

WALL HOUSE

A FAMILY IDYLL IN OJAI DESIGNED
BY NOTED ARCHITECT SCOTT JOHNSON

By LESLIE A. WESTBROOK

The 5,000-square-foot house sits on a 12-acre low-lying meadow surrounded on two sides by creeks that stream from the Los Padres National Forest into the nearby Ventura River. Entered through a private gate and a bridge over the creeks, the secluded property is surrounded by some 200 native oaks. Photo by Michael Montano.



It's a far cry from the bustle of downtown Los Angeles to the quietude of the Ojai Valley. But for one powerhouse couple, renowned architect and artist Scott Johnson and his wife, gynecologist Dr. Margaret Bates, the pandemic contributed to a seismic lifestyle shift. Their main residence is in the Arts District in downtown LA, close to Johnson's architectural firm (Johnson Fain) and Bates's medical practice at PIH Good Samaritan Hospital. Before the virus hit, the couple were spending many weekends, holidays, and special events, like the annual Ojai Music Festival, in the valley. But COVID-19 has them spending more time at Wall House, their stunning Ojai retreat that Johnson designed in 2014.

Bates and Johnson are more than their professions. And the pandemic's restrictions have created more chances to explore interests outside of their jobs. For Johnson, it's time in the studio to work on his mixed media art. For Bates it's her devotion to her garden and the fruit-bearing orchards.

"Since last March, we've been pretty fully ensconced in Ojai with weekly trips into LA to work in our offices for two to

three days," Johnson said. "Otherwise, I'm doing virtual meetings and Meg is on her iPad doing telemedicine with access to electronic medical records. Most of the cultural things we enjoy doing in Los Angeles are still closed or rescheduled — concerts, theater, dance classes, museums, and art openings."

Instead of dance, art openings, and theater, there are peaches and apricots to tend, as well as a dance studio with a barre for Bates, who takes ballet classes on Zoom. Proximity to a newly built art studio for the busy architect allows Johnson a place to explore other creative endeavors and still maintain virtual contact with his colleagues at Johnson Fain.

"I was always interested in art and making things, but sometime in high school I got it in my mind that buildings could be art and have impact," Johnson said. "So I went to college with an open major and spent my sophomore year in Italy, where all roads led to architecture."

The couple initially began their search in Ojai for a hillside property, but, after exhausting their options, discovered the off-market, 11-acre, completely private site.

It took one year to find the site, a year to design Wall House, and two years to build the main structure. The original house, consisting of four bedrooms and three and a half baths, was

completed in 2016. Three years ago, a building was added that included a guesthouse and dance studio. In 2019, they opened Wall House for the Ojai Music Festival's annual Holiday Home Tour to help support the festival. And this past November, the large "Artbarn" — Johnson's painting studio — completed the compound.

Mostly flat, surrounded by some hundred large oak trees and two creeks, the land provided a perfect setting for the impressive, horizontal structure.

"We enjoy the natural landscape so much, the oaks, the meadow grass, the big sky, and the view of the Topatopas, that we didn't want to obscure the distinction between the architecture and nature," Johnson said. "We've tried to respect the superiority of nature by containing and clarifying our own efforts. The idea of a super-long steel wall seemed ideal both to draw attention to the long north/south axis of the site, but also as a device to make the arrival side of the house completely private and the opposite living side of the house completely transparent and open to the landscape."

This is not Johnson's first design to house his family. Asked about the process, he replied, "It was beautiful. Peo-

ple always say, 'It must be so hard being your own client.' No, actually it's like skating on smooth ice. You can still have issues with the contractor, the subs, the building inspectors, but you know your program, you know what you want to get done, and you just go about figuring out how to best do that. In my case, I have a great family, not lacking any ability to say what they like and don't like, and we had done a number of houses together over the years."

MEG'S GARDEN

The garden is contained within a six-foot-tall wall with a potting shed. The wall, which is gated and planted with grapevines, was constructed to keep the deer, rabbits, and other wildlife without and protect the plants within. The farming is all organic: no pesticides or toxic substances. In some cases it's taken a season or two to experiment with plants such that beneficial insects are attracted and birds take care of the others.

"The garden perimeter comprises the herb garden, which is harvestable year-round," said Bates, the gardener in the family. "When the basil is plentiful and before it flowers, we make large containers of pesto, some of

The rear yard is paved in natural flagstones with a 25-meter pool, outdoor fireplace, and kitchen complete with wood-burning grill and pizza oven. Stone planters contain native plant species with a flower, herb, and produce garden adjacent to the kitchen. Photo by Tom Bonner, courtesy of Johnson Fain.



Sustainable elements of the house include the exterior wall assembly that has been designed as a rain-screen system to provide a high level of thermal insulation. The roof houses a large photovoltaic solar array as well as a rain collection system for gray water irrigation. In addition, select floors feature radiant cooling and heating. Photo by Tom Bonner.

Opposite: The expansive living area is column-free, with the ceiling hung between two massive board-formed concrete walls. The Douglas fir ceiling is open and naturally ventilated through an automated clerestory system that produces changing patterns of light on the interior. On one side of the living area, a depression in the floor defines the seating area around a hearth sheathed in silver travertine, while on the other side, a small rise in the floor creates a stage upon which sits a concert grand piano. Floors throughout the common areas of the house are polished concrete with steps lined in native flagstones. Photo by Tom Bonner.



which we use fresh and some of which goes in the freezer for later. Vegetables are harvested throughout the summer with the many varieties of tomatoes coming on in the latter half. The peaches come on early, depending on the heat. The apricots are ready usually about a month later, so there are pies and preserves and boxes for friends and family. When the summer ends, and the tomatoes are cleared away, it's time for planting winter lettuces and fava beans."

The peach and apricot orchards are elevated and surrounded by stone borders. One of the five stone planting beds is reserved for David Austin roses in different colors, all of which have beautiful soft blossoms and make for lovely bouquets throughout the summer and well into the end of the year.

Well known for the many skyscrapers he's designed, Johnson notes they're only a part of the Johnson Fain practice, which has some 60 employees. The firm recently completed La Plaza Village, a low-rise residential/retail community adjacent to the historic Pueblo in downtown LA; a Catholic cathedral in Orange County; and they're "wrapping up" the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City for the Native American tribes there. (If you were a fan of HBO's "Big Little Lies," you've seen Johnson's work in the form of the palatial home of Renata Klein, played by Laura Dern.)

And whom does he admire in his profession?

"I admire the GOOD architects!" laughed the award-winning, Harvard Graduate School of Design alum. "In Southern California I've admired the ones who tried to master sunlight and shade and the implications of outdoor liv-

ing," citing Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler, Raphael Soriano, and A. Quincy Jones. Internationally, he says his tastes vary with cultures, calling out Kengo Kuma in Japan, Álvaro Siza in Portugal, and Richard Rogers in the U.K.

And what's Johnson's favorite part of Wall House? Answer: The hub of activity — the kitchen.

"There are more serene parts of the house, however, the kitchen turns out to be the social engine of the place," Johnson said. "Someone starts to prepare food, someone goes out into the garden to get shallots, herbs, flowers, whatever, someone thinks it's time for a glass of wine while someone else takes charge of Spotify. Then we talk while dinner is made, the table is set and we sit down and enjoy more time together. The kitchen and dining room are one and the same with a large square table in the center."

Perhaps the jewel in the crown is the living room, designed to seat 120 guests, punctuated with a Steinway concert grand piano placed atop a small plinth for home recitals.

"At the time we bought the instrument, it was mostly for my daughter, Zoe, who is an opera singer and we wanted her to have great accompaniment," Johnson recalled. "As it happens, she's now married to Christopher Allen, the conductor and concert pianist, so we consider it one of our savvy investments."

Wall House seems to be an accumulation of the many homes Johnson has designed for his family, and the couple plans to stay put. Perhaps one silver lining of the pandemic has been their ability to bond even more than expected

with their Ojai weekend home.

"In the past, when the kids were small, they always referred to these unusual houses I made for us as 'Dad's House,'" Johnson said, recalling his "no feet on the table" dictates and questions from the couple's two children like "What's with the weird furniture?" — complaints that are no longer uttered.

"Both kids chose to be married on the site and my daughter's production company is called Shokat Projects, named for our street address," Johnson said. "I don't think they'll let us sell or move anytime soon."

Scott Johnson's art website www.scottjohnsonartworks.com. Instagram account is [#scottjohnsonartist](https://www.instagram.com/scottjohnsonartist)



Scott Johnson

Photo by Michael Montano