

dwell

At Home in the Modern World

BRUTAL BEAUTY
A Concrete-Chic Addition
Rises in Mexico

HALLELUJAH!
John Cameron Mitchell's
Home Is a Queer Art Church



WHAT'S OLD IS NEW

Revelatory Remodeling

dwell.com

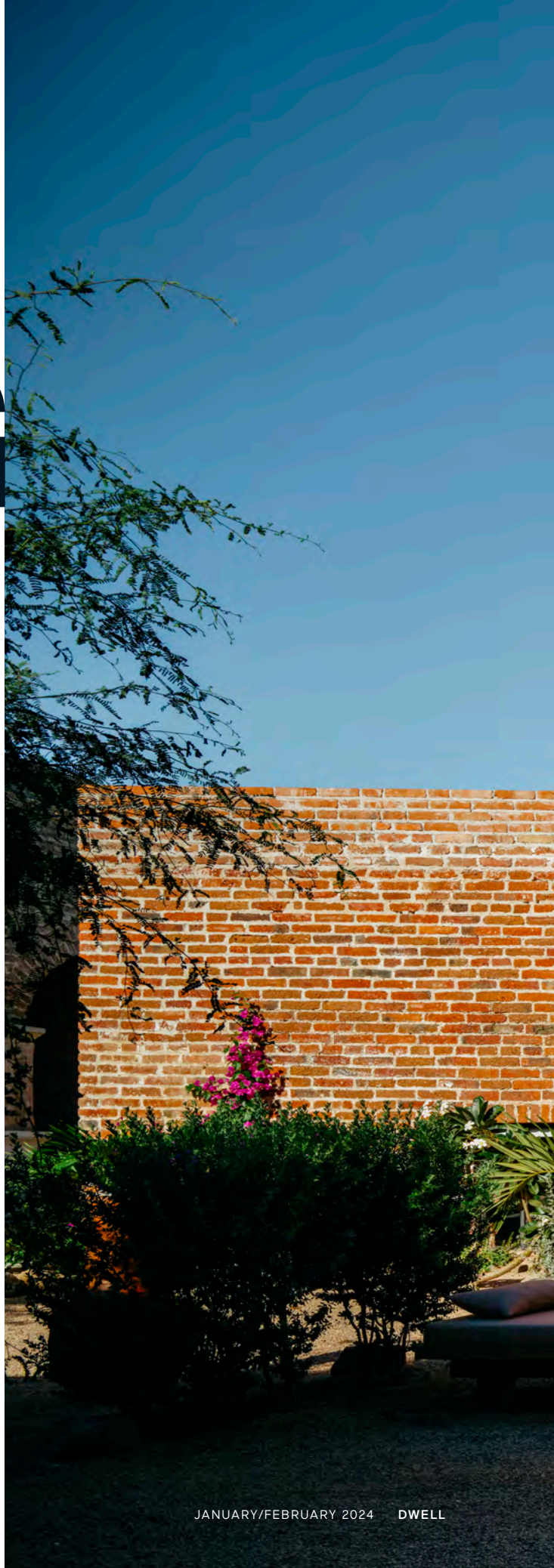
January / February 2021

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

**A CHEF TURNS A
WALLED-IN
PROPERTY IN A
BAJA CALIFORNIA
SUR MISSION TOWN
INTO AN OASIS
FOR FRIENDS AND
FAMILY.**

TEXT BY
Duncan Nielsen

PHOTOS BY | @FERNANDOMARROQUIN
Fernando Marroquin



Near Mexico's Pacific Coast, chef Ernesto Kut Gomez transformed a property with two dilapidated buildings into a food-focused retreat. Its pièce de résistance is a tower with guest suites and views of the area. Ernesto's partner, Ellen Odegaard, collaborated on much of the property's furniture, including the pool lounges.





It's a pleasant May night in Todos Santos, Mexico, as most are this time of year in coastal Baja California Sur. In the courtyard at chef Ernesto Kut Gomez's tucked-away home toward the edge of the historic downtown, he and his assistant are preparing dinner in an outdoor kitchen. They set dishes on a slatted-wood table, starting with bean tostadas and ending with slow-cooked lamb stew and baskets of warm tortillas.

Before we eat, Ernesto provides a little backstory about the environs. Established as a mission in 1724, Todos Santos was gradually abandoned after the missions were secularized, but by the middle of the century it had been resurrected by sugarcane growers. "People settled here because it was an oasis," he says.

Its fertile grounds and its history are what attracted Ernesto to the area, which some know better for its surfing beaches, gringo outpost Hotel California, or boutique retreats like Hotel San Cristóbal and the Paradero. He'd been making regular trips between Vancouver, which he calls home, and Mexico City, where his parents live, when, seven years ago, he stopped in Todos Santos to see a friend. "I fell in love with the place," Ernesto says. "I loved the beach and the ruggedness and everything. And I've always loved historical buildings."

On that first trip, an 1800s brick structure used in the sugarcane industry >



The gallery (opposite) has a new whitewashed pine roof that covers the main villa, which includes two one-bed suites and one of the property's three and a half kitchens. "We think it was a little church before," says architect Yashar Yektajo. The brick was stripped of plaster from a prior renovation. "It was completely rotten because there's so much humidity here," he adds. "Now the brick can breathe, and the whitewash brings it together."

Pinto, one of the couple's two dogs, rests under a coffee table Ernesto and Ellen designed. The gallery is lined with original arches (left) that lead to the courtyard. Ernesto designed the villa's kitchen more "for every day," he says, but the one added to the courtyard (above) has a professional range and *parilla* to accommodate groups. "I don't need super-fancy equipment," Ernesto says. He and Yektajo designed the bar stools.

**“This is a place to host friends and friends of friends.
It’s a really magical spot—it has this aura.”**

ERNESTO KUT GOMEZ, RESIDENT



The courtyard and open-air kitchen are the home's hub, where Ernesto's guests can convene for meals he prepares using local ingredients. "There is an incredible amount of produce in the area. It's the simple things," he says. Ellen designed the table and benches, which are surrounded by plantings added to the property.





"This is where we had a little fun with the carpentry work," says Yektajo, referring to the slatted-wood inserts covering the openings in the villa's primary suite (above), as well as ones in the guest suite and loft. "You can't add more windows in the facade of historic buildings, so that was the only way to get ventilation," he adds. Ellen designed the bed frames with built-in nightstands for every room. For the primary bath (right) and the

one in the guest room, Yektajo made wood boxes for the showers that rise partially up the wall. "We liked the idea of having a different height for everything that's new," he says. The tower has a sunken ground-floor suite (opposite), which allows for a higher ceiling and helps it stay cool, as does the window facing the pool. "The wind passes over it and brings in fresh air," Yektajo says. "This is how pools are built in the Middle East."

Casa Melina



ARCHITECT Yektajo Architects

LOCATION Todos Santos, Baja California Sur, Mexico



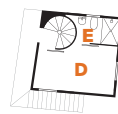
Third Floor



Rooftop

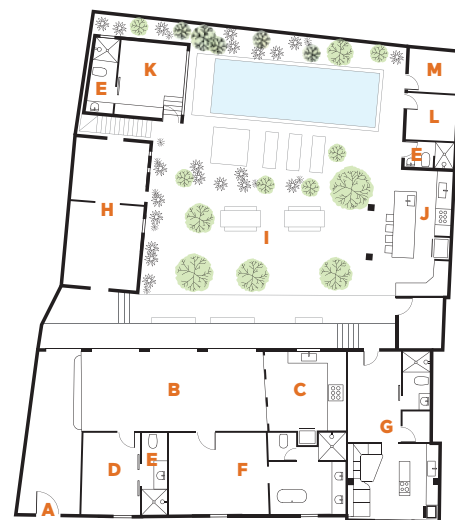


First Floor



Second Floor

- A Entrance
- B Living/Dining Area
- C Kitchen
- D Guest Room
- E Bathroom
- F Primary Suite
- G Loft Suite
- H Entertainment Room
- I Garden
- J Outdoor Kitchen
- K Tower Bedroom
- L Laundry Room
- M Mechanical Room
- N Deck



Lower Level





caught his eye. “It was beautiful, but it was really in ruins. Like, it didn’t have a ceiling. It was like it had been neglected for at least thirty years and nature had taken over,” Ernesto says. Two impulses led him to purchase the building’s lot, which contained another historical structure as well. “One was to inspire other people to preserve the history of the town—it’s very easy to destroy heritage,” he says. The second was to create “a place for hosting all kinds of friends in the food, music, and art industries. I wanted to have a place for residencies and cultural events and to open the door to the community.”

At first, he and architect Yashar Yektajo, one of the designers of the Paradero, were going to preserve the property’s structures as they stood. Then, when the humidity and salt air peeled back a chunk of plaster

left over from a prior renovation, Ernesto saw the potential in exposing the brick structure inside and out. “I said to Yashar, ‘I think we need to have a chat,’” Ernesto recalls now, laughing.

Today, the property holds five beds and six baths across four buildings, old and new. Stepping through the main villa’s unassuming entry off a quiet street, you move through an open-air foyer and into a gallery, where the exposed brick has been repaired. It’s topped with a new wooden roof that connects four broad arches with two suites, the dining room, and a kitchen that’s partly open to the elements. “It’s so Baja that the ‘indoor’ kitchen is still pretty outdoor,” says Yektajo, adding that it’s one of several on the property. Here, before dinner, Ernesto serves baguette slices smeared with local

goat cheese and topped with figs plucked from a tree in the courtyard. “You have to get to them before the birds do,” he says.

The bedrooms, too, are airy, with soaring ceilings and porous tornillo-wood doors designed by Ernesto and Yektajo. “I love the draft of air, but I hate mosquitos,” says Ernesto, who put mesh screens over the windows so he could enjoy breezes without pests. Ernesto met his partner, Ellen Odegaard, partway through the renovation. An architectural designer, she offered some guidance on the project toward the end and shaped a lot of the furniture, like bed frames, tables, and nightstands; anything made of wood was built on-site.

The main villa shares a wall with a new studio suite, accessed from the gallery’s concrete patio via a set of stairs. >

The tower (opposite) was limited to nine meters in height (because it's sunken, it rises to about eight and a half), but the construction style emphasizes its stature. "We did the board-forming top to bottom to give it a sense of verticality," Yektajo says. "It makes the tower seem way taller." The concrete's rough texture and brown pigment complement the adjacent brick building, now a lounge.

The third-level bar and kitchenette (below) have four openings with wood coverings that slide away. The space is perfect for "wine and ceviche—for enjoying the sunset," says Ernesto. The table, designed by Ellen, nests into concrete banquette seating. To connect the bar with the top-level viewing deck, Yektajo inserted a spiral staircase (right) with a compact footprint to preserve the views.



The gallery looks out over the courtyard, flanked on one side by the outdoor kitchen and, on the other, the property's second original brick structure, a sunken space that's now a lounge. Next to it is the compound's most dramatic addition: a board-formed concrete tower containing bedroom suites on the first two floors, an open-air kitchenette and bar on the third level, and a rooftop deck with multiple vantages. It provides a bird's-eye view of the property and vistas of the town, lush palms, the rolling desert, and, in the distance, the Pacific Ocean.

At first, Yektajo and Ernesto weren't sure how they were going to add more living space to the property, given that the city and federal government limit the footprint of new structures on historical sites. But Ernesto was determined to build more accommodations and, in addition, was going to be disappointed if there wasn't a view. "I was putting in all this energy, but I wasn't going to be able to watch the sunset or see the ocean," he says. On a hike, a stout variety of cactus, known as *bisnaga*, gave him the idea to build up instead of out. "I was like, That's what we need to do," he says.

Despite all you can see from the tower, it's invisible when you're standing on the street in front of Ernesto's home. The residence melds with the rest of downtown Todos, a patchwork of cobblestone streets with sun-faded buildings occupied by *taquerias*, *tiendas*, and *oficinas*. The home's only tell is the freshly hewed *tornillo*-wood front door, ready to welcome those who know where to go. ■

“We made the tower’s third-level windows the same size so you can look to the town, the mountains, the ocean. We didn’t want to favor one view over another.”

YASHAR YEKTAJO, ARCHITECT

