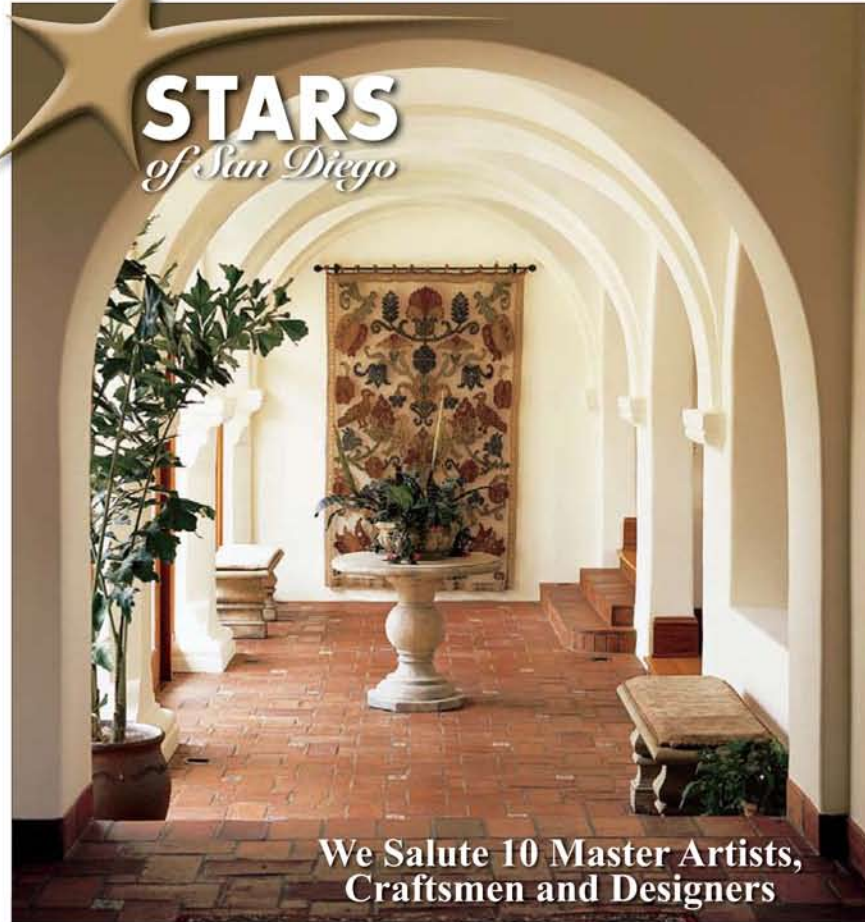


# SAN DIEGO HOME/GARDEN

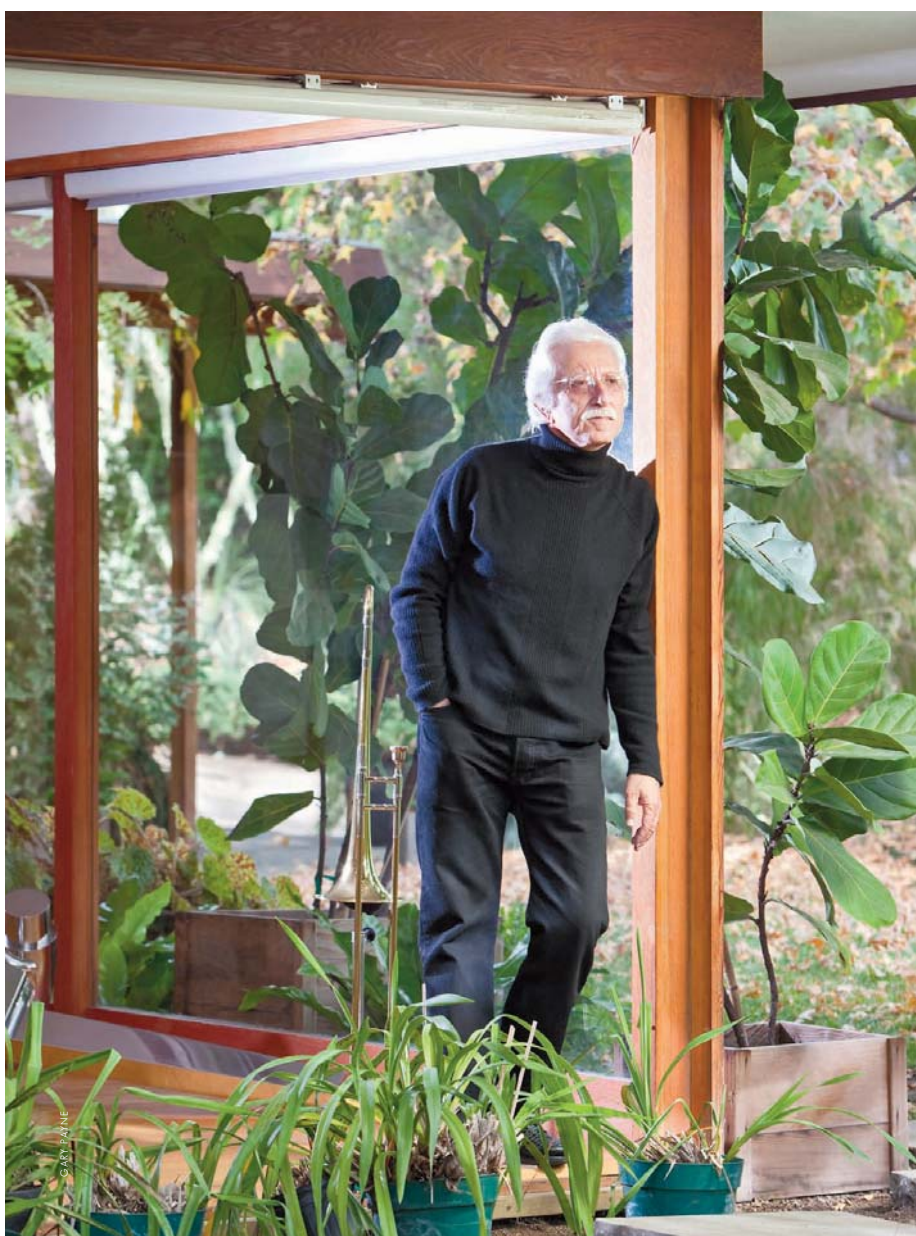
LIFESTYLES



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# NORM APPLEBAUM

*architect*

BY WAYNE CARLSON

**N**ORM APPLEBAUM LIKES TO COMPARE HIS ARCHITECTURE to striptease — “by the way it reveals itself gradually.” That’s a funny line, but also a perfectly accurate one.

Consider some of this AIA architect’s signature elements:

- A sense of drama that unfolds as visitors approach the house
- Water features that enhance the entry sequence
- A low entry ceiling that opens up to larger volume
- Cantilevered beams and shelves that appear to defy gravity and penetrate windows to the exterior
- “Reveals” between surfaces that define and separate materials

There’s nothing funny, however, about Applebaum’s homes, which have all but defined contemporary San Diego residential architecture for 38 years. When the nation’s pre-eminent architectural photographer, Julius Shulman, toured Applebaum’s *Sinucab* residence in Rancho Santa Fe in 2005, he told the architect, “This is the finest house in the world. Your genius is beyond words.”

The contemporary 54,000-square-foot mansion (26,400 in living space, 28,000 for the garage) is Applebaum’s masterpiece. It took him a year just to build the model for the house, which, if stretched on a line, would cover a football field. It took another seven years — and a half-million board feet of Douglas fir — to build it.

Despite that towering achievement, Applebaum is quick to say one should “never equate quality of space with quantity of space.”

To this design icon, “great architecture is born from the single mind focused on a timeless concept.” Clearly, a “think tank” approach to design appalls him. “I cannot imagine how a group can create beautiful architecture using that process of design.”

After Applebaum’s design of an Escondido residence for Carlton and Eileen Appleby won this magazine’s Homes of the Year top prize a quarter century ago, San Diego architectural critic Dirk Sutro called it “the quintessential San Diego house.”

Opposite: Architect Norm Applebaum, at his Mount Helix studio, which is a vintage residence designed by post-war modernist architect Lloyd Ruocco.

Below: A 1996 Applebaum design in Kensington. Photograph by John Durant.





Above: Master bedroom of the 1996 Mueller home in Kensington. Far left: Interior trellis, built-in art niches and stained-glass door to master suite, and (left) cantilevered roofs – all Applebaum signatures. Photography by John Durant.

Opposite clockwise from top are views of Suncatch, a large estate in Rancho Santa Fe: An indoor/outdoor koi pond. ♦ The architect at the estate's front door. ♦ Reflecting pool borders entrance sequence to house. ♦ Large expanses of glass keep interiors light-filled.





When the architect designed a Fairbanks Ranch residence in a Ranch style inspired by Cliff May's ground-breaking designs, May gave Applebaum the ultimate honor by photographing every detail of the house for his own study. Every detail of this Ranch-style home (see *SDHG/L*, May 2009) was designed with the homeowners in mind — and 20 years later, they still love every inch of it.

More of Applebaum's signature features explain what matters to him most:

- Residences that are in harmony with the natural site and follow the lay of the land
- Interiors that have a sense of openness and lots of natural light
- Interior spaces that fit, not overwhelm, the home's occupants
- Main rooms situated to overlook garden focal points and outdoor sitting areas
- Lighting that, in the evening, makes ceilings appear to float
- Interior trellises that extend to the exterior to emphasize the relationship between inside and out

In his sculptural homes, Applebaum designs features that evoke Frank Lloyd Wright, John Lautner and his love of Asian, Craftsman and Spanish sensibilities. He also bows deeply to contemporaries like organic architectural designers Kendrick Bangs Kellogg, Wallace Cunningham and James Hubbell, who he says are among the few "truly creative architects" in San Diego.

*Opposite clockwise from top left:* Beehive fireplace warms the kitchen in this 1988 Fairbanks Ranch home Applebaum designed as a tribute to Cliff May, father of the Ranch-style home. ❖ Interior trellis connects main wing of house to the bedroom/office wing. ❖ A water-wise garden planted by Schnetz Landscape of Escondido nicely complements the low-slung hacienda-style architecture. ❖ Dining room overlooks the rear garden. Photography by John Durant.

*This page:* The master bath in a 1996 Applebaum house in Kensington. Photograph by John Durant.

"It takes real courage to design something that's never been done before," Applebaum says. "Those three do it with every project."

*Suncatch* is also an original design. When Applebaum was offered the commission to design it, the homeowner asked his architect not to take on any other clients until his house was complete. "And I did not," Applebaum says. "I did no other work for the eight years I was on the project. I was so low-profile at that time that a lot of people thought I had retired."

That is not likely to happen anytime soon. He lives and breathes architecture virtually every waking moment, except for those times when he's enjoying or discussing music. And even then, there's a connection, for he considers architecture as "frozen music." He credits his background as a classical and jazz musician (a trombonist who has played with greats like Stan Kenton and Les McCann) with "strengthening my creative process." "The ability to play freely and create new thoughts in music is directly proportional to my innovative archi-



tectural process, allowing my mind to explore further than most architects.

"My clients become my family," he says. "Their homes, and the architecture I create for them, are my children. They can never be duplicated, and the bond we share lasts a lifetime.

"Architecture is working together with clients to create a functional work of art. If the function isn't met, it isn't architecture." ❧

## Highlights

### EDUCATION:

- ★ Bachelor of Architecture degree from Arizona State University in 1968, and was mentored by the late Calvin Straub, FAIA, professor of both University of Southern California and Arizona State University schools of architecture.
- ★ Studied under visionary architect Paolo Soleri for five years.

### NOTEWORTHY:

- ★ Appleby residence, Escondido, 1977 (*SDHG/L* Home of the Year, 1986)
- ★ Brown residence, Fairbanks Ranch, 1988
- ★ Matheron residence (*Wings*), Escondido, 1990, featured in *Another 100 of the World's Best Houses*, Images Publishing, 2003; destroyed in a 2007 wildfire
- ★ Riegel/Gillespie residence (*The Wedge*), Poway, 1994; destroyed in the 2003 Cedar fire
- ★ Mueller residence, Kensington, 1996
- ★ Bateman residence, Rancho Santa Fe, 1997
- ★ The Estate at Rancho Santa Fe (*Suncatch*), 2005