

{ writer Karen Werner }

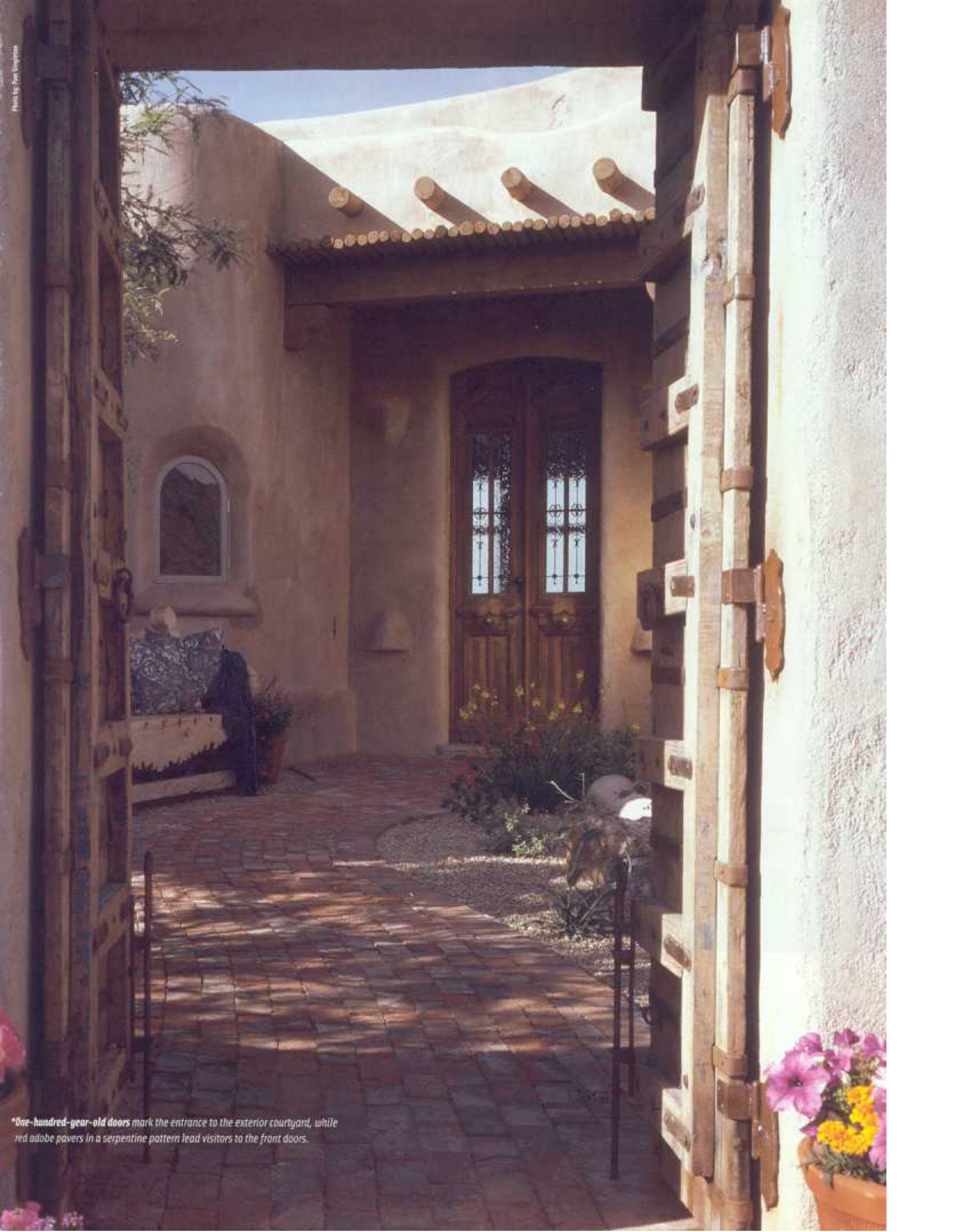
Sanctuary

in Scottsdale

OSO AUTHENTIC - Barry and Christy Smith, the husband/wife team behind Casas del Oso Luxury Homes, love the mystery and romance of old houses and the stories they have to tell. This passion for life over time propels them to build dreams—thoughtful, inspired homes that feed their clients' imaginations.

Some couples play bridge, others enjoy golf. Throughout 25 years of marriage, Barry and Christy Smith have been bonded by their shared love of architecture. They vacation to look at old buildings and choose restaurants that are architecturally appetizing. "It's like Disneyland to us," says Christy. "It's just what we love to do."

They started working together in 1980, as framing contractors for commercial and high-end residential projects. In their time off, they designed and built their own homes. And they noticed something interesting. Every time they decided to sell one, it would go before they put up the sign. Word would get out, and buyers would somehow appear. So in 1990, despite a flagging economy, they decided to try an experiment. They built a custom home on spec, and it sold by the drywall phase.



**One-hundred-year-old doors mark the entrance to the exterior courtyard, while red adobe pavers in a serpentine pattern lead visitors to the front doors.*



A few more forays led to similar results, and Casas del Oso was born. The luxury homes produced by this design/build firm bear the Smiths' imprimatur at every turn. In fact, this couple is so passionate about architecture they will only build the homes they are particularly passionate about—namely, Mexican and Spanish colonials, and abodes in the territorial and Santa Fe styles. “That

decision has really paid off for us,” says Christy, “because we’ve gotten to be experts at those styles.”

Their expertise stems from Barry's preternatural visual and mechanical skills. Growing up, he struggled in school but aced classes like wood shop and drafting. “They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but it's more like a million for me,” he says. “I see things



**above: The home's circa 1830 entrance doors represent synchronicity at its best. They arrived with their original locks in tact—something of a rarity—but didn't have a key. "I had given Barry a ring full of old keys one Father's Day and one of them actually worked!" says Christy, still amazed by the coincidence.*

**left: The front entrance of this Santa Fe style home celebrates classic adobe design with Pueblo-style vigas and deeply recessed windows.*

that aren't in pictures, like the logic of why a building looks the way it does. Most people see a front door and seven windows. I see what's behind that door."

He employs this intuition to help his clients build romantic, intimate homes, such as a classic Santa Fe for a couple that had become enamored with the style after spending a considerable amount of time in New Mexico. "Staying there was really

the seed of their thoughts," says Barry. "They'd collected books and pictures and traveled through the cosmic center of the style." They longed for thick walls, deeply recessed windows and lots of heavy beams. They also wanted to exploit their lot's magnificent views of Pinnacle Peak. But beyond that, it was up to Casas del Oso to deliver Santa Fe to Scottsdale.

To do this, Barry got to the roots of the

style. "Santa Fe architecture grew out of one family owning a small structure, then another family owning and adding onto it later in time," he says. Because the original building materials might not have been available, these homes have a certain eclectic appeal. Walkways meander. Window sizes vary. Doors and handrails came from different catalogs at different points in time. "Before I put pencil to paper, I had



**left: The music room boasts acoustically enhancing soft corners and beams. A pair of antique doors from Santa Fe was also central to the design. "If we have antique elements before we start framing," Christy says, "we'll plan the house around them."*

**bottom left: An antique window grill separates the foyer from the dining room. Below it sits J.C. Dye's statue, "Waitin' for Dad." A life-size version of the same piece was also placed in the courtyard by crane. The owner had it trucked down from Montana and plans to give the statues to his two sons.*

**right: Great care was taken to give the massive vigas in the great room the dark patina of age. "Even though they are new and pine, we didn't want them to look like closet rods," Christy says. In this room, as elsewhere in the structure, step-downs allowed the house to adhere to strict height requirements.*



a pretty good understanding of what I wanted the house to look like," Barry says. "But then a lot of tiny gems came to mind and I start incorporating them."

"Barry did little things along the way that were so charming," the homeowner says. He did cutouts in the walls and kept his eyes peeled for grace notes that would make the design ring true. "We're in love with it all," the homeowner says. "It's exactly what we anticipated down to the detail. Actually, it's even better."

Casas del Oso clients prize this sort of fluidity and the ability to carry requests through to the end. "It's one of the reasons we got into design/build," Christy says. "We design what we know will function, and we understand everything that we design. It allows us to deliver a better project."

Because Barry and Christy build in several styles, it can be tough to identify their work from the street. Behind the

front door, though, it's another story. Rooms are intimately scaled, and eagle-eyed attention to detail abounds. In one courtyard, a rope strung to a bell was deemed "too new." Stained in tea, however, it became era appropriate. "We're very concerned with every element," says Christy. "We want you to visit a house for the tenth time and say, 'Wow. I never noticed that before.'"

One project that continually elicits surprise is the headquarters of the Scottsdale interior design firm, Casa del Encanto. Its owners, Michael Barron and Luis Corona, wanted a Mexican hacienda with an air of antiquity, even though they'd be building it from scratch. They approached Barry and Christy with a sketch of a mansion in Guadalajara, and asked if they'd be interested in rendering it here. "They understood that we got it in all respects," Barry says. "So we were the builder they picked."







**right: When it comes to Cantera, too much is never enough for the Scottsdale interior design firm Casa del Encanto. Because the company imports the stone, Barry incorporated it in the crown molding, columns, finials and fountain at the front of the store.*

**left: A double-grained arch leads to a soaring painted ceiling at Casa del Encanto. The enormous room is broken into several areas that showcase the best of the company's wares.*

Barry and Christy watched over siting and structural elements, took the project through permitting and essentially created a building that Barron and Corona could decorate. "We as a company understand Mexican colonial architecture," says Barry. "We understand the logic, the proportions and how to put it all together."

In the years since it opened, the building has snagged two ASID design awards and become a Scottsdale landmark. From its hand-painted ceiling to its intricate stone floors, the building is the ultimate calling card for the firm. "Michael and Luis do a lot of Cantera, and it was an opportunity for them to showcase what they do," says Christy. They provided the inviting courtyard with stone angels and santos, fine furniture and florals, and eye-catching silver accessories.

"They were looking for authenticity and were confident they would get it from us," Barry says. It's something that Casas del Oso is known for. For instance, Barry and Christy refuse to use Phillips-head screws, choosing only to use straight slot. They employ an integrally colored stucco system that renders the look of adobe. And they choose real materials over faux every time. Wood, stone, iron, glass—Barry says, "If it's not real, we don't use it." In fact, Casas del Oso projects look so authentic, it's not uncommon for tradesmen to pass their job site, mistaking the new construction for a fine old home.

"We do what is right for the project,



and sometimes that costs us money," Barry says. "It's not uncommon for us to spend four or five thousand dollars out of our own pocket tearing things down and putting them back up just because we feel it's not authentic."

The homeowner ensconced in his Santa Fe-style home has a theory about this all. He says that Barry and Christy care so much about the houses they build, it breaks their hearts to turn them over to their clients. That suits him just fine. "Casas del Oso doesn't take everybody, and my feeling is that if you're lucky enough to get them, then you are lucky indeed," he says. "When I talk to friends about my building experience, they can't believe how I feel. Except for a friend who I referred to Casas del Oso. He feels exactly the same way." ✨