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this old
Santa Fe
house

Steve Thomas

remodels an eastside adobe

rammed earth

takes on the elements
in Taos

two households,
one goal:
sustainability





this old adobe

TV building expert Steve Thomas renovates a historic Santa Fe casita, keeping things simple, streamlined, and green

by Dianna Delling
Photographs by Douglas Merriam

There wasn't a cameraman in sight when, back in November 2011, Steve Thomas ripped the first piece of flooring out of his decades-old adobe in Santa Fe. As host of the PBS television series *This Old House* (1989 to 2003), Thomas had renovated more than two dozen buildings for others, but this one he was tackling for himself. Thomas was confident he could turn the run-down hilltop casita into a modern but still regionally authentic home—a place where he and his wife, Evy Blum, could escape the winters that routinely clobber their primary residence, an island cottage off the coast of Maine. Still, he never expected the project, which took about eight months to complete, would turn out to be one of the most satisfying of his career.

"This house, in many ways, is a masterwork," says Thomas, the once-crumbling adobe now a neat, polished, aspen-shaded home. "More than any other project I've done, this one is the perfect marriage of an architect at the top of his game and a builder at the top of his."

The architect he's praising is Stephen Samuelson of Plan A Architecture—one of the

Plan A Architecture can be reached at 505-820-1460 or planaarch.com.





Acting as his own builder and contractor, Steve Thomas (above), former host of *This Old House* and current spokesman for Habitat for Humanity International, remodeled an adobe casita on Santa Fe's eastside for himself and his wife, Evy Blum. To add space without extending the footprint, Thomas and architect Stephen Samuelson looked downward, digging out old flooring to add a foot-and-a-half of height to the home's original, cramped, six-foot ceilings.



many friends Thomas has made in Santa Fe since featuring a 1930s Camino Don Miguel adobe on *This Old House* back in 1990. After that first stay, he and Blum began vacationing here several times a year, and in 2007 bought their own fixer-upper adobe: a one-bedroom, one-bathroom casita that needed loads of work but was close to downtown, on a ridge overlooking the Sangre de Cristo mountains. When Thomas was ready to start work on it last fall, Samuelson offered up his design skills.

“Stephen would stop by on his way to or from work, just to help me out,” says Thomas. Rather than developing a master set of drawings at the beginning, the pair made decisions as they went along. “We’d look at the problem, he’d sketch things out, and I’d build it. The collaboration was complete and seamless and really fun.”

organic beauty

Originally, the house was a 1,200-square-foot structure that had been built in sections over the years, each with a different material—adobe, wood, and penitentiary tile. Six-foot ceilings made the small rooms feel even smaller, and the place was in desperate need of new plumbing, wiring, and windows. Thomas knew right away that job one was gutting the building’s interior. The next step—rebuilding it—involved decisions that were dictated in part by city ordinances.

Thomas wanted to keep the original timbers in the adobe part of the house, but he needed more height. So instead of building up, he built down, removing the original, rotting floor structure to gain a foot-and-a-half of vertical living space. On top of compacted dirt, Thomas installed insulation, radiant heat tubing, and a new concrete slab floor.

The historic integrity of the modest original structure inspired

“We probably could have carved out another bedroom, but the house wouldn’t have it. It sounds strange, but a lot of times, the house kind of tells you what it wants to do.”

—Steve Thomas



Opposite and above right: Steps connecting the dining area to what Thomas calls the “martini room” are reclaimed Douglas fir from a factory building in Denver that burned down; the charring is still visible.

Above: Bold kilim rugs accent an otherwise serene bedroom.



Thomas to stay within the existing footprint—a challenge in itself. “The only way you can get functionality out of building in a small space is to focus on design,” he says. “Every square foot counts.”

While Thomas left the interior adobe walls intact, he moved a couple of others, opening up the dining area and making the bedroom a little more private. The bathroom remains in its original location across from the bedroom, but Thomas moved the kitchen, which used to sit just inside the front door. Visitors now enter the home through what Thomas calls the mud room—a space for coats, boots, and storage that’s separated from the adjacent dining room not by a wall, but by cleverly placed cabinets that also offer additional storage space.

“We probably could have carved out another bedroom, but the house wouldn’t have it,” says Thomas. “It sounds strange, but a lot of times, in my long experience working on houses, the house kind of tells you what it wants to do.”

He kept his materials simple—wood, concrete, and plaster, in light natural tones—to achieve a Northern New Mexico look that is quiet and uncluttered. Thomas and Blum’s midcentury-modern furniture and art look entirely appropriate in the finished home’s interior. “I like to describe it as Georgia O’Keeffe minimalism, very spare and modern in its sensibility,” says Thomas. For a New England builder who’s accustomed to interior adornments like wainscoting, baseboards, and window and door trim, the clean lines of Southwestern style are endlessly refreshing. “The essential structure of the adobe reads right though,” Thomas says. “It knocks me out”

less is more (except when it comes to insulation)

As host of the 2007–2009 series *Renovation Nation* on cable’s Planet Green channel, Thomas taught viewers about sustainable building and how money spent on energy efficiency can often be quickly recovered through lower heating and cooling bills. Insulation, he says, is the key to making any home greener, so in his Santa Fe casita he installed 3 to 4 inches in the floors, 5 to 8 inches in the walls, and 15 to 16 inches on the roof. To further boost efficiency, he replaced the old single-pane windows (“they looked like something you’d see in an RV”) with highly efficient, low-E argon-insulated models.

The home’s outdoor areas are xeriscaped with native trees and grasses that require little water once established. Inside, Thomas avoided pressure-treated lumber and other materials that might emit toxic gases or chemicals. Cabinets from Great Northern Cabinetry are manufactured to the standards of the Environmental

The living room, like the rest of the house, is simply and carefully appointed, allowing the home’s adobe features to shine through. Concrete floors dyed in Pebble grace every room, creating a seamless and peaceful flow from space to space.





Bold artwork is a theme throughout the house. Thomas relaxes in the living room in front of *Atheism*, a striking print on paper by American artist Jim Dine. Thomas and Blum were drawn to it because "it was big, colorful, and iconoclastic."





Above and opposite: Now clean, bright, and streamlined, the kitchen was relocated from the front of the house—one of only a handful of changes Thomas made to the interior footprint. With energy efficiency firmly in mind throughout the remodel, Thomas selected high-end appliances by Wolf, Asko, and Sub-Zero.

Left: Visitors now enter the home through the mud room, flanked on both sides by storage space-creating cabinetry. Fir beams from Southern Colorado spanning the mud room and dining room are brightened with recessed lighting.

“The only way you can get functionality out of building in a small space is to focus on design. Every square foot counts.”—Steve Thomas





A gate post that once heralded the entrance of a Buddhist temple in Thailand adorns one wall of the dining room. Whimsical tilted vases from Paris brighten the Le Corbusier glass-topped table, while *Silver Lake*, an oil on canvas by Thomas and Blum's longtime friend Ruth Bauer, is a serene focal point for diners.




Above: Thomas and architect Stephen Samuelson, engaged in their favorite game: "You design it; I'll build it."

Stewardship Program (ESP), which is a benchmark for cabinets under the National Association of Homebuilders' Green Building Standard. Energy Star-certified appliances (including an Asko dishwasher and a Sub-Zero refrigerator) were selected for their efficiency and high quality.


"It's extremely well built, which is a big part of being green," says Thomas of the house. "The better it's built, the less maintenance it will require and the longer it will last. You're taking the carbon cost of the renovation and amortizing it over a much longer period of time."

In the months ahead, in his new role as an international spokesperson for Habitat for Humanity International, Thomas will travel the world sharing his knowledge of smart, affordable construction practices. As time permits, he'll visit Santa Fe, keeping in touch with the people who helped him make the casita renovation so successful.


"Members of the building and renovation community welcomed me as a brother and were tremendously helpful," he says. "More than any other place I've ever worked, Santa Feans really came out and said, 'You're one of us, and we'll do anything we can to help you out with your project.'" 

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resources

Steve extends special thanks to:

Rob Anderson	Peter Wolf
Ra Patterson	Dale Scharp
John Wolf	Florencio Garcia
Stephen Samuelson	Jay Maes
Edy Keeler	Glynn Juben
Steve Peterson	Kolbe Windows & Doors
Jim Etzler	Great Northern Cabinetry
Richard Wilder	Stone Systems

Architecture

Stephen Samuelson, Plan A Architecture
505-820-1460, planaarch.com

Windows and Doors

Ra Patterson, Sun West Construction Specialties/
Kolbe Windows & Doors, 505-438-7199

Concrete Floors

Steve Peterson, Constructors and Associates
505-438-8200, steve@cainm.com

Cabinets

Jim Etzler, Great Northern Cabinetry
greatnortherncabinetry.com

Interior Design

Edy Keeler, Core Value Inc.
505-577-2167, santafeinteriordesigner.com

Insulation/Roofing

Matt Segura and Aaron Lewis, Southwest Spray Foam
505-231-6032, southwestsprayfoam.com

Landscaping

Richard Wilder, Wilder Landscaping, 505-989-8524

Lighting

Lucy Dearborn, Lucia Lighting, lucialighting.com

Michael Cornelius, mcldesign@comcast.net

Plaster and Stucco

Valente Ochoa, Ochoa Lath & Plaster
505-920-4979, ochoainc.com

Roy Carroll, L & P Building Supply
505-828-0332, lpbuildingsupply.com

Kitchen Countertops

Dale Scharp, Stone Systems, stone-systems.com

Electrical

Peter Chang, Saturn Electric, 505-930-0040

Plumbing

Frank Kilmer, Golden Sun Solar, 505-982-9899

Tile

Greg Woeffel, Applied Tile, 505-852-2765

Appliances

Jason Roberts, Builders Source Appliance Gallery
505-982-5563, builderssource.com

Bathroom Fixtures

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