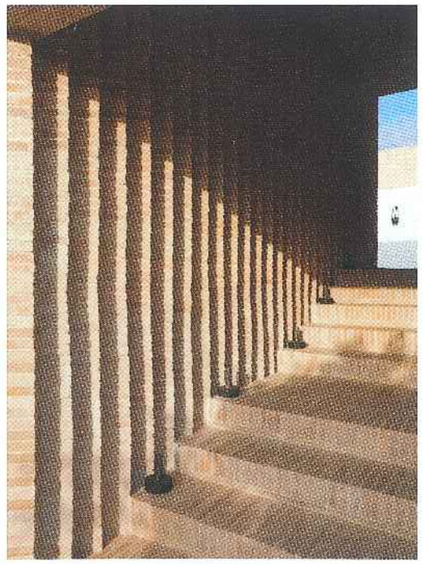
CUBE ROOTS

In a gated community in Andalucía, one couple commissioned a retirement home consisting of interlinked boxes, whose austere Modernism is softened by borrowings from the Hispano-Moorish vernacular – patterned brickwork, tadelakt walls and exposed beams. Executed by a young Spanish team, the house represents the finely calculated product of two different but complementary personalities, as Rowena Morgan-Cox reports. Photography: Ricardo Labougle

This fountain at the edge of the site was created by landscape designer Pablo Vidal, the blue/green tiles acting as a curtain/backdrop to the buildings in front of it. For the decorative paving on the ground, consisting of traditional Nazari tiles, reclaimed bricks and pebbles, Blanche supplied some of her jewellery designs as inspiration

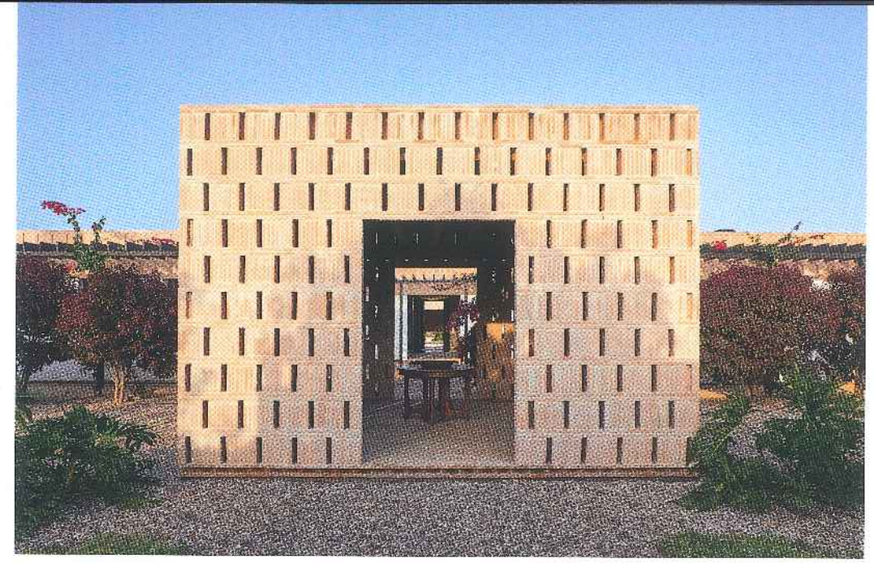






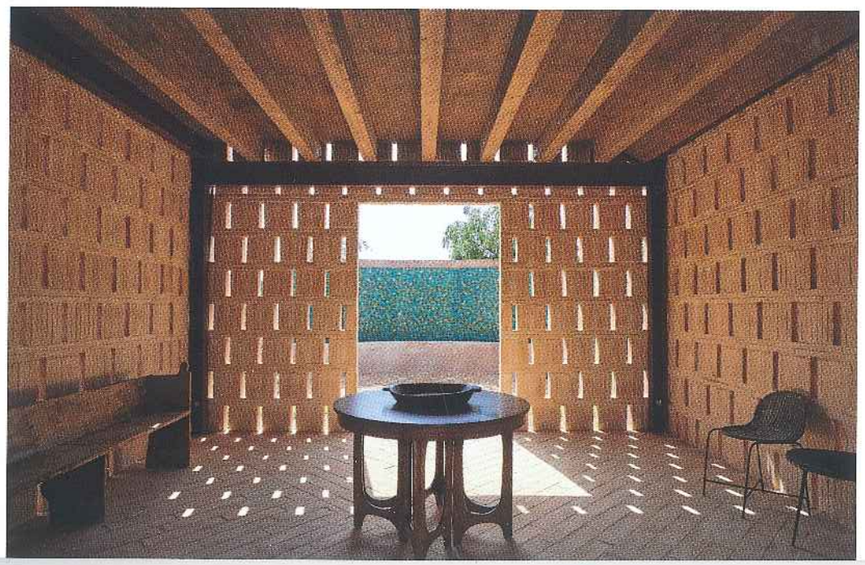


This page, clockwise from top: flanked by metal lights drawn up by project manager Claudia Garay, the large entrance to the main building is a painted-wood bespoke design (with a hatch typical of Spanish houses) by the architect, Paloma Cañizares. The double pools are inspired by the Alhambra; specialist Moroccan craftsmen, without whom the decorative elements of the house would have been impossible, executed the patterned brickwork on the entrance stairs; a view across a garden of white flower perennials and zoysia grasses (which require little watering or mowing) to the kitchen and drawing room of the main house; with the grand entrance to the house, Paloma needed to create a transition from the low street level to the house on the fill above. A lift to the garage and a bench for relaxing are also hereby concealed



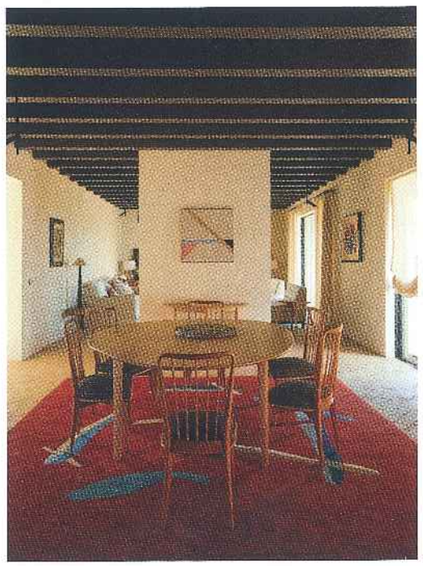


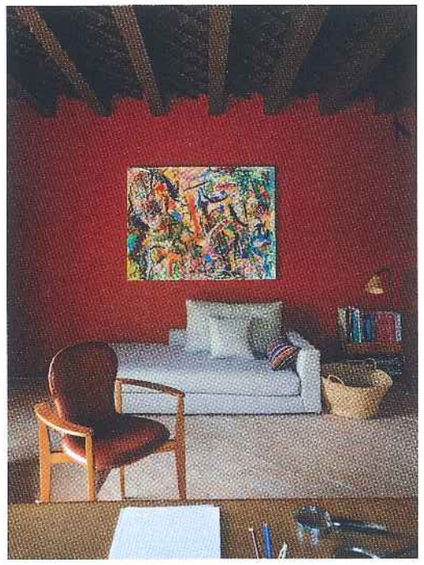




This page, clockwise from top: a view from the back of the garden through the 'meditation pavilion' and into the house to the (open) front door. The building has been used for outdoor meals, family weddings and as a temporary resting place for Jim's ashes; the perforations in the brickwork bring light effects and the flow of cooling air. Blanche bought the simple wicker furniture from a Paris flea market; a carved wooden bowl from Jaipur, where Blanche used to make her jewellery, sits on a Danish table bought from 1st Dibs; in the courtyard, with its rough black-granite fountain, Pablo played with colour, using *Euphorbia cotinifolia* with some brushstrokes of coral and fuchsia thanks to the bougainvillaea. Jim wanted the pergola to be sculptural – its purpose is to throw abstract, rhythmic shadows on to the ground









This page, clockwise from top: in the drawing room, the two armless sofas are designs by Frank Lloyd Wright. Either side of the window is a painting by Albert Gleizes and an ink drawing by Eduardo Chillida. On the console table sits a vase by Christopher Dresser; the Shaun McDowell painting above the daybed in Jim's office was bought from Hannah Barry Gallery in Peckham; Jim always painted his study this same red. His desk is by Adnet and the room dividers, which have been mounted on the wall as shelves, are by Ludvík Volák for Dřevopodnik Holešov; the asymmetric dining table, a collaboration between Blanche and a local cabinetmaker. Opposite: the carpet in the drawing room (and elsewhere) is a bespoke design by Marcel Zelmanovitch and produced by Diurne. The picture above the fireplace is by Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart (1944) and to its left is a Picabia work on paper from 1922





ON AN UNLIKELY cul-de-sac in the gated community of Sotogrande, a monumental portal of thousands of terracotta bricks rises from the red, dry earth. Such an entranceway, with steps up through a squared tunnel, is worthy of an Aztec pyramid – more mausoleum than domestic threshold. The first time my husband and I laid eyes on it, and the dozens of labourers working around it, we knew that the modest, new-build bungalow planned for the retirement of my mother-in-law and her husband was out of the window. They had bought the land directly across the street from their original house, an Americanised version of a traditional Spanish villa. By contrast, what was emerging behind this new façade was a grand Modernist structure, formed of a vast complex of low-lying buildings, some independent and others interlocking, linked by passageways, terraces and courtyards sprawling across the narrow, windswept plot on top of a hill overlooking the Mediterranean and Africa.

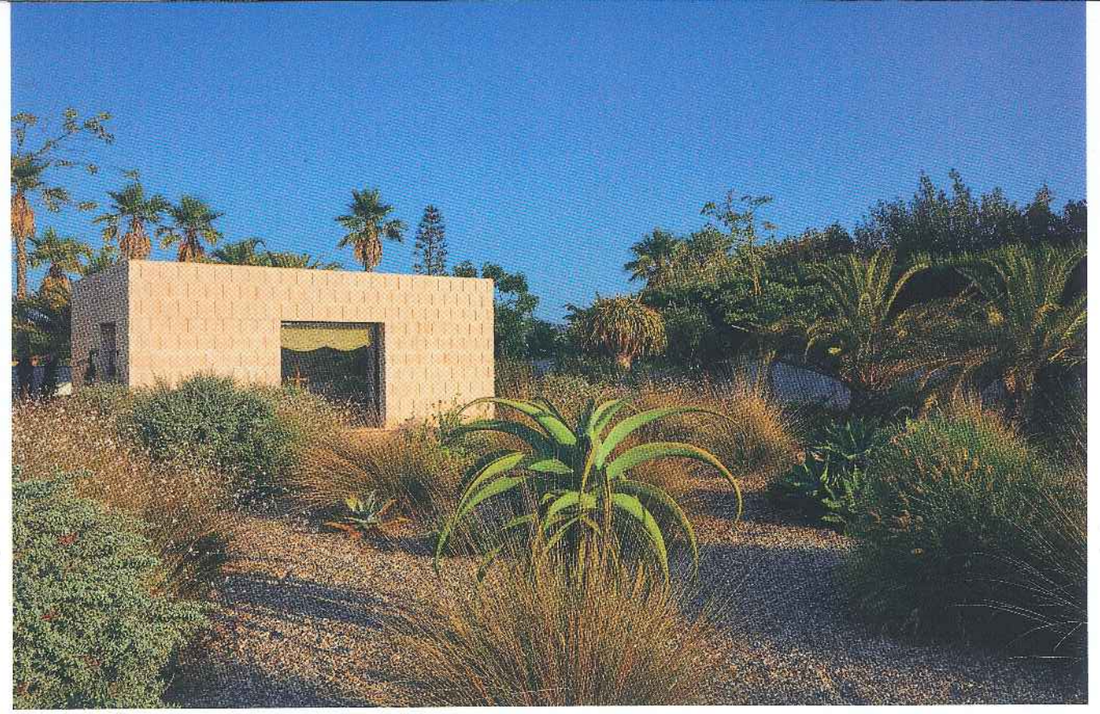
In many ways, this is a house of contradictions. Primarily, it's the summation of the different personalities of my mother-in-law, Blanche de la Forest, and her late husband, Jim. She is an agonisingly elegant Frenchwoman; he was a maverick self-made businessman from Staten Island, New York, more comfortable in jeans, shirt and sweater. While Blanche was looking to escape the often gaudy blandness of Sotogrande's architecture and lifestyle, Jim was most at home in its archetypal institution: the world-famous Valderrama golf club. Blanche imagined a two- or three-bed property on a humble single-storey scale; Jim angled for a triple garage, lift, at least five bedrooms and a gym. 'The house evolved to something much more sophisticated than I wanted,' Blanche explains. 'Jim wanted this, but it was my view to avoid concrete and go back to traditional construction. I was maybe more idealistic than he was.'

To satisfy both these visions, the couple took inspiration from the simple Spanish architecture of the surrounding area (white stucco walls and timber construction) and borrowed the grandeur – long narrow walkways, courtyards, pools and decorative brickwork – from the Alhambra in the city of Granada, around 250km away. As a result, the house is a wonderful mix of modesty and palatial expansiveness. 'I had worked on [Jim] already, showing him the beauty of a poor material like brick and the liveliness of it and how it aged,' says Blanche. 'And then, when we first visited the Alhambra, he fell in love with it.'



Seven independent blocks make the whole. The main house is the largest and contains the kitchen, drawing room, TV room and dining room, connected to the master bedroom and study via an airy entrance hall. There are two bedroom buildings. One has its own private garden; the other, with sea views, is the only two-storey element. A maid's flat sits behind the kitchen, a gym is hidden in a building under the pool and a pavilion of decorative brickwork sits in the centre of the garden. Taken on their own, each block has a quiet sturdiness. The seemingly low, stained-wood ceilings are reminiscent of rustic beams in a peasant house, while the brick motif from the entrance is echoed in the flooring. Aside from one room, all the internal walls are a sober off-white and each bathroom has an earthy, grounded quality from the tad-

Opposite, top: shaded private patios amid tall swaying grasses. Bottom: the crockery in the kitchen sideboard has been collected from around Andalucía and has a distinctly Moorish character. This page: the kitchen has a polished-concrete floor, for ease of cleaning. Around the breakfast table are pictures including a Bonnard drawing, a photograph of Georgia O'Keeffe taken by Jim's son-in-law and a Duchamp poster

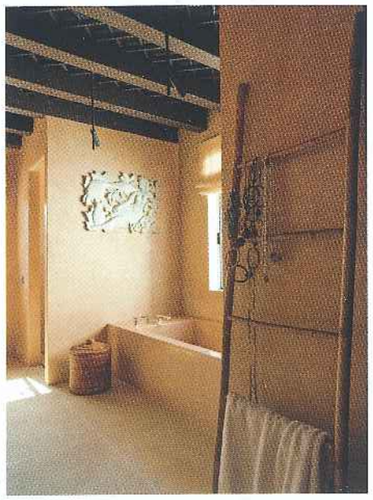


elakt walls, another nod to the Moors. 'We are neighbours with Morocco. The connection is important,' says Blanche.

Despite their outward differences, the couple were united in their desire for this place to be rooted in its surroundings; they also championed the region's emerging designers. They first met the gifted lighting designer, later their project manager, Claudia Garay, in Sotogrande. She assembled a talented young team, including the architect Paloma Cañizares and the landscape designer Pablo Vidal. Paloma was the star of the show. 'She had a very definitive vision,' says Blanche, 'a special way to build, and she invented things on this project.' Pablo had worked locally despite living in the Spanish capital. 'Pablo is a real artist. He works like a painter. Jim best expressed himself with the garden and Pablo captured the spirit of what Jim wanted. The house is the result of the talent of the people who have been involved,' continues Blanche. 'They had a sensitivity about what we wanted to achieve – we were not easy clients – and they worked together to make it happen.'

The couple were initially brought together by a shared passion for art. Blanche is a painter and designer who has worked in fashion, homewares and, for the last 20 years, jewellery, which she now produces locally. Jim was an avid art collector, known to bid on lots at auction while teeing off on the golf course. Although the bulk of his collection was by fin-de-siècle and early 20th-century Parisian artists, they embarked on a different direction for the new house. Jim delved wholeheartedly into the world of abstract art. They bought paintings in Madrid by the Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida and the Argentinian-born artist César Paternosto, among others. The abstraction is mimicked in the painterly carpets by Marcel Zelmanovitch.

One of the most beautiful parts of the house is Blanche's studio. Tucked away at the back of the garden, it is also the property's highest point, affording the finest view of the Mediterranean. 'Jim joked sometimes that he wanted to build me a studio and we built a house. The architect insisted that I have the best place as this was Jim's original intention.' Here, Blanche works on her jewellery designs or invents some of the offbeat decorative details for the house – the cluster of ebonised coffee tables or the tessellated Arabic-style fire-screen. She has even begun planning some painterly tiles for her flat in Paris. It was here she was able to catch her breath during Jim's illness.



I write this just over a year after his death. Yet this house, Jim's last major project, is not the tomb the entranceway might suggest. It is the culmination of a life, and it is full of beauty. 'In the end, this project was based on love for each other. Somewhere to be enjoyed for the coming years,' says Blanche. The kitchen is at its heart. Guests gather around the casual table, which has an Indian textile thrown over it, drinking coffee and tea. We look out at the double view, across the garden and ocean. Can anyone see Morocco? We wonder whether the wind is the Poniente or the Levante – blowing in from the Atlantic or from North Africa. The room, the people, the garden and the landscape are sparkling with vitality. This place is quite special and we named it thus: Casa Aura ■

Paloma Cañizares. Ring 00 34 912 303 128, or visit palomacanizares.com. Garay Studio. Ring 00 34 620 959 834, or visit garaystudio.com

Opposite, top: the studio, which has the best sea views, overlooks a cactus garden. Jim was passionate about cacti and Pablo found him some special varieties; the tadelakt master suite contains the only bath in the house. Above it hangs a 1930s plaster plaque. This page: facing a sofa covered with a Lewis & Wood fabric, the tall headboard is a bespoke design by Blanche's cousin Véronique de Soultrait. Either side of the window is a pastel by Vuillard and a gouache by Sonia Delaunay