsches and saw “how the client had become a part of the house.” The clients had easily adapted their lives to the house and vice versa. “It is at this point that every architect realizes that the design no longer belongs to him, yet this is also the most rewarding aspect of our profession.” ■



- 1- Great Room
- 2- Dining Area
- 3- Kitchen
- 4- Gallery
- 5- Den/Media Room
- 6- Bedroom
- 7- Master Bedroom
- 8- Master Bath
- 9- Guest House
- 10- Storage
- 11- Laundry
- 12- Pantry
- 13- Courtyard
- 14- Paseo
- 15- Terrace
- 16- Garage
- 17- Spa



■ The great room is anchored by a massive stone fireplace and includes built-in seating along the wall. The concrete floor throughout the house are stained to a deep leather finish and utilize integral radiant heating.