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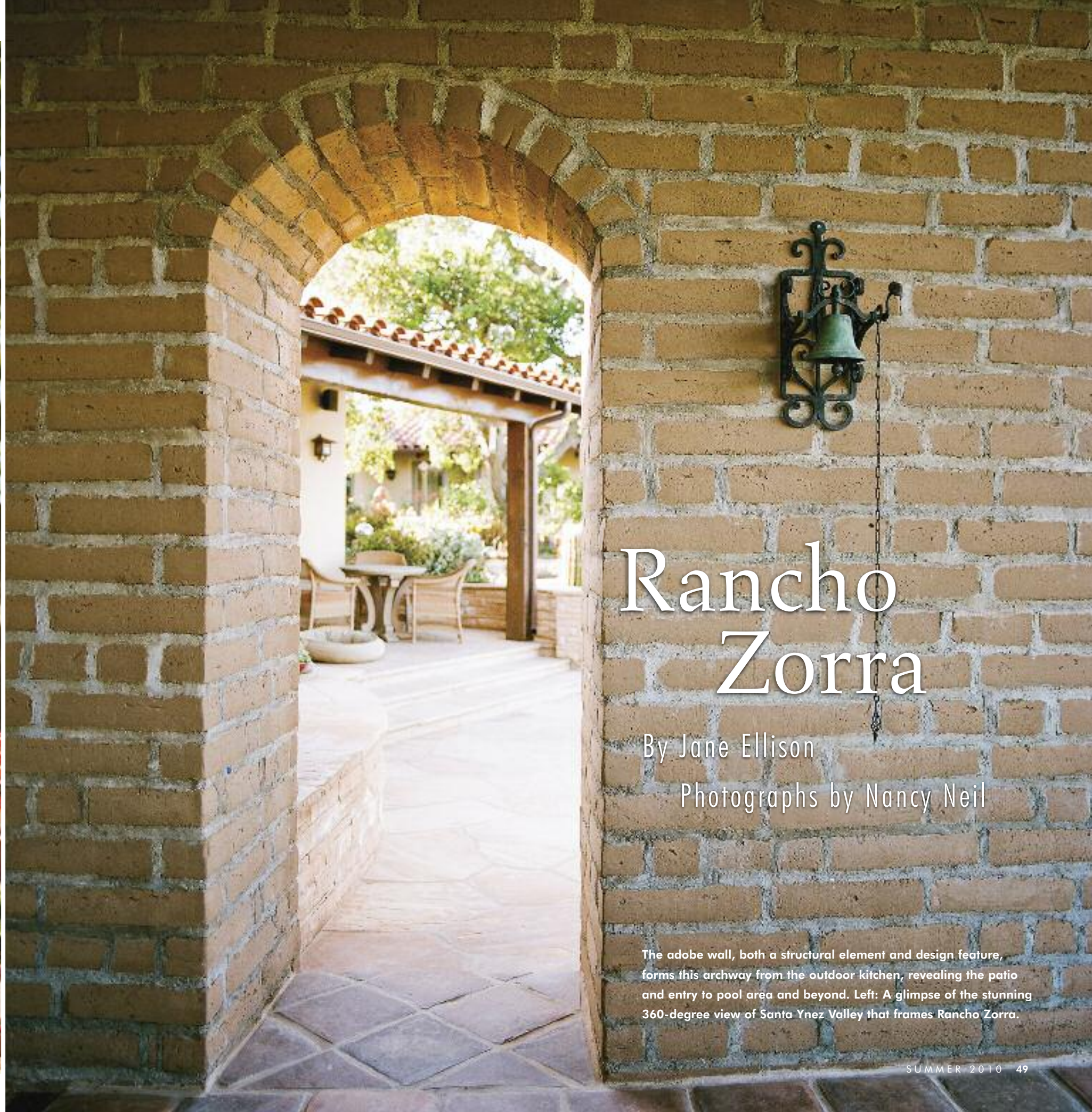
RANCHO ZORRA

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# Rancho Zorra

By Jane Ellison

Photographs by Nancy Neil

The adobe wall, both a structural element and design feature, forms this archway from the outdoor kitchen, revealing the patio and entry to pool area and beyond. Left: A glimpse of the stunning 360-degree view of Santa Ynez Valley that frames Rancho Zorra.



**Above: Rancho Zorra's entrance provides exterior clues to its interior design: clerestory windows that illuminate the entranceway; a screened porch to the right for enjoying evening sunsets and the adobe wall that dramatically projects above the roofline.**

**a**RRIVING AT SUSAN JORGENSEN'S and Alice Gillaroo's home, Rancho Zorra, is truly an event. Yes, it includes a long, winding road, but the 360-degree view of Santa Ynez Valley that greets you at the top announces this as more than just another hilltop home—it's an experience you will long remember.

"At my first meeting with Susan and Alice, I asked them how they imagined their home might respond to such a spectacular property," architect Tom Ochsner explains. "But instead of telling me how they envisioned it, they asked me to return with ideas for a design that would respect the site's topography and existing native oaks.

"Often, when this is asked of an architect," he continues, "the concept presented is altered significantly by the clients. But Susan and Alice were enthusiastic and embraced my design concepts." He smiles, still a little surprised by his good fortune.

"It was a meeting of the minds," Jorgensen recalls. "We all understood the need to respect this beautiful spot. Being available onsite nearly every day during construction made the entire process a great experience for me."

It is clear that their combined vision resulted in a home that is one with its surroundings, beginning with the three-foot-wide interior adobe wall—quite literally the backbone of the home—that traces the site's ridgeline.

Because adobe absorbs light, clerestory windows and skylights were introduced to allow filtered light to reach the interior entryway and provide illumination of the wall. Along with being the major structural element of the home, the wall also cools the home in summer and warms it in winter—a result of its passive solar qualities. In the first of many surprises offered at Rancho Zorra, an opening in the wall at this entry frames a view of distant mountain ridges to the east.



**Clockwise from below: The entryway follows the curvilinear adobe wall and a series of built-in niches serves as exhibit space for a selection of work from the owners' art collection. The screened porch is enhanced by a display of numerous treasures Susan has collected during trips to Africa. Left: Susan welcomes guests in the family room, a dramatic space that serves as the hub of their household.**



Rooms are arranged on either side of the wall and step down, following the grade of the property. This arrangement allows some to bask in early morning light, while others face the valley's legendary sunsets. Structural beams radiate from the adobe wall, adding even more drama to each room. The combination of natural materials serves to reinforce the synergy between the building and land.

"Circulation was the key to making the floor plan work," Ochsner points out. The family room is accessible to all major rooms, while others are connected by what feels to the visitor like a path leading from one to the next. The path ultimately reaches a gallery exhibiting Susan's photographs and works by other artists that she has collected over time. The gallery's gentle curve appears to be in a conversation with the gallery garden just beyond.

Two magnificent oaks—among many on the property—dictated the form of the home and garden walls and proved inspirational for landscape designer Dan Horgan. Using architectural drawings and the site's topography, he developed a plan that responds not only to the curvilinear forms of the home, but also to the surrounding valley and mountains beyond.

A palette of sage, rosemary, lavender, rock rose and a variety of aloes was selected. "These are plants I've worked with over many years and they were perfect for this site. They need little water and will survive heat, frost, winds, deer and squirrels," Horgan says.

The result is a deft combination of grays, blue-greens and lavenders above which bob salmon-colored blooms spouting from the aloes. "I use aloes for the subtle combination of color and form they provide," he adds.

Spending time with Susan, walking the site, provided the starting point, "It's a relationship-builder," Horgan notes. "I had worked with Susan for some time at her previous home in Mission Canyon, so we already had a history together."

Horgan's environmental art—rock and stone sculptures—is scattered throughout the landscape. "I often search for beach stones in different locations, depending upon my design. Each location offers rocks with unique characteristics that I might be looking for. As evidence, he points out the "dragon's spine," a garden detail that rises above the land and is made of small, round, flat beach stones.



**Opposite right: Swimming in this pool offers the added enjoyment of a stunning view all the way to Sedgwick Reserve. Above: The living room faces towards a mountain view and serves as both a library and a showcase for Susan's photographs of Africa.**

Below: Susan and landscape designer Dan Horgan have conferred on gardens for many years, sharing a love of design that responds to natural surroundings. The “serpent” echoes the curvilinear elements of the home and garden and was created of hand-cut slate and boulders. Right: Aloes, lavender, rosemary and sage line one of the many paths that lead through the garden.



“For Carmella’s cairn (constructed to honor an adored pet), I was looking for rocks with a slight curvature to them because the design narrowed from bottom to top. It’s capped by slate, which proved to be the perfect choice for highlighting the irregular inside edge,” he explains.

The “serpent” was another matter.” This long, winding form follows and at one point, crosses the trail to Susan’s studio. “It took five years to complete and is made of hand-cut slate and large boulders. This piece could not have been completed without stonemason Jose Huerta, who is someone I’ve worked with so long that his work fits my vision. I always know that when I return, it will be just as I imagined it.”

Huerta also implemented Horgan’s larger design by building the pathways that wind through the gardens, leading visitors from one experience to another—a bench placed beneath a large oak overlooking the valley, a *Dia de los Muertos* altar or one of several cairns placed throughout the garden in honor of pets now gone. Literally tons of stone were delivered to the site before the home was constructed, much of it used for the beautiful, mortar-free paths.

To the east, the gallery garden is planted with numerous aloes that surround another of the original oaks on site. It overlooks the koi pond, swimming pool, valley and Sedgwick Reserve in the distance. It isn’t difficult to imagine what it must be like to enjoy a warm summer evening here while marveling at the Milky Way.

Although Rancho Zorra’s design is unconventional, it conveys great warmth and charm—a testament to its owners’ unique perspectives and the exceptional relationship they forged with the professionals whose skills brought it to life. ✨

*Jane Ellison’s professional background in urban planning and with architectural firms informs her writing. She is former editor in chief of Santa Barbara Seasons and a frequent contributor.*



Viewing architect Tom Ochsner’s floor plan of Rancho Zorra, the way in which the rancho responds to its site becomes clear. The adobe wall, following the ridgeline, is the organizing element bringing together the major rooms.

## Resources

### Architect

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### Landscape Design

Dan Horgan, Landscape Design,  
Environmental Artist  
805/698-7797

### Interior Design

Christopher Teasley Interior Design  
1201 De la Vina Street  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101  
805/969-4005  
www.ctinteriordesign.com

### Stone Mason

José Huerta with German Sanchez,  
P.O. Box 1164, Carpinteria CA 93014;  
805/689-3070.