



SPIRIT OF DESIGN

Deliberate architectural features underscore a home's profound relationship with its location and owners.

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INSPIRATION CAN COME FROM the most unexpected places. Just ask architect Amit Upadhye. While hiking near Pinnacle Peak, he came across a formation of large boulders resting against each other, with a narrow crevice at the point of junction. Protected from the sun's harsh rays, desert greenery thrived in the interstitial space. "Sometimes when you see things, you're not particularly looking for them," recalls Upadhye, who had just been commissioned to design his first project in the Valley when the serendipitous hike occurred. "I saw these boulders kind of leaning on each other, and I asked myself, 'How do I abstract this image into a house?'"



ABOVE An 8-inch-wide continuous frosted-glass skylight cuts through the center of the home, dividing the public and private areas. **TOP LEFT** "The light becomes an abstract threshold," says architect Amit Upadhye of the skylight.



ABOVE The homeowners originally wanted to build a single-level ranch dwelling on the property, but during construction, Upadhye brought them onto the roof to show them the views possible from a second story, which changed their minds. “There is an excitement in seeing the mountains,” he says. “All of the openings are and even the L shape of the house is oriented toward the views.” **LEFT** The structure’s southeast corner showcases a marriage of concrete, glass and block. The tall, narrow window brings light into the master bathroom.

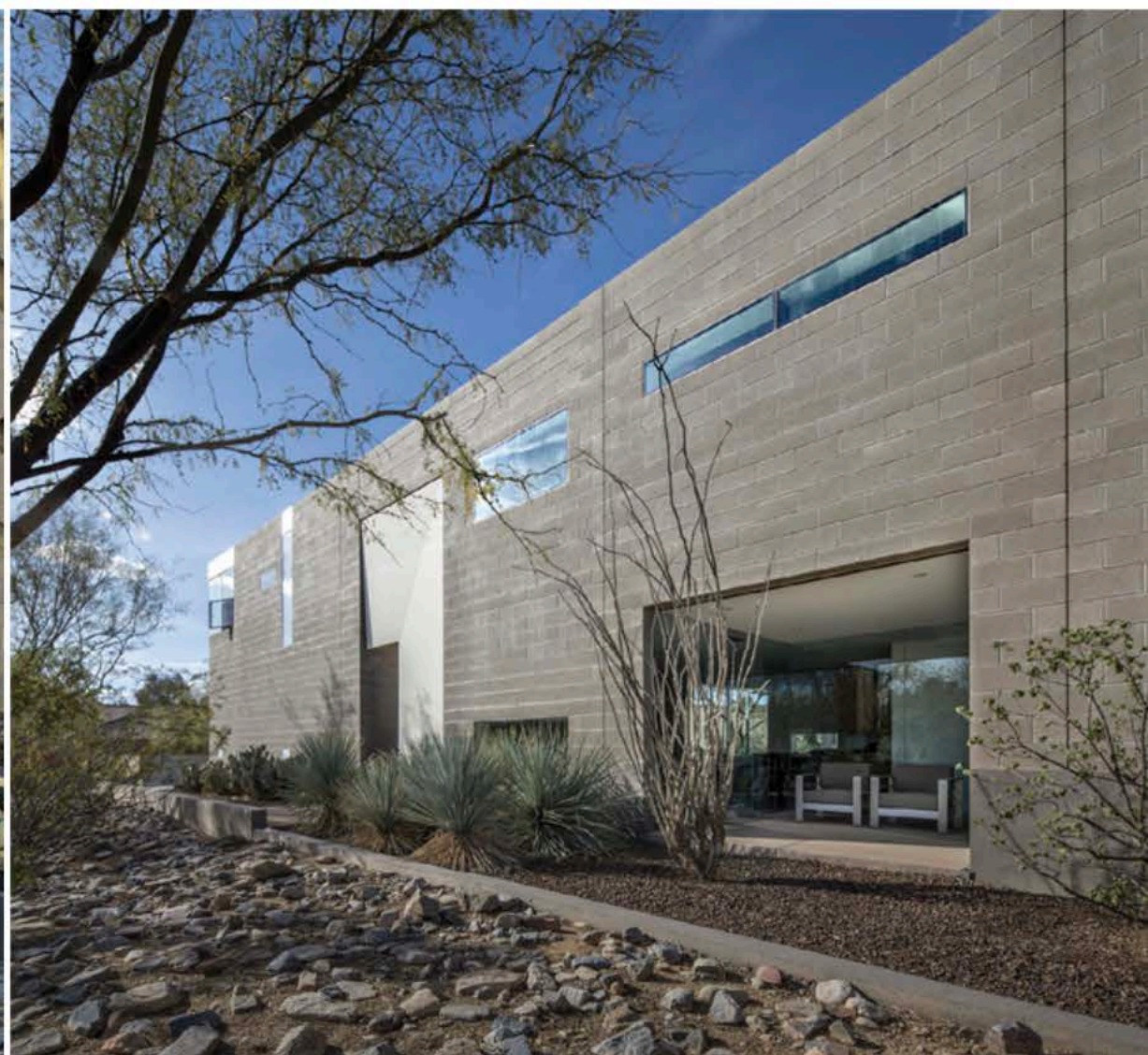
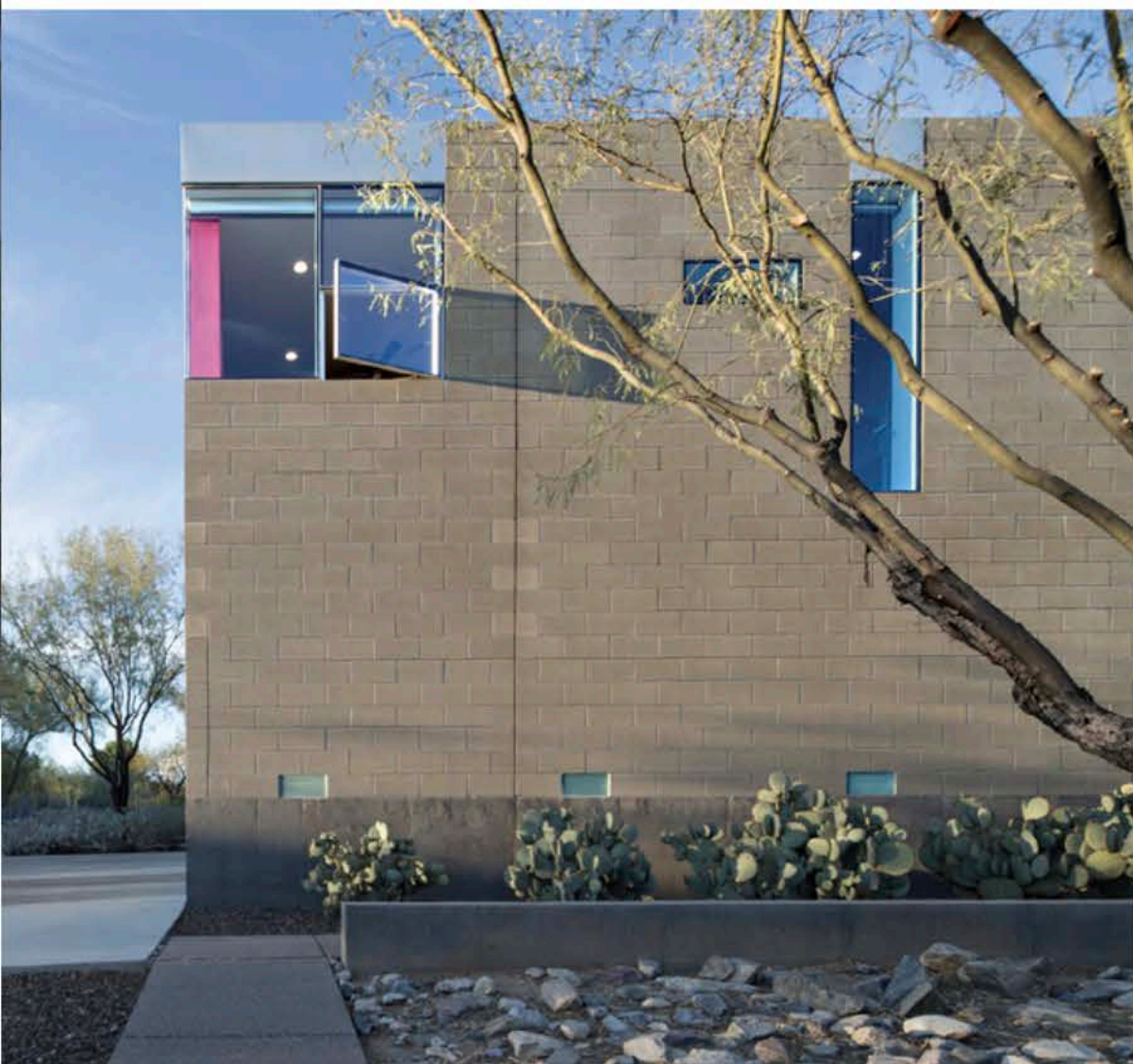
Back at his drawing board, the architect could not stop thinking about the rocky arrangement. “I took one of the boulders and, in my mind’s hand, I pressed it like a lump of plasticine, and it became a wall,” he explains. “I placed the wall on the west side, because I wanted maximum shade to the east. That’s where the homeowners were going to thrive—in the shadow of this boulder.”

While the completed residence—a modernist masterpiece of concrete, block and glass—could never be mistaken for a craggy landscape element, Upadhye’s meticulous attention to its siting and its relationship with the sun, mountains and surrounding flora fostered an intensely personal connection between the structure and the Sonoran Desert—as well as the young family that resides within it.

Originally, the owners wanted a single-story ranch-style abode, as their 1.25-acre lot could support the expansive footprint. “After we met with Amit, we gave him some liberty to show us how he would interpret our requirements,” says the wife. “We were surprised with the two-story design. But I still remember touring the home while it was being built and seeing for the first time the wonderful views from the second floor of the McDowell Mountains looking north and, on a clear day, Camelback and Black mountains to the south.”

On first approach, the south-facing front elevation appears spartan, almost industrial. But closer inspection reveals intentional details that bring personality to the straight lines and raw gray

BOTTOM The view from a seating area beyond the pool focuses on the architecture. "It was a conscious move," Upadhye says. "When the homeowners are sitting here, I want them to be able to admire the house and watch their kids in the swimming pool." A large metal scupper creates a waterfall effect under which the children can play.



TOP LEFT From the arrival court, the eye is drawn to a magenta wall that peeks through a second-story window. The color echoes that of strawberry hedgehog cacti in the yard. **TOP RIGHT** Upadhye was inspired by his mother's home in India, which featured a large entry gate with a smaller inset door. Fabric panels angle inward, drawing guests to the tucked-away glass front door. To the right, the architect added a covered patio that is surrounded on the interior by floor-to-ceiling glass walls.

ARCHITECTURE

block. On the southwest corner near the arrival court, the main building materials—concrete and block—converge, drawing the eye upward to a window above the garage, where a sliver of magenta peeks out through the glass. “The color comes from the strawberry hedgehog cacti that are in the yard, while its straight lines match that of the ocotillos,” Upadhye notes. “It’s an abstract idea about welcoming somebody. The architecture is trying to talk to you.”

A sequence of luminarias—frosted glass windows embedded into the block at body level—guides guests to the towering front entrance. Influenced by medieval fort gates in India, its beveled scrim surround acts as corbels that recess inward and lead to the glass front door. Low ceilings in the foyer and a small seating area give way to 20-foot-tall open kitchen and a wall of windows that looks out to the mountains beyond, an homage to Frank Lloyd Wright’s compression-and-release design principle.

The centerpiece of the home is the kitchen. Taking his cue from the stalactites and stalagmites of Kartchner Caverns in Benson, Upadhye designed a bank of custom cabinetry that connects the first and second floor and houses not only tableware and cooking supplies but also hides ductwork before converting into linen

storage and a balcony railing above. Crafted from rich quartersawn walnut, it softens the otherwise austere finishes. “The kitchen is the heart of the American home, and the heart is always warm,” Upadhye says.

Cutting through the center of the house is an 8-inch wide continuous skylight, which seamlessly girdles the width of the structure and serves as a threshold, using the sun to divide the



ABOVE Upstairs, the kitchen cabinets transform into linen storage and a balcony railing. At the far end of the hallway is the master suite. The small opening on the wall to the left of the room’s entrance is the “anniversary window.” On the morning of the homeowners’ anniversary, the rising sun casts a beam of light through the house.

LEFT A bank of walnut cabinets rises from the kitchen up to the second floor, offering plenty of storage space while hiding ductwork. A wall of windows opens up the center of the house to the mountain views beyond.

public to the west and private areas to the east, and casting rays on the custom bamboo stairs with lap joinery that lead to the second floor.

But the most personalized details aren't so obvious. Outside, on that western wall that birthed the entire composition, is a square notch that is easy to overlook. Upadhye recalls hearing the sun tell him that the wall would block the Valley's breathtaking sunsets, so he decided to include an indentation through which the setting

sun could be viewed. He notes, "Then I thought, 'Why stop there?'" He asked the homeowners for a list of important days and, with the help of then-architecture and astronomy student Trevor Pentecost, determined the exact point where the sun would set on the couple's wedding anniversary and centered the notch on that moment. To complement the exterior feature, he added a small window inside the master suite, through which the sun's morning rays would shine on the same day. And, in an unexpected surprise, another

bedroom window aligns perfectly with the rising sun during the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, casting a brilliant beam of light 100 feet down the second-floor hallway.

In the master bath, which is located in the home's southeast corner, a tall vertical corner slot window balances the one seen above the garage. "During certain times of the year, it is illuminated with the morning sunrise in a spectrum of pink, purple and orange hues," the wife remarks. On the northeast corner is the master bedroom's private balcony. To protect the space from the summer heat, Upadhye enclosed it with a pair of curtains that diffuses the corner of the cube. "They add a sensuousness and contrast with the ruthless building materials," he explains.

"Someone once asked Van Gogh why the trees are so tall in his 'Starry Nights' painting," the architect continues. "His response was that he didn't paint the trees but instead their desire to touch the sky and the stars. I thought, 'What if the desire of this house is to hug the mountains?' This is a poetic way of expressing that. When the curtains billow in the wind, it's actually the home's longing to go and meet the mountains. And that's what I bring into my designs—translating human emotions into the architectural expression."

For more information, see Sources.

To protect an intimate balcony off the master suite from intense sunlight, Upadhye installed curtains that add softness to the concrete and masonry.

