



Tree Huggers

Gaudi-esque flamboyance gets back to nature at the Ojai home of Marc and Julia Whitman.

BY LISA SNIDER
PHOTOS BY GASZTON GAL

Nestled into Ojai's backcountry near Lake Casitas is a hidden architectural gem that masterfully merges art and craftsmanship with nature to create a residence that is one with the surrounding oak-studded property.

The home was a 15-year labor of love that Marc and Julia Whitman began designing shortly after they were married in 1986. As an architecture student, Marc had traveled to Spain, where he visited Gaudi's most famous work, La Sagrada Família church; his style resonated with the Ojai native, whose designs, like Gaudi, are rooted in nature. He gravitates toward organic shapes and curves; Julia, who also grew up in rural Upper Ojai, refers to her husband's style as "intricate" and "sculptural."

Over the years, Marc has worked on many residential and commercial projects in the local area. "I love the whole magical aspect of taking ideas and then they become a physical reality," he says. But after so much time working to manifest his clients' artistic and creative expressions, Marc found himself asking, "What's my expression?"

Five years ago, that question was answered when Marc and Julia's dream home finally became a reality. Named for the property's singing frogs, "La Bana Casita" feels cozy and inviting, although it has grown to 4,000 square feet. Ceilings billow gracefully over gently curving arches that rise from columns resembling tree trunks. The oak tree that had grown behind the little cabin became the new home's centerpiece, and Marc went to great lengths to care

for an interior wall.

A heritage coastal live oak that grew behind the cabin, adjacent to Santa Ana Creek, inspired the home's design, as did the work of Spanish Gothic architect Antoni Gaudi. As an architecture student, Marc had traveled to Spain, where he visited Gaudi's most famous work, La Sagrada Família church; his style resonated with the Ojai native, whose designs, like Gaudi, are rooted in nature. He gravitates toward organic shapes and curves; Julia, who also grew up in rural Upper Ojai, refers to her husband's style as "intricate" and "sculptural."

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Left: Marc and Julia Whitman at home, surrounded by live oaks and redwoods. The house built in 1986 is a blend of stone and wood, with a Spanish oak floor, produced from a single 1931 cabin.

Above: Beyond the naturally flowing pond, an outdoor dining room and stone garden with a large fireplace and stone seating. A playful white cat of the neighborhood.



Clockwise from above: Broken tiles adorn an Art Nouveau-styled spiral staircase. The Gaudi-esque dining room, cantilevered over Santa Ana Creek, features curved ceiling arches. A clawfoot tub gives a nod to the home's rustic past (this was the attic loft of the original cabin). Corners are rounded, windows are arched; there are almost no angles at La Rana Canta.

for its roots by hand-pouring and hand-digging the concrete foundations. One of the home's five fireplaces is original, as is an exterior staircase and the front porch. "We wanted to keep as much of the original cabin intact as possible," says Marc.

From all angles, large windows gaze high into the tree. Ascending the stairs to the second and third floors makes you feel as if you're actually climbing into the tree itself. Marc's artistic handiwork is evident in the smallest details, including his own tile mosaic of the tree, given a prominent place in the third-floor bathroom.

In the master bedroom, a Gaudi-inspired balcony is made to give the impression of sitting amongst tree limbs while looking down into the flowing water of Santa Ana Creek, which usually runs year-round. Bird feeders are placed strategically and see a lot of activity. "Instead of watching TV in the morning, we watch the birds," says Julia.

With the Los Padres National Forest as their backyard, wildlife is abundant. Hawks, owls, coyotes, herons, bobcats, ringtail cats, and foxes are frequent visitors. Marc has even seen a mountain lion, and has had more than one run-in with a raccoon inside the house looking for food.

One would think that such a rural setting would yield silent evenings, but the rushing creek waters, singing frogs, and even an occasional snorting bear remind the couple they are not alone. "We're in the hub of the wildlife world," says Marc.

With an exterior that at first blush appears grand and whimsical, the interior, by contrast, is fluid and intimate. "It's a very livable house," says Julia, who set out after construction to choose the home's tasteful interior finishes.

The signature space and focal point is the outdoor living room on the ground floor. Its sensuous curves, ivory columns, giant fireplace, and overhead skylight are wrapped in gorgeous draperies, which are pulled aside to welcome guests. As the home's largest room, it becomes the perfect place for entertaining. Marc and Julia have strong ties to the community and often host fundraisers for their favorite charities, including the Ojai Education Foundation (which Julia's family helped found), the Ojai Film Festival, and the Ojai Music Festival.

Reflecting on the 15 years of dreaming, designing, and living in an unfinished construction project, Julia is proud of the home her husband built. "It turned out perfect," she says, adding, "Now that we have finally graduated into this, I can't quite imagine how we lived all those years the other way." ■

WHITMAN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN
111 W. Topa Street, Ojai
805.646.8485, Whitman-Architect.com