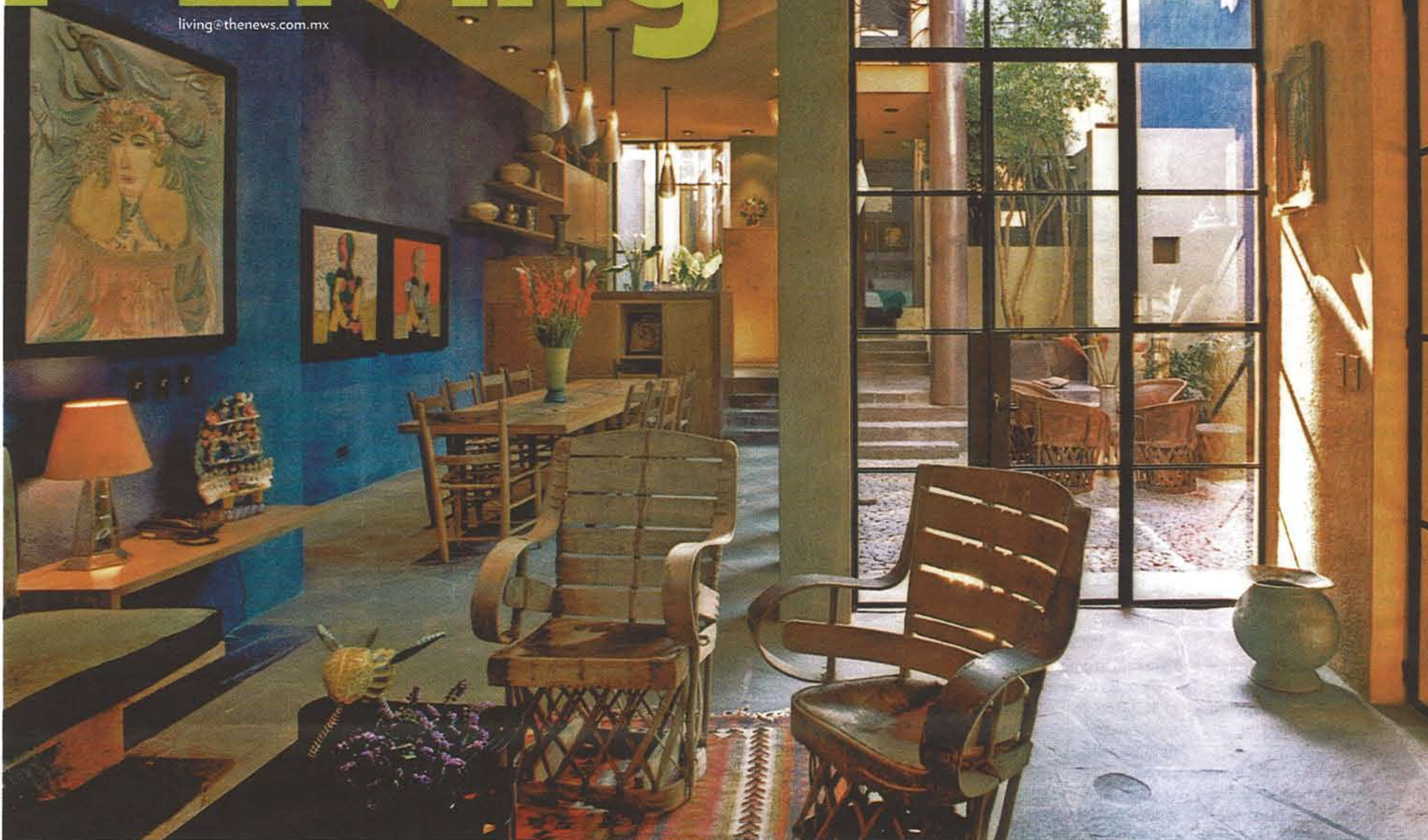


Living

living@thenews.com.mx



This living room leads into the dining room and out to the spacious courtyard in just one of the Mexico homes designed by Cathi and Steven House.

HOUSE + HOUSE = HOME

A husband and wife team of architects from San Francisco have made San Miguel their second home, bringing their 21st-century vision to the 16th-century city

BY JIM JOHNSTON • SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

For many foreigners who ended up living in Mexico the way we got here was surprise. For Cathi and Steven House, two architects from San Francisco, it borders on the supernatural.

"We first came to Mexico in search of a quarry for cantera stone for a project in the Caribbean," Cathi said. "We traveled extensively by then and had dreams of owning a house on the Greek island of Santorini. One afternoon in San Miguel de Allende we passed a realtor's office, and though we'd look at houses just for fun, the last place we saw was a little ruin, and we fell in love with it."

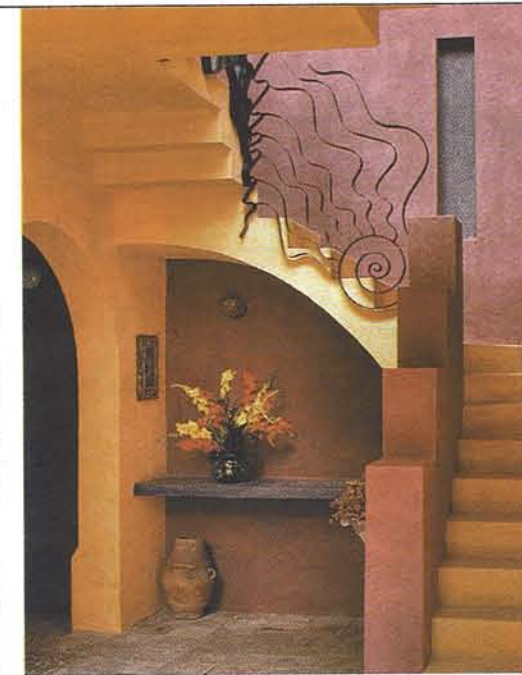
They went to a corner store for snack and to talk it over.

"The first thing we saw was a water bottle with the name Santorini on it. Later that day we went to buy a shirt... and we saw that same Santorini image with the logo, 'Mirage - San Miguel de Allende.' So we bought the property and the rest is history."

That was back in 1989, and since then they have designed 14 houses in Mexico, including one for themselves on that little property with the crumbling house.



A fireplace helps create a cozy living and dining space.



The Houses add details like this fluttering steel railing.



An ornate mosaic livens the bathroom.



A light scoop opens the space.

They were among the first foreigners on their street. Before buying, they knocked on each neighbor's door to make sure it was OK. "We didn't want to be seen as intruders," Cathi said.

MAKING MEXICO HOME

Cathi Bowden and Steven House met during their first week at architecture school at Virginia Tech in 1970, and married four years later. They established their firm, House + House Architects in 1982, and since that time they have designed more than 200 houses in the United States, Mexico and the Caribbean, and have received more than 50 design awards. They divide their time between San Francisco and San Miguel de Allende, but their work in Mexico keeps expanding. Currently a third of their projects are in Mexico.

"Mexico feels like home to us," Steven said. "Living in Greece and Italy early in our careers, exploring small villages and learning about the local architecture, influenced our work a lot. We're always trying to understand new cultures, other ways of living, Mexico is a natural extension of all that."

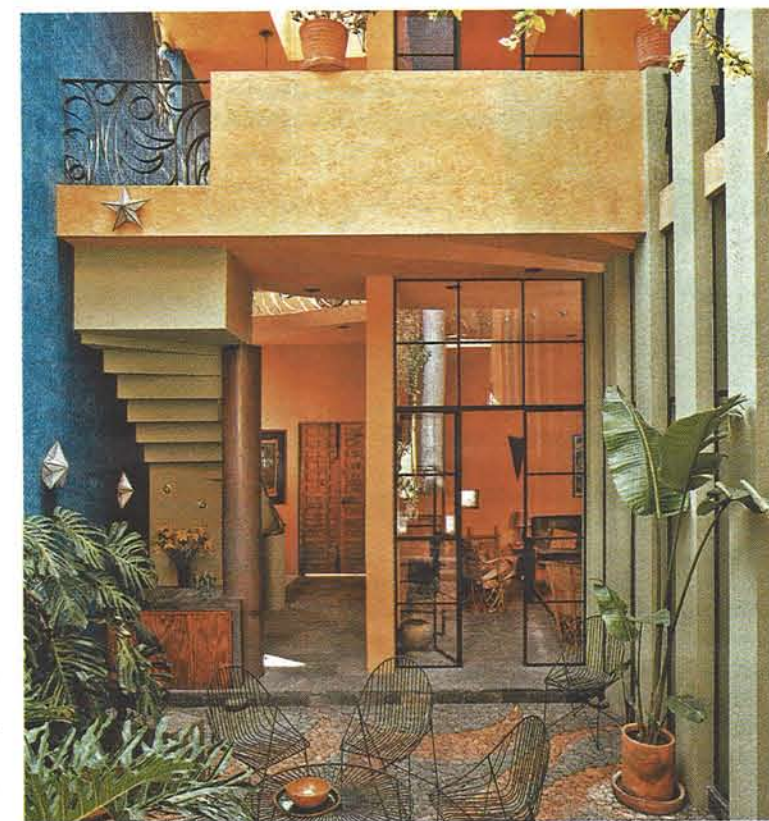
San Miguel de Allende, recently designed a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, boasts some of the most outstanding colonial architecture in Mexico. I asked Cathi and Steven how their own more contemporary designs fit in with the traditional surroundings.

"Being appropriate to the colonial aesthetic of San Miguel includes scale, relationship to the neighborhood, how the building engages with the street, and use of materials," Cathi said. "A house may incorporate some visual re-interpretation of colonial detailing or materials, but our design decisions are not governed by style, but by how people live."

Their work has been influenced by great architects like Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Carlo Scarpa and Louis Kahn. They also admire contemporary Mexicans such as Enrique Norton, Ricardo Legoretta and Teodoro González de León. "And, of course, Luis Barragán," Steven said. "There's a boldness, a sensitive use of materials, textures and colors in Mexico that is a continuing source of inspiration to us."



An old door serves as hurricane shutters in the courtyard.



The balcony looks out onto the courtyard.

Indigenous architecture is another important influence. An unusual staircase design on their rooftop, for example, was taken from a chapel in a Greek village which certainly had no architecture. An idea for "light scoops" that bring light and fresh air into the center of one house came from an ancient underground dwelling they saw in southern Spain. The use of textured stucco,

stone columns and polished concrete are elements found in traditional Mexican architecture.

Organic, soulful and timeless are words Steven and Cathi use to describe their houses. "Handcrafted modernism is another term used to describe our work," Cathi said. "In Mexico there are so many talented craftsmen for every material - carpenters, ironworkers,



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CATHI HOUSE
Architect

HOUSES' HOUSES

- At 5 p.m. on Friday, March 6, Cathi and Steven House will give a slide lecture and present their new book, "Houses in the Sun: Light Movement Embrace."
- The book documents 20 of their recent projects in California, Mexico and the Caribbean.
- The event will be held at St. Paul's Church, Cardo 6, San Miguel de Allende. You can also visit Cathi and Steven's Web site at: www.houseandhouse.com

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TAILORING DESIGNS

There's a lot of investigation into their clients' lives before the design process begins. They've developed a list of more than 200 questions about how people live, about their emotional and spiritual needs, their dreams and expectations.

"Our clients are often couples, so we ask each one to answer separately. Then we compare notes and start from there," Steven said. "It's easy to make something beautiful in a superficial sense, but many beautiful houses do not necessarily work well. Once we get the ideas to work, it's easy to make it all beautiful."

The effects of natural light are another important consideration in their

designs. For example, when Cathi and Steven designed a home for a couple with five grown children who always gathered for a late dinner on Thanksgiving Day, they aligned the dining room to give it a perfect view of the sunset on that day. Another house takes advantage of the pattern made by moonlight across an open patio.

The architects noted that working in Mexico is "a pleasure rather than the struggle we'd expected."

They've worked with the same builder, Guadalupe González Morales, for the past 15 years.

"When we first met I spoke very little Spanish, and he no English," Cathi said.

"Yet there was something about him that I knew was right for us. He's one of the best builders we've ever worked with, and his crew of workers is great. We like to challenge our workers. They're proud of building something they've never done before."

Depending on the specific design, the cost of building a house in Mexico can range from \$80 to \$130 per square foot. In comparison, prices for new construction in San Francisco ("one of the most expensive places in the U.S. to build") range from \$300 to \$800 per square foot.

"Our home and our hearts are in Mexico - our apartment and our families are in the U.S.," Cathi said. "There's a greater sense of community here, more appreciation for the simple things in life. We dream of spending more time in Mexico, and expanding our work here."

Jim Johnston is author of Mexico City: an Opinionated Guide for the Curious Traveler. His blog is www.mexicocitydf.blogspot.com