



ORGANIC ZEN

A pair of empty nesters find serenity in simplicity.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL TIMMERMAN



The western side of the home highlights the three levels: plinth, dispersed core and canopy. On the lower level, a guest room opens to a deep, covered workout patio. Directly above is the master bedroom patio. To the left is a fenced-in dog run.



THIS PHOTO AND RIGHT Night or day, the entrance to the home is dramatic. The large covered patio features a grill, outdoor dining, firewood storage and a sunken fire pit. “We use the space every single day,” says homeowner Kimberly Meredith. To the right of the doorway is an indoor-outdoor aviary. Echoing a split in the plinth alongside the stairway, the stainless steel fascia and canopy “cracks open as a way to signify entry,” says architect Wendell Burnette.

For many homeowners, bigger is better, as evidenced by the current construction projects popping up across the Valley. But for Keith and Kimberly Meredith, a smaller home on a secluded 5-acre property was the right answer after they found themselves as empty nesters.

“We were living in the Troon area, in a house that was about 5,000 square feet,” says Kimberly. “After our four kids moved out, it was time for us to mosey and build a smaller, more organic home that better suited us.”

The couple looked at more than 100 lots before finding an ideal location about 12 minutes due north of Cave Creek, in a saguaro canyon area known as Hidden Valley. With a south-facing slope that looks toward the west side of Phoenix, with glimpses of far-away Pinnacle Peak and the McDowell and Continental mountains, an exposed flow of pinkish-red schist covering the ground and a cholla field that runs down the slope, the site had an almost magical pull. “It was the first lot that I fell in love with, and I kept circling back to it,” recalls Kimberly.

The couple knew that they wanted to build a custom, nonconventional home, and their massage therapist suggested they meet with



Running alongside the southern edge of the entryway, a water wall provides a cooling vibe in the hot summer months.



Shadows play off a steel plate guard rail along the southern edge of the house, creating a sundial effect.

prominent architect Wendell Burnette, who is known for designing contemporary structures with a keen sense of place.

“All sites have some special qualities, and we’re all about reading a place and the people and program you’re designing for, and asking ourselves, ‘How do we respond to that in a highly specific way?’” says Burnette. “In this case, we wanted to be a little bit up on the slope where, at a certain elevation, we get a slight view to the Valley floor.”

The architect also decided to incorporate the site’s most prominent feature—the pinkish schist field—and “extend” it into the design of the home. “The concept of the house is that this schist is flowing into a plinth, or podium, which is the base of the house. It’s a continuation of the geology,” he notes.

Topping the plinth is what the Burnette calls “a dispersed core”—think of it as a desert-friendly homage to Mies van der Rohe’s famed Farnsworth House. “Because of our extreme temperatures, we can’t do that much glass, so we needed to reduce the glass but we still wanted to capture all these pieces of the landscape,” he says.

The house starts with a central core, and then pinwheels out to various rooms, each with its own view. On the east side of the building is the entrance, complete with a large patio with outdoor

cooking, dining, fire pit and indoor-outdoor aviary. There's the media/dining room that looks out to the north. An indoor porch with a fireplace, where the Merediths like to sit and enjoy a bottle of wine—opens to the south and the late afternoon sunset. The master suite is on the west end of the home. "It's much more appropriate for the bedroom to face west because you get the reverse sunrise on the ridge," says Burnette. "It's a softer way to wake up." Pocketing glass walls in almost every room allow the structure to be opened completely to natural breezes.

"One of the main concepts was just reducing and simplifying," Burnette explains. "The Merediths were going from a 5,000-square-foot house to 2,500 square feet. They were consciously wanting to downsize."

Inside, the rooms are minimalist, with an Asian flair. "We're very organic Asian-focused in our lifestyle," notes Kimberly. "We're both third-degree black belts, and we studied taekwondo together for more than 20 years. It really influenced who we are as a couple and how we navigate things."

Because the homeowners didn't want to use all drywall on the interior, Burnette was able to play with finishes. He used a blend of steel cladding; wabi sabi stucco, which embraces the Japanese aesthetic of imperfection; and a resin-infused paper. Together, these elements exude a level of richness in detail and handcraftsmanship not found in traditional homes.

After deciding to downsize, the couple got rid of about 90 percent of their belongings, including clothing and furniture. One item they couldn't part with, however, was the dining room table. "It's an ironwood table that we bought in Argentina when we were living in Colorado," says Kimberly. "It was the only item our children wanted us to keep because of all the rich family stories and things that have happened on it." Burnette replaced its base and added custom steel-pipe, pin-cushion stools for a sleek, updated look.

The ceiling, both inside and on the deep overhangs that shelter the patio spaces, is an expanse of theatrical fabric that doubles as acoustic insulation. "It's the largest continuous-fabric ceiling that we've done. I don't know of any installation that is similar," notes Burnette. The fabric connects to a mill-finished stainless steel fascia, which obscures photovoltaics and water-harvesting features on the roof, or "canopy." Burnette explains, "The interesting thing is where the fascia



ABOVE From the kitchen, the homeowners can see through house to the master bedroom and the landscape beyond. The palo verde green and deep red panels are made from corrugated, perforated mill-finished steel with colored acoustic felt behind them. **RIGHT** A Buddha sculpture at the end of the water wall looks east toward the Continental Mountains. To the left is the aviary, which houses the Merediths' two cockatiels and four parakeets.



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—WENDELL BURNETTE, architect



“We wake up every day and feel like we’re truly at home in an environment that we envisioned.”

—KIMBERLY MEREDITH, homeowner



Kimberly sits at the dining room table, which is located in front of a large north-facing window.

and the fabric meet. When you’re below it, you’re not really sure what you’re looking at. The fascia seems to be floating above as if by magic, and there’s this dark void, which is the fabric ceiling, that is supporting it but looks like it can’t. It’s a very abstract composition.”

While the Merediths love the look and feel of their new home, the most important aspect for them was its ability to be pet-friendly for their Rhodesian ridgeback, cat, numerous birds and koi. “When we initially met, the first 30 minutes of our talk was about their pets and not themselves,” Burnette recalls. “That said a lot about who they are as people. This house is as much about their animals as it is about downsizing.”

Of course, having a home that is open to the elements can be difficult with pets, especially when that home is located in an area replete with wildlife. “This was talked about a lot,” says Burnette. “Because the dispersed core is quite high off the ground, neither the dogs nor the cat is going to jump that far.” An enclosed dog run off the northeast corner of the plinth was designed to be rattlesnake-proof, and the front entry door has screens to keep the animals inside when no one is on the patio.

For the birds, Burnette designed one of the home’s most unique attributes: a steel mesh birdcage near the main entry that spans both indoors and out. “The aviary is a very interesting feature. It’s wonderful,” says Kimberly. “If I’m in the kitchen area, I can



The center of the home features a staircase that leads from the dispersed core into the plinth, which houses the garage and guest rooms. The walls are lined with mill-finished steel, which are inset with photographs set in antiglare glass. The stairs run beneath the master bath and dressing area, with views straight through to the western edge of the house.



"It's much more appropriate for the bedroom to face west because you get the reverse sunrise on the ridge."

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The master bedroom opens to an expansive patio that features a pair of ferro-cement chairs, a fire pit and a koi pond. The western ridge shades the house, while a low late-afternoon light filters in.



ABOVE A small lounge area in front of a north-facing window faces the doors to the soak/bathing room.

RIGHT The bathing room features a Vermont black slate soaking tub and a handcrafted sink made from a rare birdseye redwood burl.



see into the aviary and out to the hills. The birds like it because they live outside every day.” In the center of the cage is a climatic partition that the homeowners can close to block out heat or cold air. And a vintage granite handwashing bowl from a Buddhist temple is used as a water feature for the birds. “It’s an Asian tradition to have birds in your life,” says Burnette. “And it’s very fun to arrive here and have them be part of the greeting.”

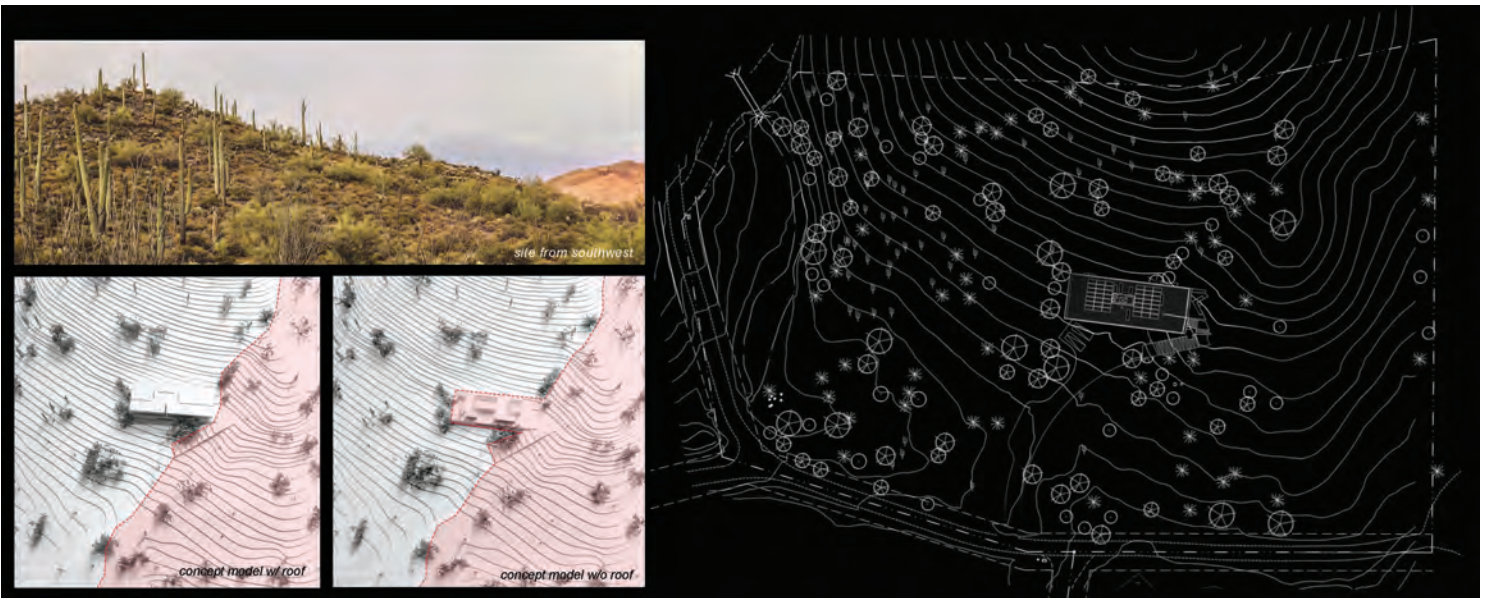
Straightforward in appearance, this desert home is anything but that. “It’s looks simple, but within it you discover a strong concept of plinth, dispersed core and canopy. It’s about addressing very specific views and creating very specific moments at different times of the day,” says Burnette. “There’s complexity within simplicity.” □

For more information, see Sources on Page 126.



ABOVE A view from the wine/fire room underscores the home's connection to the outside. The large window wall in front of the fireplace pocket opens to create an indoor patio. Just beyond the sitting area is the entertainment center, which houses the homeowners' TV and stereo equipment. At the far end is the front door, which leads to a large

outdoor dining area. Small shelves in the fireplace hold a collection of antique teapots. The indoor-outdoor Throne Chairs feature a stretchy ropelike covering. **BELOW** Topographic illustrations show the placement of the home on the saguaro-laden hill. The pink area highlights the changes in the earth's color due to the schist field that runs through the property.





Surrounded by nothing but desert landscape, including the cholla field in the foreground, the home is designed to blend in with its natural surroundings.