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Desert Jewel

Simple, organic materials belie the complexity of a modernist dwelling.

WRITTEN BY TATE GUNNERSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WERNER SEGARRA

Architecture: C.P. Drewett, Drewett Works Interior Design: David Michael Miller, David Michael Miller Associates
Home Builder: Jeremy Meek, Desert Star Construction Landscape Architecture: Jeff Berghoff, Berghoff Design Group

It's said that iron sharpens iron, and that was certainly the case when architect C.P. Drewett assembled a seasoned team—interior designer David Michael Miller, builder Jeremy Meek and landscape designer Jeff Berghoff—to create a sprawling compound on more than

200 saguaro-studded acres in the Sonoran Desert.

The owners envisioned a resort-like space where they could host family and friends as well as philanthropic events. “Not all projects are created equal,” Drewett says, noting this one offered a site unparalleled in its beauty, committed clients and an ambitious, often exacting, scope. “It was a remarkable design experience.”

Rather than compete with the spectacular surroundings, which Drewett compares to a state park, he selected a pared-down palette of four materials: Sirewall—a type of rammed earth using a mix of local soils; mill-scale steel, which features a blue-black surface finish resulting from oxidation; sleek concrete; and a warm mix of woods. “It’s very peaceful, and there’s not a lot of visual chatter,” he says. “The Sirewall feels indigenous and gives the residence a sense of place and belonging, like it’s growing up and out of the site.”

The rammed earth walls were built in advance of the slabs, standing like ancient monoliths until the structures slowly took shape. Hidden inside those walls are light switches, wires, conduits and pipes, which, unlike with conventional construction, cannot be moved once installed. It’s a challenge that requires careful attention to detail, says Meek, noting all the mechanicals and wiring must be precisely placed. “It takes extra effort and attention to complete, but it’s well worth the aesthetic,” he explains. “It’s truly a jewel of the Southwest.”

The buildings include a multicar garage that harbors an enviable collection of classic automobiles, a guest house, a wellness center and a pavilion-like abode with a cantilevered roof, clerestories, and expansive metal windows and doors that open to a series of outdoor areas designed by Berghoff. “Even though it’s heavily grounded, it feels sort of like it’s floating, open and fully transparent,” Drewett notes. The materials pierce the boundary between inside and out,

further blurring the distinction. “The house lives very exquisitely,” Berghoff adds. “Your eye just goes for miles and miles to the horizon.”

Just as Drewett deferred to the natural surroundings, Miller deliberately selected a muted interior palette with a mix of modern furnishings and lighting that allow the architecture to shine. For example, both the custom intersecting rectangular pendants over the Bulthaup kitchen and the coarsely sawn white oak shell he designed to surround the sleek white cabinetry play off the exposed mill-scale steel beams throughout. “I wanted it to feel classic, mellow and rich without making a bunch of clever moves,” he says.

Wool-and-silk area rugs atop the concrete floors establish a cozy milieu, anchoring a series of distinct conversation zones that flow into one another. In the main living area, a low-slung sectional and a pair of contemporary chairs surround a tall, steel-clad fireplace—one of several throughout—that takes advantage of the soaring ceilings. And in the media area, tinea veneer panels atop the rammed earth walls create the sense of a lower ceiling. “I wanted the house to have some intimacy,” Miller explains.

Not to mention drama. A large-scale painting by Doug and Mike Starn that takes up nearly an entire wall enlivens the dining room, which features clerestory windows and walls of glass doors on either side. It’s a stunning backdrop for a 17-foot-long walnut dining table surrounded by 14 leather chairs. “It brings nature into the residence in an electric and exciting way,” the designer says.

After dinner, it’s easy to imagine conversation flowing over to the bar, overlooking the pool and mountains in the distance. Sporting a wood base with a backlit laminated wire-meshed glass apron, “it glows in this subtle way that’s very sexy,” Miller explains. Distinguished by leather panels with a bronze reveal, the office door also fits that description—one of the many doors Miller designed throughout. Just outside, a placid pond surrounded by cacti and ironwood trees creates a welcome oasis during the strong desert heat.

The same could be said of the entire compound. “It is a quiet sanctuary that communicates really well with the landscape,” Drewett says. “Ultimately, I wanted it to be historic.” ■



Landscape designer Jeff Berghoff surrounded a lagoon-like water feature with lush greenery in this modern courtyard. The space sits between the main living areas and a robust wellness center, crafted by architect C.P. Drewett, designer David Michael Miller and builder Jeremy Meek.

In the media room, two Holly Hunt chairs and a Joseph Jeup sectional backed by a Holly Hunt credenza, all from John Brooks, surround a double-sided fireplace made of self-insulating rammed earth. A Christopher Farr rug grounds the space;





Above: Illuminated by pendant lights from Roll & Hill, the brass-and-glass shelf system at the bar was designed by Miller and fabricated by Amuneal. Leather Holly Hunt swivel chairs from John Brooks and a stone-and-walnut coffee table by Caste Design create a conversation zone.

Opposite: *The No Mind Not Thinks No Things* by Doug and Mike Starn overlooks a generously proportioned table by Joseph Jeup and Jean de Merry leather chairs in the light-filled dining room. The walnut-and-granite cabinet by Philip Nimmo features hammered-brass accents.





Above: Clarence House-upholstered swivel lounge chairs paired with side tables, all by Liaigre, form a cozy sitting area in front of the main bedroom's fireplace. Beside the bed, a John Wigmore ceramic lamp from Ralph Pucci pops in the otherwise neutral space.

Opposite: Sculpted from a single piece of honed Marquina marble, the curvaceous soaking tub beautifully complements the primary bathroom's rammed earth walls. The stool is by Caste Design from Holly Hunt.



"Because Drewett Works crafted the space with floor-to-ceiling windows, we designed the millwork features so they would float in space," Miller says of the bathroom vanity built by Lineer Fine Woodworking. The marble flooring is from Arizona Tile.

