

HIGH ABOVE THE COLORADO RIVER  
MAYAN AND ART DECO FUSION

The house sits high above a bend in the Colorado River, just outside Austin, Texas. Your first impression is that the Mayans had been here, leaving behind a fine example of their architectural skills. On further inspection, you discover that architect Paul Lamb was indeed inspired by that ancient Mexican civilisation, whose culture fascinates the client. Inside the house, Art Deco prevails – of which lady of the house is a fan. As the building process progressed, interior designer Fern Santini succeeded – working closely with the architect and the house owners – in fusing together those two divergent cultures into a logical totality. The unusual style of construction is arresting; huge pieces of stone have been integrated seamlessly in cantilevered walls. David Escobedo is responsible for construction, demonstrating, in the building carcass as well as the finish, the skills of a true master craftsman.

text + photos: Hans Fonk



Right: the team that built the house. From the left: architect Paul Lamb, interior designer Fern Santini (Fern Santini Design) and builder David Escobedo (Escobedo Construction).

Right-hand page: the Great Hall with a dining table in macassar ebony in the manner of Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann, by A.Piccoli Ltd., Brooklyn, NY. The dining chairs and side chair are by Dessin-Fournir, Plainville, upholstered in fabrics by Coraggio Textiles. The custom steel panels for the dining table pedestals are by Pehoski Metal Smiths, Salado, TX and the alabaster and white bronze chandelier is by Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann, c.1925, from DeLorenzo Gallery, NY, NY. The custom bronze palm trees are torchieres by Pehoski Metal Smiths, Salado, TX and the custom rug in wool/silk, is by Edward Fields Inc. The macassar ebony/shagreen buffet with white onyx top, is by Atelier Viollet, Brooklyn, NY, the plaster urn lamps on the buffet are Jansen, 1940s from Reymer-Jourdan, NY, NY and the gilded bar is French, c.1935, from Calderwood Gallery, Philadelphia, PA. The custom gliding on plaster ceiling was done by Betsey Ranck, Jackie.

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Left: the cantilevered limestone stairs with the steel railing designed and fabricated by Joe Pehoski. The bowl is by Dale Chihuly, Chihuly Studio, Seattle, the sconces + wall torches are by Solis Betancourt through Holly Hunt, NY, NY.

Right: living room looking back to the Great Hall with a pair of upholstered armchairs in mahogany and crotch mahogany from Dessin-Fournir, Plainville, a coffee table in bronze with glass top, Giacometti, 1950s, from Rain-bow Fine Art, NY, and an armless sofa by Todd Hase, NY, upholstered in fabric by Todd Hase, NY. The end table in black lacquer with eggshell mosaic top is by Jean Dunand, 1920s, from DeLorenzo Gallery. The sculpture on the Dunand table is by Charles Umlauf.



The house is massive in all respects: external dimensions, interior spaces and building materials. Yet all the proportions harmonise fittingly, so the actual size is less apparent. As soon as you enter the house, you are struck by the precise, mortarless coursing of the stone – a method which typifies Mayan construction. This style did not just 'happen'. The client is particularly fond of the old culture of those peoples from Guatemala and southern Mexico, and in particular the Yucatan peninsula. He took the entire team, including culture experts, on various expeditions to the centres of Mayan culture for inspiration. Looking back, every trip led to adaptations and new ideas concerning furnishings and decoration. Hardly surprising, as the ancient Mayan culture was one of the most exceptional in the world. It came about around 2000 BC and

peaked in 250 AD. The Mayans had a fully developed written language, and their art, architecture, mathematics and astronomy were so sophisticated that they are still highly respected today. Architect Paul Lamb found more than enough ideas for his house design in that culture. "Before the house acquired its present form, I'd already made two earlier designs. Admittedly based on the same L-shape, but the trips to Guatemala and Mexico produced more and more new ideas. We started with the space in the lowest part of the house, making a really heavy porch at the edge of the rock. At some stage someone suggested it looked like a Mayan cave and in fact that turned out to be the basis for the entire house. I was familiar with the Mayan culture out of books, but our trips supplied ever-more ideas, which in turn were also incorporated. Accordingly, the house was built layer by layer, starting from the





Left hand page top left: Reclaimed columns and beams from the Yucatan, Spanish Colonial carved wooden panels from James Powell, tinted Venetian plaster, grain mesquite block floor. The mirror is mounted on hidden doors from James Powell, Austin. The iron wall sconces are from Dennis & Leen, Los Angeles. The vintage desk, chairs and rug are from James Powell, Austin. Beside that: the living room with a bookcase by Emile-Jacques Ruhmann, 1920s, DeLorenzo Gallery, and a rope chair with grass skirt by Christian Astugueville, Paris, through Holly Hunt. The lamp on library table is French, c. 1930, through Karl Kemp &

Assoc., NY, and the art above it is by Jean Dupas, c. 1928, pen and charcoal on paper, through Barry Friedman Ltd. NY. The pair of Biedermeyer side c. 1820, through Karl Kemp & Assoc. NY. The table between the Biedermeyer chairs is two tiered, with reverse gold leaf glass tops, c. 1945, Jan Showers & Assoc., Dallas, TX.

This page top left: the master bath and dressing room with sycamore paneling, white onyx tops and plaster ceiling. The chandelier is by Rene Lalique, 1920s, through Paul Stamati Gallery, NY, and the boudoir chair is by Jean Charles Moreux, French, 1940s, through Alan Moss, NY. The custom rug is from Edward Fields, NY.

Above: the master bedroom with a view to south over Colorado river valley, Hope's steel windows and a steel balcony by Joe Pehoski. The bed is custom made by Atelier Viollet, Brooklyn, NY and the custom rug is by Edward Fields, Inc. The bedding is by Adobe with a fabric by Bart Halpern, NY. The bedside lamps are by, Giacometti, c. 1933, Christie's, NY. They were originally made for made for Jean Michel Frank. The gilded light monitor in ceiling is by Heirloom Gold-Leaf Frames, Austin. The custom draperies by Adobe are made from fabrics by Gretchen Bellinger, Albany, NY. The upholstered chairs are by J. Robert Scott, Inglewood, CA.

Below: the entry and loggia with cast glass light fixtures by Kathleen Ash modeled after Mayan ear flares. The limestone column details are inspired by columns at Tikal. The custom bronze, opaline glass, sconces are by Pehoski Metal Smiths, Salado, TX. The front door is by Edgar Brandt, originally made for the Montreal Board of Trade Building, 1920s, through Paul Stamati Gallery, NY.



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porch – as the Mayans would have done. The brief remained unchanged, but the form altered during the process. It became far more ‘muscular’ with lots of stone.”

“I like the feeling of the house. It resonates with the surroundings. The landscape here resembles that of the Yucatan to some extent. The house seems to rise up out of the ground. As building work progressed, more and more details were added – thanks to the contractor, David Escobedo, who worked with us. He succeeded in implementing many of the far-fetched ideas – for instance, seamlessly shaping the large chunks of stone into smooth walls, the spiral staircase comprising cantilevered stairs virtually hanging in space and the self-supporting stone arches. The project would never have succeeded without his expertise. Although the house acquired its final form step by step, the end result is a well-proportioned, pleasing whole”, as Paul put it.

The exterior architecture took shape gradually, as did the interior design. That was primarily Fern Santini's job, though it was a joint effort with Paul Lamb and the lady of the house. The latter has a predilection for Art Deco and that style proved to combine amazingly well with the Mayan-style architecture. Fern Santini studied accounting and political science and, almost by chance, ended up in the interior design world. As the manager of a high-end fashion store, she frequently met up with leading fashion designers in big cities in the United States and soon began to appreciate their taste and style. She'd always enjoyed interior decoration and was already designing interiors for clients of the fashion store. Her breakthrough came when she was invited to fit out and appoint a large house.

Right: the big wall seen from the garden. The rail pattern is based on the symbol for "Mountain Water Place".

Below: view from kitchen into family room. The leather armchairs are by the National Upholstering Company, Emeryville, CA, with leather from Edelman Leather, New Milford, CT. The Noyer cigarette tables are American, c.1930, through Jan Showers & Assoc., Dallas, barstools and breakfast table are by Rex White, Fredericksburg, TX and the chandelier is by Holly Hunt. The sconces frosted glass, 1930s, through Alan Moss, NY.



Right: the porch next to the pool: the house design was based on that. The teak bench is by Jerome Abel Seguin through Gardens, Austin, and the iron chairs are by Mosaix Studio, Los Angeles. The fabric is by Perennials, Dallas. The custom bronze sconces are by Pehoski Metal Smiths, Salado, TX.

Right hand page:

The living room with a sofa by Holly Hunt upholstered in fabric by Veronese, Los Angeles. The floor lamp is French 1940s, through Reymer-Jourdan, NY. The coffee table is also French 1930s through Jan Showers & Assoc., Dallas. The pair of armchairs is by Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann, c.1930, through Rainbow Fine Art, Inc., NY. Fabric is by Gretchen Bellinger, Albany. The trio of nesting tables, c.1930, is through Jan Showers & Assoc. Dallas. The painting above the sofa is by Maurice Vlaminck. Spanish Baroque Library 17th century walnut table is through Therien & Co., San Francisco. The draperies are by Creation Bauman USA



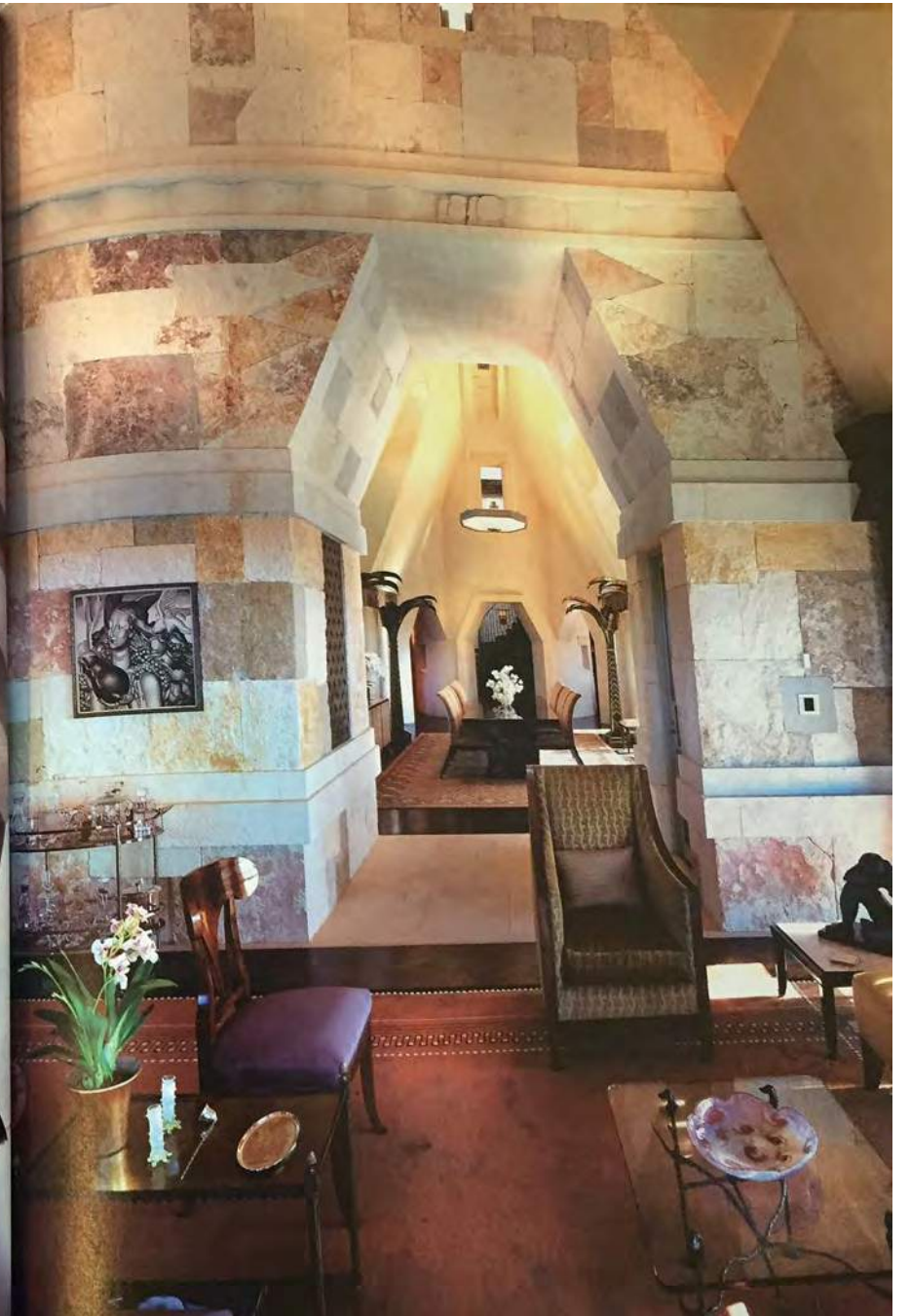
It encouraged her to make a U-turn and open her own design studio. As she put it: "I was working on major houses but not with major architects." All that changed when Paul Lamb involved her in this project.

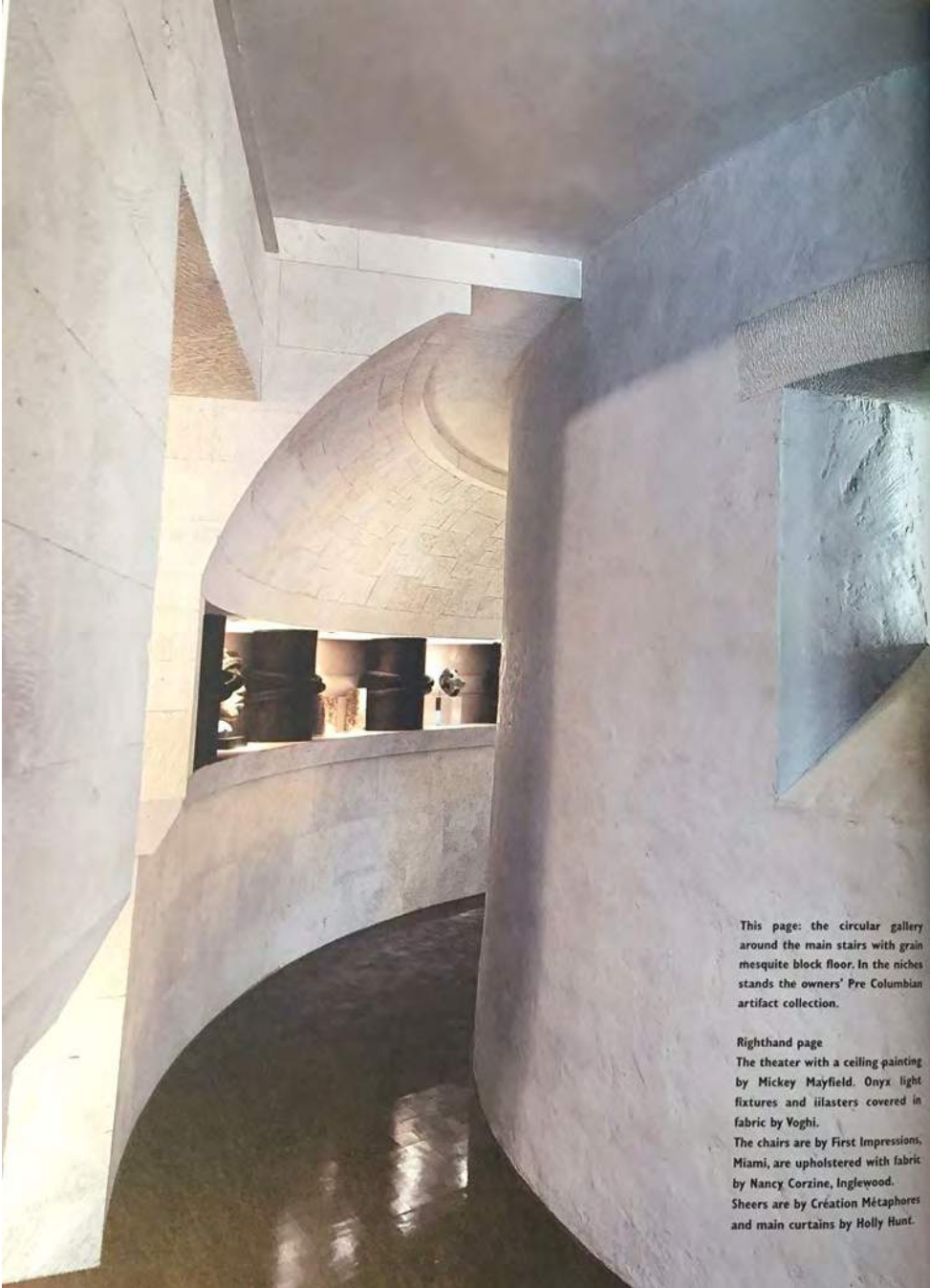
Fern: "In fact Paul introduced me to the clients and the project has changed my life. Together Paul and I decided what to put in the house. To start with, I didn't know much about Art Deco, what was right and what not. I didn't want to go over the top with the style, but to create a complete picture in which all the elements would come into their own. I learnt so much during the six years the project lasted. Antique dealers in New York introduced me to the world of Art Deco. I went with them to major auctions in Paris with

genuine Ruhlmann items and was gradually able to acquire objects like the Giacometti figures, which go so well in the house. I was lucky to have been involved in this project and to work with people like Paul, David and, of course, the clients, to create such an imposing totality." Even at the construction stage, the project was attracting attention from architects and students of architecture, who, as Fern put it, flew in from all over the United States to look at the house. She has meanwhile made a name for herself as a designer specialising in residential projects.

"I invest a lot in every project, emotionally. It's great if you can work with clients who are very much involved themselves, and particularly if you have the opportunity to work with someone like Paul Lamb", in Fern Santini's words.







This page: the circular gallery around the main stairs with grain mesquite block floor. In the niches stands the owners' Pre Columbian artifact collection.

**Righthand page**

The theater with a ceiling painting by Mickey Mayfield. Onyx light fixtures and pilasters covered in fabric by Voghi.

The chairs are by First Impressions, Miami, are upholstered with fabric by Nancy Corzine, Inglewood.

Sheers are by Création Métaphores and main curtains by Holly Hunt.

