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BY KATHLEEN O'STEEN

One of the most outstanding features of the ranch's "Bonanza" house are the home's massive iron and glass front doors, designed to replicate the front doors of the historic Adamson House in Malibu. An intricately crafted vining pattern, the original design featured grapes woven throughout. In this instance the pattern was altered to substitute hummingbirds for grapes. The house's architect, Richardson Robertson III, says the famous Spanish Steps in Rome were his inspiration for the winding tiled stairs leading to the home's entry.



When your city residence is a 45,000-square-foot estate, how could your weekend getaway be anything less than spectacular? Case in point: Billionaire David Saperstein's eye-popping equestrian enclave, Hummingbird Nest Ranch.



THE HUMMINGBIRD NEST RANCH, A PRIVATE WORLD-CLASS

equestrian estate nestled in the hills of Simi Valley, boasts a 17,000-square-foot Spanish colonial main house that its owners have fondly nicknamed “Bonanza.” The ranch has its own semi-private off-ramp on the 118 freeway, ultra-modern horse facilities that have been home to some of the world’s most expensive jumping ponies, an Olympic-sized Grand Prix field, a lake, a heliport and a mountaintop view that affords an unrivaled tableau of the area’s raw, expansive southwestern splendor.

But, given the area’s rugged terrain, the ranch is something of an anomaly. Its stables are pristine—there’s nary a cobweb, dust-bunny or, er, road apple to be found in the wide, airy paddocks and spacious tack room that feature a state-of-the-art air-filtration system and rubber pavers underfoot. And the lush, green manicured fields in which well-groomed horses romp seem more in keeping with the bluegrass pastures of Kentucky, not the fire-charred hills of Simi.

It’s doubtful that TV’s fictional Cartwright family of *Bonanza* fame, or any other cowboy worth his chaps, has ever seen anything quite as grand as this.

Built by billionaire David Saperstein as a weekend retreat and party house for his wife, Suzanne, and their children, the estate has more recently been used to host the prestigious F.E.I. Children’s International Jumping Final, a once-a-year event held on Thanksgiving weekend that brings together future Olympians from around the world. And, for weddings and events in search of a unique, albeit high-end setting, parts of the 142-acre estate are also being made available for use—there are several guesthouses and condos on the outer fringes.

Perhaps the true irony to all of this grandeur is the fact that most people don’t even know it’s there. Hidden from view at the back of a winding private

road dotted with pepper trees and bougainvillea, the property is the kind of secret getaway that makes one readily forget that Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley is only a short freeway ride away.

Saperstein is the founder of Metro Networks Inc.—a supplier of traffic, news, sports and weather programming to the broadcast industry. He sold his company to Westwood One, Inc., in 1999, the same year he bought Hummingbird’s Nest Ranch and, in the intervening years, has become a philanthropist of note (in July, 2004, the \$158.5 million critical-care tower bearing the Saperstein name opened at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles). He currently runs a Houston, Texas-based partnership specializing in strategic investments, among other things.

When Saperstein and Suzanne decided to build a retreat with horse facilities—she and their three children ride, he doesn’t—the idea was to design a house that reflected the couple’s love of entertaining. Although they had initially planned to build an equestrian center in Coldwater Canyon, the couple heard about a rundown ranch in Simi Valley and, upon visiting the property, found themselves in awe of the rugged, boulder-strewn terrain. Once the home of Chumash Indians, the land eventually became part of the 113,000-acre El Rancho Simi, deeded to Santiago Pico and later to Jose de la Guerra y Noriega.

In the late 1800s Charles Emerson Hoar of Massachusetts—nephew of Ralph Waldo Emerson—bought a parcel of the land that would become the ranch. In the 1920s a businessman bought the property and built a brick ranch house, which has been refurbished and still stands in close proximity to the main house. The 1920s house, named “Sitting Bull,” features its own grove of olive and Eucalyptus trees, a pool and a quiet, cobblestoned courtyard.

The Sapersteins bought the property in 1999 and, to date, the work on it still hasn’t stopped. In addition to building roads and digging three wells,

Competing themes—equestrian and hummingbirds—are dominant throughout the Spanish Colonial home, ranging from handmade horse-head iron doors from Mexico that lead to the main living room to hand-painted hummingbird tiles in alcoves and on baseboards. The length of the home's loggia is an outstanding feature, with doors that open to exterior patios overlooking the ranch's breathtaking International Grand Prix field, dubbed the Spotted Elk Ring.





David Saperstein decided to make the ranch as self-supporting—in terms of energy use—as possible. Thus a field of solar panels off in the distance currently provides nearly 60 percent of the property's electricity. Work on the main house began just over a year ago, and today is nearly complete.

When it came time to design the main house, the couple turned to architect Richardson Robertson III, of Robertson Partners, the same man who designed their 45,000-square-foot Holmby Hills estate—a stunning mansion in the Beaux Arts design that the couple has dubbed “Fleur de Lys.” For his design, Robertson was awarded the prestigious Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by France's president Jacques Chirac, no less. The French award honors a design that's the best example of its type seen in the last 200 years. Past recipients include Picasso, Matisse and Manet.

“We've done several houses for the Sapersteins,” says Robertson, a soft-spoken Texan with offices in Los Angeles and New York. In addition to the Holmby Hills estate, Robertson also did some design work on the couple's home in Malibu. (Currently Suzanne and her children reside in Holmby Hills, while David's main residence is a penthouse apartment in Houston.)

When it came time to design the house in Simi Valley, Robertson says the influences that came into play ranged from the historic missions that dot the California coastline to Rome's famous, winding Spanish steps.

“The Sapersteins wanted the house to feel like it was part of old California, something that harkened back to the golden era of Spanish architecture,” Robertson says.

The design is reminiscent of the work of Walter Neff, the famed architect of the 1920s who conceived many of the stucco and iron Spanish-style homes in South Pasadena and



The dining room table was commissioned from artisans in Guadalajara, while the room's majestic fireplace, made of pale green stone quarried from the mountains of Oaxaca, has pillars that were hand carved at the base of the mountain by local artisans. Beams throughout the home are solid two-foot by two-foot wood timber—near impossible to find—and many of the home's furnishings are one-of-a-kind pieces designed for the house.

Looking to capture the feel of old California, architect Richardson Robertson III designed rooms that were large in scale—the living room’s lofty and expansive ceiling dwarfs a rustic iron chandelier from Mexico—but that also offered intimate gathering spaces, like the alcove in front the tiled fireplace. Furnishings range from antique finds found Beverly Hills (note the large mirror at the rear) to custom-made sofas and wall sconces.





the Hollywood Hills. “He brought back a Mediterranean style during this period and, in part, we’ve emulated that here,” Robertson says.

Part and parcel with that concept was the idea to not destroy the surrounding terrain in order to make way for a house. Instead, so that there would be no delineation between the house and its environmental edge, the structure was perched atop a series of boulders that adorn the crest of the hilltop. “We built around the boulders,” Robertson says. “We didn’t want to change the terrain but, rather, make the house fit into its environment. It was a very exciting idea.”

It was a plan that also grew out of a need; initially it was decided to move the boulders and then put them back as the house went up. But the construction crew inadvertently destroyed the first boulder it attempted to move. “So we decided to leave them where they were,” Robertson says. “The only thing we did, because of earthquakes,

was to bolt them into place.”

From the start, the design of the five-bedroom, nine-bathroom house was meant to be expansive—doors opening to long, tiled outer terraces to accommodate parties that would range from intimate to immense. “It really was meant for entertaining on a grand scale,” Robertson says. “It was for Suzanne’s love of horses and for her horse events.”

Nowhere is that grand scale more apparent than the kitchen, featuring a one-of-a-kind hand-made brass and titanium stove from France that can accommodate several chefs at once. “The kitchen is designed so that chefs can cook for up to 500 people,” says Craig Bennett, the Sapersteins’ director of construction. It also boasts a yogurt machine, an espresso machine and a margarita machine.

The Spanish colonial influences range from walls throughout the house that are between one

and a half and two feet thick to heavy, solid-wood beams, intricately woven ironwork from Mexico and handmade tiles adorning floors, fireplaces and fountains. "The beams in the dining room are two feet by two feet thick," Bennett enthuses. "And they are solid lumber. That's impossible to find anymore."

Many of the house's distinctive features have been hewn from old wood, found at the sites of demolished buildings in downtown Los Angeles.

"We used old corral fencing to make a lot of the doors," Bennett says, noting that many of the doors are over three inches thick. Stained glass, iron sconces and many of the house's furnishings were handmade in places as far away as Tecate, Guadalajara and Tijuana.

And while the house's huge dining room, with a table that seats 16, opens to a long Hacienda-style loggia and open-air patios that overlook the green



Grand Prix jumping fields, architect Robertson suggests that the house also offers many a “cozy” spot for quiet reflection. “The tap room off the living room [adorned in antique brocades] is an intimate spot,” he says. “The nook around the fireplace in the living room is a cozy place. You absolutely need these small spaces because you don’t get the feeling of grandeur unless you have them. We call it scale play.”

Scale play on a grand scale, for sure. Yet given all of the unbridled grandeur of this “Bonanza” house and its adjacent structures—did we mention the modern laundry facilities set up just to keep the horse blankets clean?—it’s still that quiet sense of history coupled with the amazing spectacle of a natural setting that won’t be denied that make this home so much more than just a place to hang your hat. ☺



Built atop a series of boulders, the “Bonanza” house is surrounded by two extremes—the ranch’s numerous green-grass horse pastures and fields, and the blackened hills of Simi Valley. Fires in the area over the past three years have twice threatened the home, first when it was being built and, more recently, when this summer’s wildfires burned right up to the property’s edge.