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VOL. 9 NO. 4 \$4.95
SuCasaMagazine.com







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There are lots of ways to create a home design. You can throw together hot-button details, materials, and appliances until the place looks like the main showroom at Trendi-Mart. Alternatively, you can use a safe, simple design scheme to discipline space and color into rooms as orderly as a row of gravestones.

By Laura Sanchez Photography by Kirk Gittings
Architect: Analdi Shaw Design Builder: Housemakers



Previous pages: Rick Ansaldi and Lee Shaw blended design influences from Old Mexico, like the entry zaguan, with references to classic New Mexican architecture, including this carved corbel and a "bell tower" drawn from Albuquerque's late, eternally lamented Alvarado Hotel. Contrasting stucco color reinforces the illusion of a home that has evolved over time. This page: Indoor space flows easily out

to broad patios under generous portales. Spot color accents rather than defines the strong structural design. Opposite page: Huge patio doors slide open for uninterrupted connection between the dining room and both east and west patios, taking full advantage of Albuquerque's generally mild climate.





A bank of custom bookshelves by J. Wheeler & The Branch Cabinetry dominates one wall of the library. One shelf swings away to reveal a climate-controlled wine room. The stained concrete floor finish is by Faux Real. Rooms in this rambling adobe are scaled to maintain a family-oriented intimacy.

Right: The parapet above the bedroom wing steps up from a classic Pueblo style cube to an arched bell tower. The casement windows wink at Albuquerque's ubiquitous mid-century crank-out windows; these are modern, thermal, double-paned glass. Plus, they're blue.

Or you can have lots of fun asking a piece of property about its history and teasing its favorite memories into the open. You can introduce those memories to a family's treasures, blending all into a coherent whole, orchestrating currents of tension and calm until each element enhances the others and the disparate parts don't just establish an architectural dialogue, they yammer their heads off.

The third approach takes more time, involvement, and imagination, but Ansaldi Shaw Design wouldn't have it any other way.

Rick Ansaldi and Lee Shaw met some years back when they both worked in Santa Fe. They formed a partnership and relocated to Tucson four years ago. About half the firm's work is residential and half commercial, with an emphasis on restaurants. They've designed imaginative eateries from Santa Fe to San Francisco, including the new Satellite Café in Albuquerque.

Commercial or residential, Ansaldi Shaw Design weighs potential clients on a scale of what is most exciting, challenging, and above all, fun. Rick Ansaldi characterizes the business as "not so much an architectural office as a design studio." About their growing residential clientele, he adds, "They're finding us."

Several years ago, potential clients talked to the partners about designing the house featured in this article. When they purchased land in Albuquerque's North Valley five years ago, they told the architects it was time to begin. Ansaldi Shaw designed the house over the course of three years. Like a cliff face layered with fossil strata, the house displays elements from succeeding stages of the process.

Most custom home designs begin with considering the building site, the clients' wishes, and the architects' idea of what makes a good house. The North Valley site lies just east of the Rio Grande. Only ditch roads separate it from the bosque, the narrow, fragile strip of cottonwoods that lines the river. The architects began by studying the property's desirable views—the river and bosque to the west, the Sandia Mountains to the east, and a charming house across the street to the south.





As they absorbed the site's physical realities, the architects explored the clients' wishes. Simplified to a single "big picture" sentence, the clients wanted an adobe home that felt like it had sheltered a family for generations and that reflected Mexican design influences rather than New Mexican ones.

If Texans remember the Alamo, Albuquerqueans remember the Alvarado. The old Alvarado Hotel sat beside the city's train station until it was torn down in the early 1970s in a misbegotten spasm of urban redevelopment. The building complex was the state's most prominent example of the Mission-style architecture that spread up from Mexico all over the Southwest. Rick Ansaldi's collection of old postcards features the Alvarado along with other local marvels. The shape of a high parapet in the North Valley house replicates the

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Left: Fine detailing and mixed ceiling treatments—covered vigas and retro painted bead board—mark the master suite. The kitchen,

designed by Cathy Jackson of J. Wheeler & The Branch Cabinetry, won the Sub-Zero Western Regional Design Award.

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façade of the Alvarado complex's Indian Building.

And the house would be built of adobe, not frame construction elaborately trimmed and chamfered, sheathed and plastered to resemble adobe. The walls would not be the code-required 10-inch minimum thickness, but 20-inch-wide double walls that exude timeless solidity.

The locations of desirable views to the east, west, and south strongly influenced the layout of the house. Such a richness of views makes every room want to look in several directions, which in turn, prods a floor plan toward sprawling arrangements that string rooms together like beads, each space accommodating windows on several walls. A counterbalance was needed to condense the layout.

Ansaldi and Shaw began to play with the superimposed forms of a circle and a cross. The circle created a boundary to limit and condense a rambling layout. The cruciform shape provided plenty of exterior wall length for windows. Not only did the superimposed forms promise a design solution, they paid subtle homage to the area's history, evoking the Anasazi circle and the Spanish cross.

The original circle/cross concept remains visible in the curved patio walls, which follow the circle's circumference. The center point is marked with a small metal plate set into the floor of the dining room near the head of the table, a nod to the homeowners' wish that the dining room be at the heart of the house.

But schematic concepts don't make a home. The clients and architects began looking at photographs. The pictures not only sparked ideas, they clarified communication about elements and flavors that escape definition in words. Usually the pictures were not of entire houses, but of small things that capture an overall

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aesthetic: a window sunk into a massive wall, the edge of a fountain seen through a wrought-iron gate, a dark, arched passageway leading to a sunlit courtyard.

And indeed, one enters the North Valley house, built by Housemakers of Santa Fe, through a *zaguan* gate opening on a short, arched passageway. Historic houses were often built in a quadrangle with a double gate, or *zaguan*, wide enough to admit a wagon into the safety of the courtyard. In early summer, walking through the North Valley gate and into the cool adobe tunnel, one feels the temperature drop about 15 degrees.

With the basics of form and style decided, attention turned to the clients' specific requirements. They wanted a central dining room off a kitchen worthy of a gourmet cook. They wanted a second-story view in a one-story house. The house's aesthetic had to be compatible with a wealth of family antiques and lots of books.

The architects began working on bubble diagrams. "Bubble diagram" may sound trivial, even a little giddy, but a bubble diagram often summarizes weeks of work. A sort of proto-floor plan, it uses simple, sketched circles to represent where a family wants to do what, thus analyzing the relationship of rooms to each other. It answers questions such as, "Do you want the kitchen open to the formal dining area, or do you want it screened?" or "How close should owners' and kids' bedrooms be?"

A bubble diagram is graphically simple, almost cartoonish, yet it's often the most important stage of a design. The Ansaldi Shaw bubble diagram eventually shaped itself into a long, angled, north-south axis of spaces, crossed by two shorter, east-west wings. In fact, it looked rather like a "does not equal" sign. Between the two east-west crossbars were spaces for patios whose curved walls established the large circle around the house.

Then the architects began the process


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shades doors painted in Old Mexico's pink, aqua, yellow, and lavender blue. Another door is inlaid to mimic trim that's inches deep. It imitates a door from the outdoor museum near Santa Fe, El Rancho de las Golondrinas, but its ultimate source is the perspective experiments of Renaissance Italy.

Rising behind it all is the high façade based on the old Alvarado buildings. But a narrow outside staircase winds up to the "sky terrace" it shields, and the white plaster finish against the bright blue sky looks as much like the Greek islands as New Mexico. In the middle of it all, complementing and focusing the disparate design sources, sits a fountain made from a basalt plug from China.

North of the patio, a second entry leads to the library, which dominates the north crossbar. The large windows in its curved west wall open on the bosque. The opposite wall is lined with bookcases. One section swings open to reveal a wine storage compartment, while video and DVD racks slide out of the sides.

Beyond the library, the owners' suite sits in serene solitude. Again, extensive glazing opens on views of the bosque, but well-thought-out portions of adobe wall, including a fireplace, block any view of the interior from the ditch road.

Also in the north crossbar, the second bedroom faces the mountains and east courtyard. No doubt it contains many entrancing features, but you won't be reading about them. The guest room possesses one feature that's often so hard to come by—privacy. It's completely off limits to roving architects and journalists, so you'll have to use your imagination. 

Laura Sanchez is a frequent contributor to Su Casa and, with her husband, Alex, is author of Adobe Houses for Today, published by Sunstone Press.