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GEMMA ARTERTON *Fancy That*
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Where the Wild Things Are

Personal passions come to life in an unconventional home that blends African tribal treasures with the homegrown

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Constructed of corrugated Cor-Ten steel, the house echoes the form and feeling of an industrial shed. A giant sliding-glass wall opens the living room to the pool.

The main level of the house has a loft-like sweep of kitchen, dining and living spaces. Opposite, a row of African chairs maintains the boundary between the interior and side garden.



A giant bison head presides over the master bedroom in the West L.A. home of Ernie and Diane Wolfe. The floor is covered in wall-to-wall zebra-pattern carpet. A painting above the bed by Kenyan artist Joseph Bertiers depicts Linda Tripp, rendered as a pig, spying on Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky locked in a tender embrace. The picture is inscribed, "It's Nobody's Business but Ours."

That sentiment could be applied to the Wolfes' wonderfully eccentric house—and to the idiosyncratic couple themselves. Ernie Wolfe III has an eponymous gallery of traditional and contemporary African art on Sawtelle Boulevard. His sartorial statements tend toward shorts and anything in camouflage—regardless of whether the occasion calls for casual attire or black tie. An avid hunter and adventurer,

he felled the great beast whose head graces the bedroom and whose flesh fills the freezer.

Diane Steinmetz Wolfe also affects the trappings of Artemis—her closet is chockablock with the animal prints that constitute her signature style—but she prefers to eschew the hunt itself. "I don't even like killing ants that come in the house. If I could redirect them, I would," she says.

The family—including sons Ernest, 19, and Russell, 16—lived above the gallery for years before Ernie and Diane acquired a nearby parcel to build a new home. Ernie's original point of reference was a prefabricated Quonset hut—an all-purpose, lightweight, semi-cylindrical metal structure developed for the military. "I nurtured that particular fantasy for a long time," he says, "but Diane wasn't so enthusiastic."

To transform their vision of domestic bliss into three-dimensional reality, they enlisted the help of their friend Steven Ehrlich, an architect renowned for the elegant modern houses—as expansive as they are expensive—that turn up regularly in the pages of *Architectural Digest* and other glossy venues. This particular project is not your typical *Digest* fare.

Ehrlich's design practice is more diverse than shelter-magazine junkies might imagine, as the title of his recent monograph, *Multicultural Modernism*, suggests. As a young man, he spent three years volunteering in the Peace Corps in Marrakech before traveling through Sub-Saharan Africa and teaching architecture at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria.

"I learned the value of sustainability from indigenous

African architecture," Ehrlich says. "It's still part of my design philosophy. People talk about indoor-outdoor architecture as a California phenomenon, but it's also distinctly African. My time there taught me the profound wisdom of architecture without architects."

Working with the Wolfes, Ehrlich devised a scheme that distills the form of an archetypal industrial shed, rendered here in rusted corrugated Cor-Ten steel, with subtle nods to West African vernacular design. On one side, the gabled roof becomes a gambrel that defines the entry progression. Massive sliding glass walls disappear into pockets, effectively erasing any boundaries between the interior, backyard and side garden on the main level.

"This is not some frozen vision of Africa but something that is genuinely fresh and

The cultural confluence that animates the home is seen in the mix of Robert Graham sculptures, Akan figures and (opposite) an Ed Moses painting with Ngere masks and a Gurunsi stargazer.





The guest bath features African barbershop signs and Baba Wagué Diakité's custom tiles. Opposite: Hunter and hunted converge in his-and-hers closets.



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energetic. It’s like giving a traditional African musician an electric guitar. Ernie and Diane appreciate the beauty in the funky,” Ehrlich says.

“We always envisioned the house as a big box with an open kitchen and a lot of space, but we never imagined that one whole end of the house would be glass,” Ernie says with a smile. “I sit here paralyzed on the sofa watching the bougainvillea and the bamboo. It’s like an ever-changing painting. I blame Steven for that.”

Diane ticks off a list of natural wonders that converge in the backyard garden—tiger swallowtail butterflies, alligator lizards, parrots, raccoons, avocado trees, jacarandas and date palms. “We have a view from the bedroom balcony of towers rising above the trees in the distance. It connects us to the city,” she says.

As one might expect, the house holds a dazzling array of treasures, everything from museum-quality tribal objects to barbershop signs to hand-painted movie posters from Ghana that put a playful—some might say twisted—African spin on contemporary American cinema. (Ernie used a rich assortment of these posters in his book *Extreme Canvas*. A second edition is due later this fall.) Mali-born artist Baba Wagué Diakité created custom tiles for the kitchen and bathrooms using barbershop, animal and sea-creature images.

Like the house itself, the art collection is grounded in both California and Africa. Paintings by Ed Moses, a longtime friend, appear in every room, along with works by Charles Arnoldi, Richard Diebenkorn, Laddie John Dill, Ken Price, David Bungay and Nathan Oliveira.

Moses also stamped images of tarantulas—a signature motif—into the polished-concrete floor.

“We have 13-foot ceilings, just like the gallery—the same lighting system, too,” Ernie says. “When you’ve had a gallery as long as we have, you get a lot of practice doing installations.”

A side garden has the feeling of an African walled compound. Boulders imported in shipping containers from Ghana sit alongside quirky sculptures and animal skulls. Bamboo will eventually obscure the neighboring house, which was designed by Barton Myers.

“I love the primal nature of the structure. That spirit carries through to the garden, the art and even the way the Wolfes live,” says Ehrlich. “I want people to express their personality in the houses we build. Ernie and Diane definitely have a lot of personality.” ♦