

SANTA FE STYLE WAS HOT IN THE MID-'80S, THEN ABANDONED. BUT AN ATASCADERO COUPLE FOUND A MODIFIED SOUTHWESTERN LOOK PERFECT FOR THEIR STRAW-BALE HOME
Written by Rebecca Juretic

BJ and Turko Semmes believe that Southwest design has gotten a bad rap. "When people hear 'Southwest,' they think about pale colors and R.C. Gorman prints on the walls," said BJ, who, along with husband, Turko, owns Semmes & Company Builders, an Atascadero company that constructs custom homes with an emphasis on sustainability.

As the couple built their Atascadero home in 2000, they found inspiration in houses they'd seen on trips to Santa Fe. The home's thick walls, rounded corners and flat roof are borrowed from the adobe pueblos of the Southwest.

Color is an unexpected surprise in the Semmes home. You won't find the white walls or turquoise and pink color palette that characterized the 1980s interpretation of Southwest decor. "To me the colors of the desert aren't light. They're really deep, rich and earthy," said BJ.

The style of the home is well-suited to another purpose: the thick walls typical of Southwest architecture are ideal for energy-efficient straw bale construction. This feature helps the family stay comfortable despite North County temperature extremes. "It never gets over 72 degrees, and we don't have air conditioning," said BJ.

The home's massive walls offer more than just insulation. Every deep-set window is a cozy nook in which to sit and view the wildlife that roams on the Semmes' rural property. In addition, they have carved roomy niches into several walls to allow for the display of treasured art and accessories. "The walls have depth," said Turko. "They're something you can walk into, instead of something very one-dimensional. That feels very comforting to me."

ACHIEVING THE SANTA FE STYLE:

* The Semmeses captured the colors of the desert with deep golds, browns, and rusts. Their wall colors include Pratt and Lambert #2082 Buccaneer Pirate and #2089 Golden Tan

* Their floors are stained concrete, giving them the appearance of old leather. They also keep the home cool in the summer. The Semmes used a patina stain by QC Construction Products in a color called "Adobe," a dark, reddish brown. After staining, they finished the floor with three coats of a water-based sealer and a top coat of wax

* Ethnic accessories work well with Southwestern decor. The Semmeses have collected pieces from Santa Fe and Mexico, including hand-carved wood furniture and pottery. They have also successfully incorporated other ethnic pieces, such as an Oushak rug from Turkey.

* Even though Santa Fe style lends itself to some eclecticism, clean-lined contemporary furniture just won't work with its thick, chunky, curvaceous architecture. It's best to stick with furniture that is equally substantial. Think soft, squishy upholstery and chunky, rustic wood pieces.