



## THE JAZZMAN OF ARCHITECTURE

Q&A WITH NORM APPLEBAUM

**A**s a jazz trombone player, he has jammed with Stan Kenton and Les McCann. As an architecture student, he was mentored by visionary architect/educators Paolo Soleri and Calvin Straub (the latter also taught a young Frank Gehry). And he was befriended by Cliff May, a San Diegan who was the father of the California ranch house.

Norm Applebaum, AIA, definitely has stories to tell. And his most eloquent storytelling medium — his art — is architecture. An avowed disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright, Norm works strictly in residential design, creating homes that soar with light, grace and imagination yet are grounded and integrated into their environments. His projects, such as the jaw-dropping Suncatch Estate and Villa Tyto Alba, are dramatic, sculptural masterworks. Norm works out of a Lloyd Ruocco-designed studio in La Mesa and resides in a Cliff May house in Kensington with his partner, Barbara Roper.

**Q: San Diego is known for its architect/developers. Do you have any interest in that model?**

**A:** No, I don't. I was raised on John Lautner's work and [Rudolph] Schindler's work and the master of all the modernists: Frank Lloyd Wright. And so I believed long ago, when I was about 19 years of age, that I would practice as an artist and not care about the money but the architecture. That's the most important thing to me.

**Q: San Diego has an impressive legacy of architects, with people like Irving Gill and Lloyd Ruocco. Do you think it gets proper appreciation?**

**A:** I think the whole problem has always been that people are not educated. It's not the public's fault; it's the education system that we have in America. The idea of people not knowing about Irving Gill and all the rest of the greats like Schindler is sad. And I believe that Bob Mosher, who began his practice in the '40s, is one of the greatest residential architects in the city. Through education, eventually people in America will understand what we have and what we must preserve. These developers come in and tear down some of the most wonderful buildings in the world because they want to make a buck. And that isn't what the essence of American architectural history is about.

**Q: What's your take on the current state of San Diego architecture?**

**A:** I'm sure there will be a lot of people that don't agree with me, but the downtown development, which is important, is done by all these Canadian architects and, therefore, it's starting to look like Vancouver instead of San Diego. I don't like that. I think originally they had other architects coming in to create very, very fine buildings, like Helmut Jahn; and Richard Meier just finished the courthouse building, and he's a world-renowned architect. So my feeling about it is that there are too many of these Canadian buildings and they all look alike with their patios, their



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guardrails and all the other business. And when you look at the city, you know that the same architect/developer has been doing most of those buildings. I could be in the minority; but as a professional for 42 years, I believe that that's what I'm looking at.

**Q: Do you think there's a relationship between what you do as musician and as an architect?**

**A:** I think there is, because it allows me to think more freely. You know, I've never trusted an architect that's not a musician. Frank Lloyd Wright was a marvelous piano player, and his son Lloyd Wright was a cellist. And all the architects that I've ever admired were musicians, so that's where I'm coming from. The freedom of jazz, which is America's music, is what I do. And I do it in my architecture as well. I wrote George Shearing years ago. I said, "You know, if I didn't listen to your music every day and hear your chord changes and hear your improvisation, I don't think I could create what I do." And so I believe in that, and I always have. It really pulls at my heartstrings to know that architecture and music are one.

**Q: May I ask your age?**

**A:** I am 74 and never plan to retire. Frank Gehry is about 86 or 87, and Mr. Wright died at 92. I.M. Pei is about 96 or 97. And I always talk about the famous Brazilian, Oscar Niemeyer, who just passed away last year at 104 — 104 and he was still pushing the pencil. In order for an architect to really express true architecture, he needs to be educated; and I do believe that the flower doesn't bloom until about age 55. Then he starts or she starts getting the vernacular, the vocabulary to do things that are powerful, and that doesn't always happen to architects at a young age. Life teaches you. So I never plan to retire. I never felt like I was working, and I still feel that way. ♦

Top to bottom: Appleby Residence, 1978; Julius Shulman and assistant at Suncatch, 2005; Villa Tyto Alba, Matheron Residence, 2009