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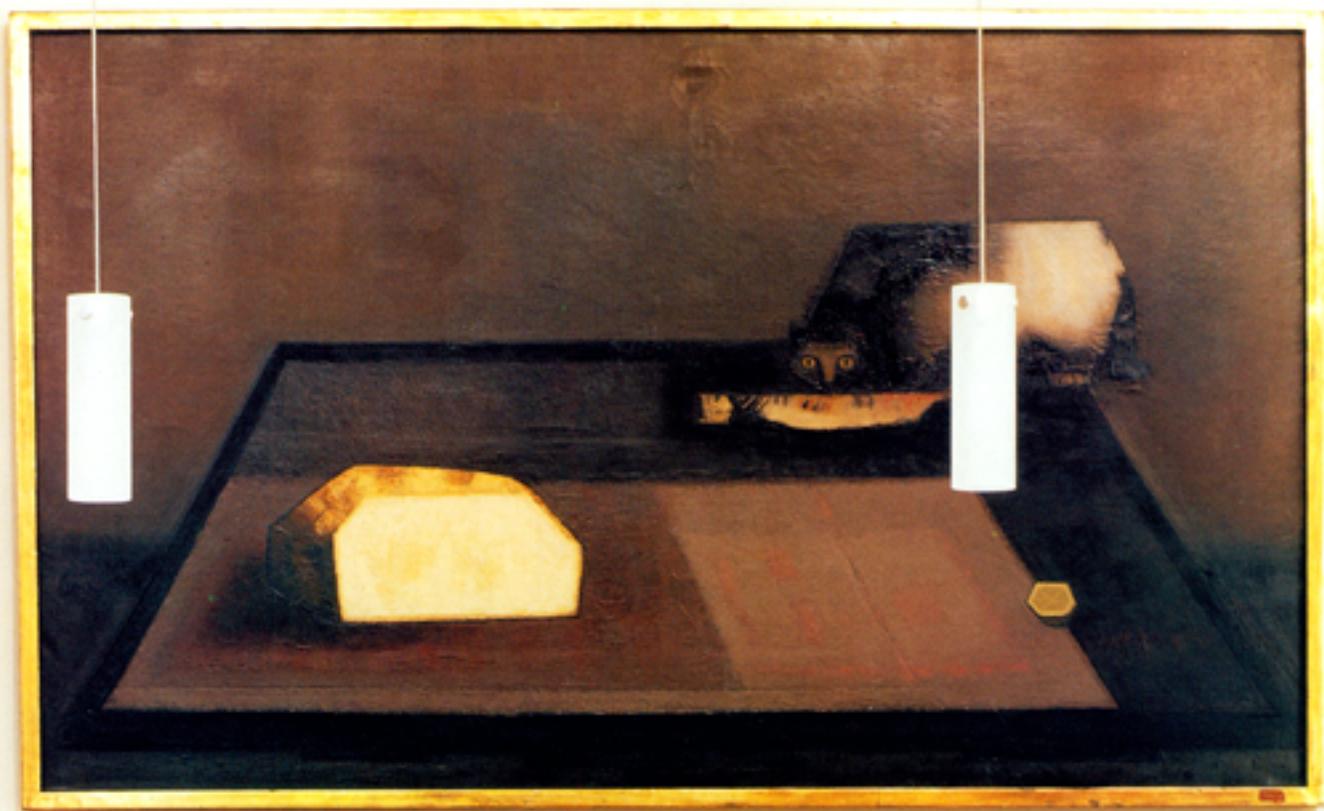


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All the right moves: The lyrical spirit of Betty and Alfredo Umansky's home in Beverly Hills soars in the curvilinear wall that leads to the glass door of the master bedroom. OPPOSITE: The house's formal dining room with its Pace table serves up a taste of the couple's art collection; on the wall, a painting by Mexican artist Luis Nishisawa.





All in the Family

THE ARCHITECT OF THIS SOARING
LOS ANGELES HOME UNDERSTOOD
PERFECTLY WHAT ITS OWNERS
CRAVED. IT'S NO WONDER—HE'S
THEIR SON. BY JULIA JOHNSON

after the last of Betty and Alfredo Umansky's four children moved out of the Tudor-style house in Beverly Hills where they had grown up, the couple decided it was time to build the home they had always wanted. While they had found their former house great for raising their brood, its rabbit warren of rooms wasn't exactly the perfect setup for them now. And given that many Tudor-style houses are, well, dark inside, it wasn't the best showcase for the art they'd been collecting for the past half-century either.

What the Umanskys dreamed of was a dramatic space flooded with natural light, with interesting nooks for sculpture and an abundance of wall space for their ever-changing collection of paintings (which now includes a Chagall and a Lichtenstein). Still, rather than an overly sleek space that shrieked "art gallery," they wanted a warm, livable place that said "home" to them—and to their children and five grandchildren who show up every Monday night for big family dinners. Luckily, the young architectural designer they hired for the job understood their needs perfectly. He should: He's Leonardo Umansky, their second son and father of their youngest grandchild.

While most parents hope to give their children a firm foundation on which to build a life, few probably ever dream of looking to one to return the favor in such a literal way. Opting for the younger Umansky was a particularly daring choice, as he and his partner in design, Ramiro Diazgranados, were just a year or two out of architecture school and hadn't been responsible for a project anywhere close to this one in size and ambition. In fact, their thriving young company, called Arxis Design Studio, was more or less born of this project. But, says Betty Umansky, "My husband and I talked about it and decided that this would be a wonderful opportunity for Leonardo, and for us. Then Leonardo showed me his ideas for our house. I knew he was good, but not this good."

The lot the elder Umanskys had settled on, underneath a teardown ("just across the alleyway from our old house," explains Leonardo) measured 100 feet by 200 feet, which presented some challenges, given the fact that the house the Umanskys dreamed of was 9,000 square feet, and they wanted to fit in a pool and gardens. The designers first suggested a courtyardlike layout to maximize the amount of light, but the elder Umanskys insisted on a formal living room and dining room at the front of the house, and the kitchen, breakfast, and family rooms in the back for easy access to the yard. The bedrooms—a master suite, a bedroom for grandchildren and other guests, and another that doubles as an office—plus an art-storage room—were to go upstairs.

If the designers felt limited by these parameters, it doesn't show in





A house by and for family (clockwise from top left): the foyer's limestone floor draws the eye to an outdoor reflecting pool and upstairs to the master suite and home office; Betty Umansky with three of her grandchildren; his and hers master baths both have showers, floors, and countertops made of stone; Francisco Castañeda's serene bronze sculpture gazes at the house, built of glass, stone, redwood, and Douglas fir.



the final design, which is neither cramped nor cookie-cutter in its handling of space. "My parents told me they wanted a Mediterranean-style house, but when they showed us pictures they'd pulled out of magazines, the things they liked leaned to modern," says the younger Umansky. "He said, 'Trust me, I'm going to do something better than Mediterranean,'" says Betty Umansky. "He did." For instance, when the clients revealed that they loved arched doorways, elliptical shapes became a central motif, played out in features from a sweeping skylight over the staircase and its spiraling, half-airborne stair rail to a curved finger-pull carved into a bathroom cabinet.

The key to making the traditional layout work, while keeping it suitably bright and light on its feet, lay in taking its forms and exploding them—eschewing the expected inner walls that are barriers to light, making doors that pivot to open the formal living room onto the family room (to make one huge entertaining space), using a change in materials to indicate the change in function of a space. The only permanent interior door downstairs leads to the powder room, and a six-foot-wide limestone path from the front of the house to the back suggests the hallway that exists only on the horizontal plane underfoot.

The designers also drew plenty of inspiration from the Umansky art collection, putting up a column that mimics a beloved Robert Graham statue in the living room, and creating a rough-hewn Bouquet Canyon stone niche to set off the organic shape of an onyx piece by Mexican sculptor Leonardo Nierman.

The art the Umanskys enjoy isn't all man-made. "My parents wanted to take advantage of the climate, to give the house a real indoor-outdoor feeling," says Leonardo Umansky. Enormous glass doors vanish into the walls with the touch of a finger, so that the patio without, shaded by the curve of the asymmetrical roof, becomes one with the family room within.

The pool gives further proof of the elder Umansky's dedication to their family. The first expanse of water, separated from the main pool by an underwater barrier, is only a foot or so deep, and when the grandchildren arrive, a motorized cover seals off the deep part, making the water a welcome spot for them to play. While lofty ideas are great for art, it is the practical touches that make a show-stopping design into a house as good to live in as it is to look at. ■

“They dreamed of a dramatic space flooded with light and wall space for their art”

ABCs OF CEILINGS

Ask most any architect and he or she will agree that while stone and steel are everyday tools of the trade, nothing inspires quite like light.

And while windows let the light in, high ceilings can give it room to play. Says Leonardo Umansky, principal architectural designer and an owner of Arxis Design Studio: "Ceilings help guide a person into a space. Lower ceilings help to move people along, while higher ceilings invite them to stop and look around. The more light there is, the more they will want to pause and discover the room."

Ceilings can allow the creativity of an architect to run wild by appearing unexpectedly elevated in an entryway or low and intimate in a living room. For example, these homeowners chose to go with a 14-foot ceiling in the kitchen to take advantage of the natural light available, whereas others might choose to go lower in the kitchen to make the room feel cozier. Bottom line? Let your imagination be your guide, but just remember:

Think light! —R.B.



An artful life: In the living room (opposite), a wooden beam spans imaginatively into the double-height foyer. **BELOW:** Custom sliding doors in the living room make it a virtual indoor-outdoor space. The hearth is made of Bouquet Canyon stone; the image over it is by Agam; the standing sculpture, a bronze work by Victor Salmones.

