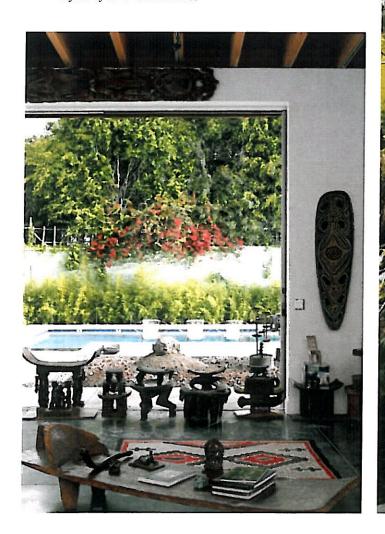


## Where the Wild Things Are

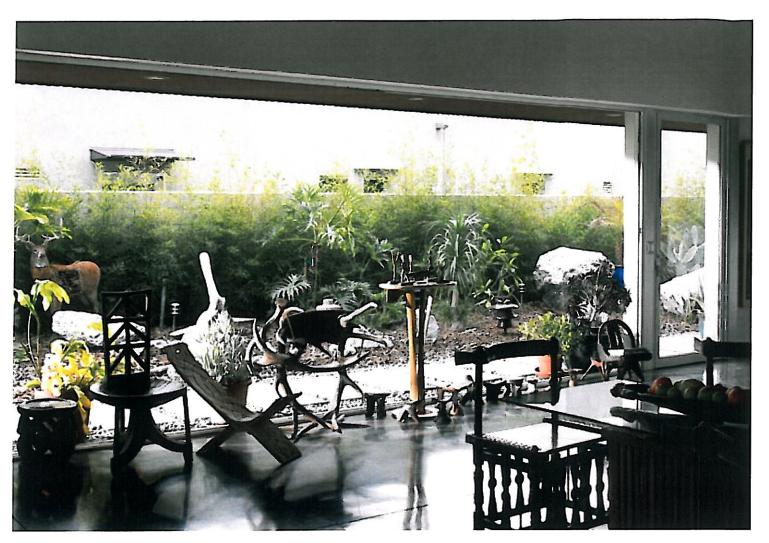
Personal passions come to life in an unconventional home that blends African tribal treasures with the homegrown

by MAYER RUS
photographs by WILLIAM ABRANOWICZ
styled by PETER FRANK









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 sheltermagazine 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

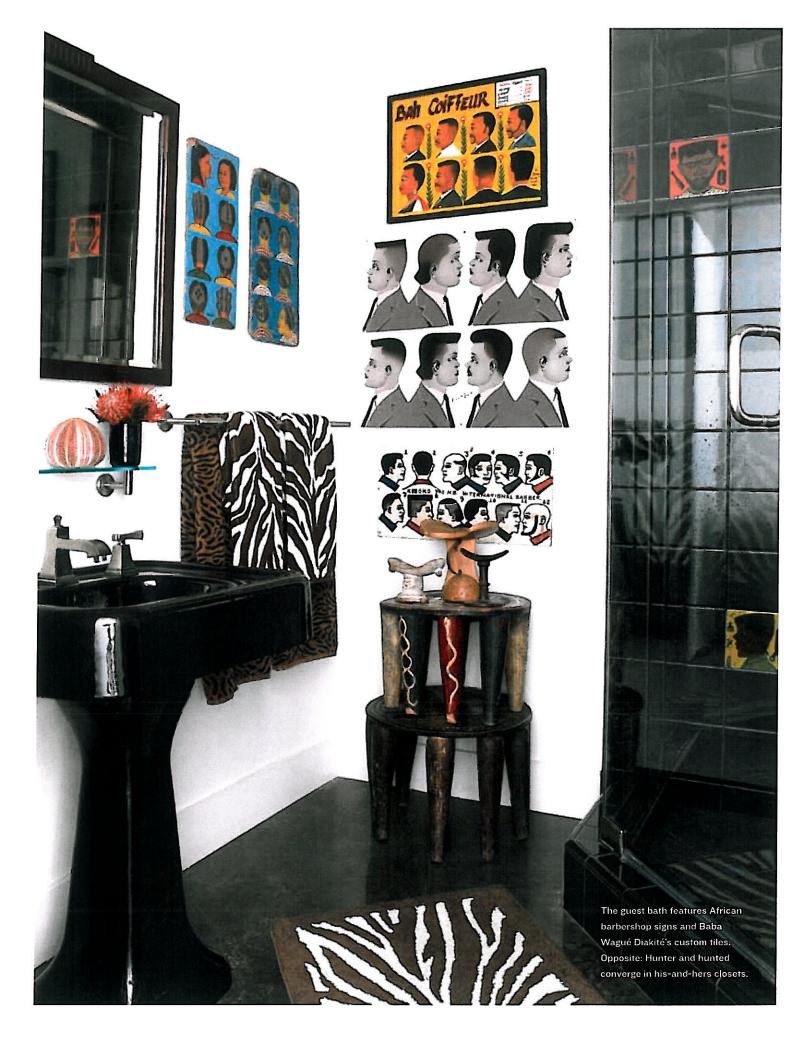
African architecture," Ehrlich says. "It's still part of my design philosophy. People talk about indoor-outdoor architecture as a California phenomenon, but it's also distinctly African. My time there taught me the profound wisdom of architecture without architects."

Working with the Wolfes, Ehrlich devised a scheme that distills the form of an archetypal industrial shed, rendered here in rusted corrugated CorTen 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









"People talk of indooroutdoor architecture as a California phenomenon, but it's distinctly African. My time there taught me the wisdom of architecture without architects."

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.



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

Like the house itself, the art

collection is grounded in both

California and Africa. Paintings

by Ed Moses, a longtime friend,

with works by Charles Arnoldi,

appear in every room, along

Richard Diebenkorn, Laddie

Bungay and Nathan Oliveira.

John Dill, Ken Price, David

sea-creature images.

tarantulas-a signature motifinto 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." \*