

## From the ground up: The early years 1964-1994

My first construction projects were tunnels—complete with air vents disguised as rabbit holes—built under the dirt, tumbleweeds, and brush fires of the West Texas desert. I don't want to encourage others to follow my potentially dangerous path in that regard, and I'm eager to get out of the dirt, so I'll focus here on above-ground projects. My first somewhat shaky adventure in building design and construction was a play fort my younger brothers and I built after we moved from Midland to Houston in 1964 when I was 11. My drawing for the first stage of what I labeled "Fort Stupid" shows brother Greg resembling Alfalfa in *Our Gang*. He is standing typically barefoot and tippy-toed on a board that is giving way. With his mouth full of nails, he is holding a hammer. The drawing is a pencil sketch on aged paper, showing a multi-level wooden structure with various openings and a wheelbarrow at the base. The name "FORT STUPID" is written across the middle of the structure.



The Fort. June 1964. Brother Greg inside the earliest version of the fort. We screened it in to escape the swarms of mosquitos that plague the effluvial swamp otherwise known as Houston.



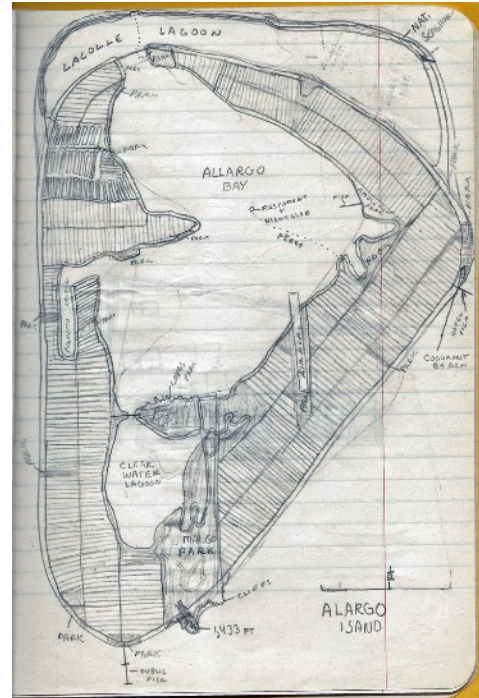
The Fort. December 1964. All six siblings. Some cousins. I'm the nerd at the top in glasses.

he is banging in another nail with a hammer. Our pet alligator has already landed on the ground. A coin collection and a lizard are falling from Greg's pockets, along with the proverbial frog, snail, and puppy dog tail. I'm pictured inside the fort in glasses, looking up in horror as our youngest brother David, saw in hand, is falling through the roof on top of me.

I had written "Goldwater 64" in chalk on the fort, partly to assuage my father. But after Barry Goldwater lost the election to LBJ, Dad declared the structure to be an eyesore, and ordered me to take it down. It was a pitiful scene, with me tearfully flailing away in the rain, claw hammer in hand, destroying my creation.

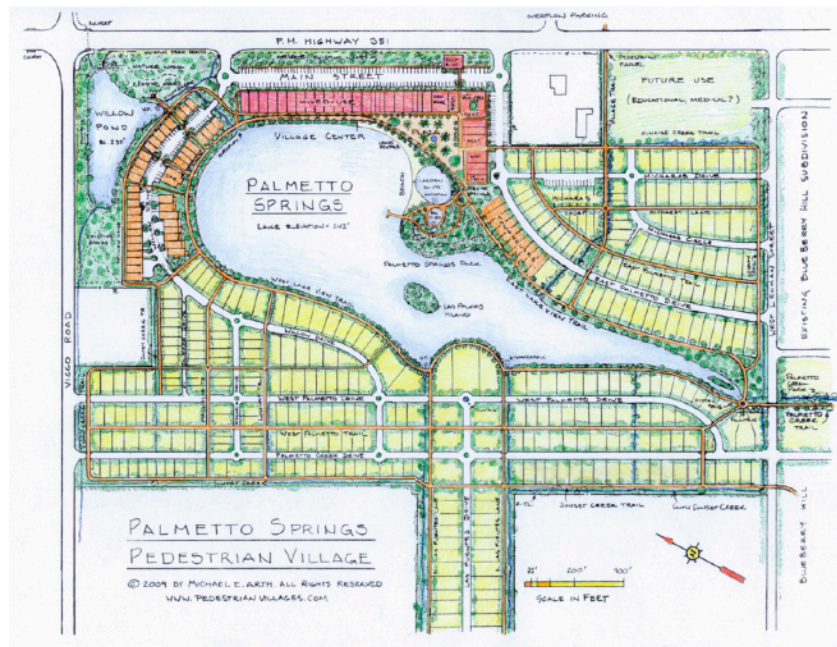
After that experience, for many years I favored drawing. It was easier to go through the cycle of creation and destruction on paper. My inner critic kept telling me that the drawings were ugly, but each iteration was better than the last, and eventually I began to save some of them. Most of those early drawings depicted my dream house, usually on a surfing beach. Later, as a teenager, the subject turned to ideal cities. I would also get into the aesthetics of the topography as well as the layout of the streets, trying to figure out how to separate pedestrians from cars.

At times, the lay of the imagined land—constraining and enhancing the city—became even more important than the



Above: childhood drawing for new town, c. 1969

Below: drawing for new town, 2009.





Topological drawing, circa 1981. I would often design coastlines, streams, beaches, mountains and canyons with the idea of working out how humans could live in such an environment.

city, and I'd just leave it out.

I'm mostly auto-didactic in all my professions. During my short stint in college, I took a few philosophy, psychology and life drawing classes, but never took any classes in film, architecture, or urban design. Instead, I dropped out to work as an artist.<sup>1</sup> Formal schooling never really mattered to me for art, filmmaking, architecture, or urban design because I learned by doing. I also owned most of my projects and didn't seek commissions. Finally, when it came to building department approvals, it was the stamps of the registered soils and structural engineers that mattered.

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<sup>1</sup> Before the 2020 presidential election, I would attend what I called "President Finishing School." I learned a lot while adding a masters degree from the University of London to my informal degree in the School of Hard Knocks.



**4510 Avenue G, Hyde Park, Austin, Texas.**

Left: Before in 1974  
Below: After in 1978

It was a dilapidated shell of a house when purchased in \$17,500. I cut my teeth on this house as a carpenter, building a second story in the attic, adding a two bedroom unit in the back, and a greenhouse on the side. I sold it in 1978 for \$83,500, and for many years would dream that I still owned it or was going to get it back. By 2018 it was worth about \$600,000.



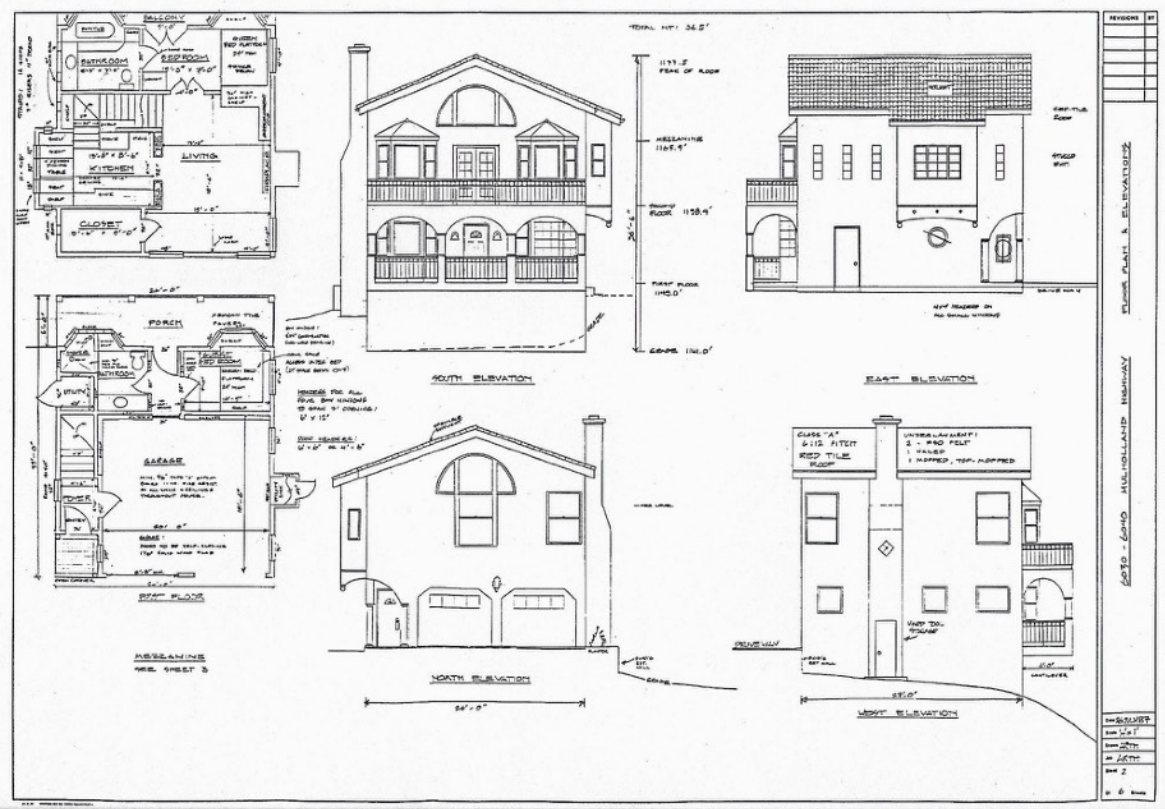
I taught myself carpentry and building design in my spare time while working as a fine artist from 1972 to 1988. I bought my first house in February 1974, in Austin's Hyde Park neighborhood and gradually rebuilt it, finishing construction and selling it in 1978. The proceeds were spent traveling around the world twice, and working as an artist in Paris until late 1981. I still dream of the Austin house even though I don't regret selling it when I did.



**Hollywood Cove, 1986-1989:** I designed two homes, did conceptual design on a third, and built a cul-de-sac under the Hollywood Sign. Ground was broken in February 1988 on the first house I ever designed and built from scratch. The lot at what would become 6030 Mulholland Highway was on an abandoned curve of the famous Mulholland Drive, directly underneath the iconic Hollywood Sign, with a view that stretched beyond the searchlights of Hollywood Boulevard and across the Los Angeles basin to the Pacific. During



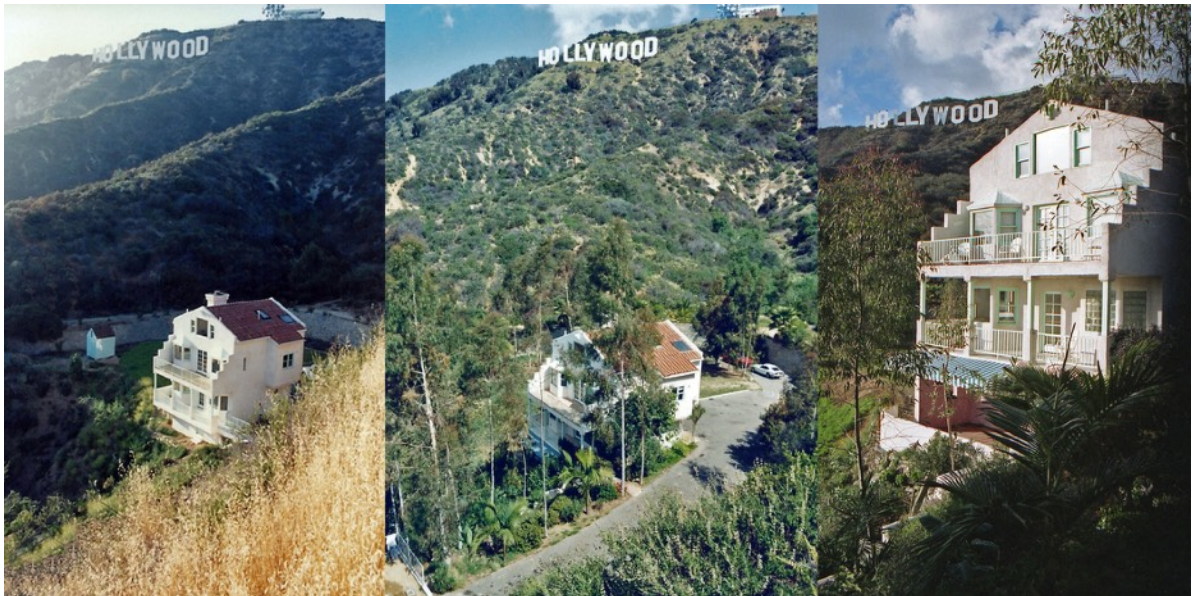
This painting shows my first idea of what the main house could look like. 1986.



Above: Architectural plans as submitted in 1986.

Below: Drawing showing how the guest house would have integrated with the main house.



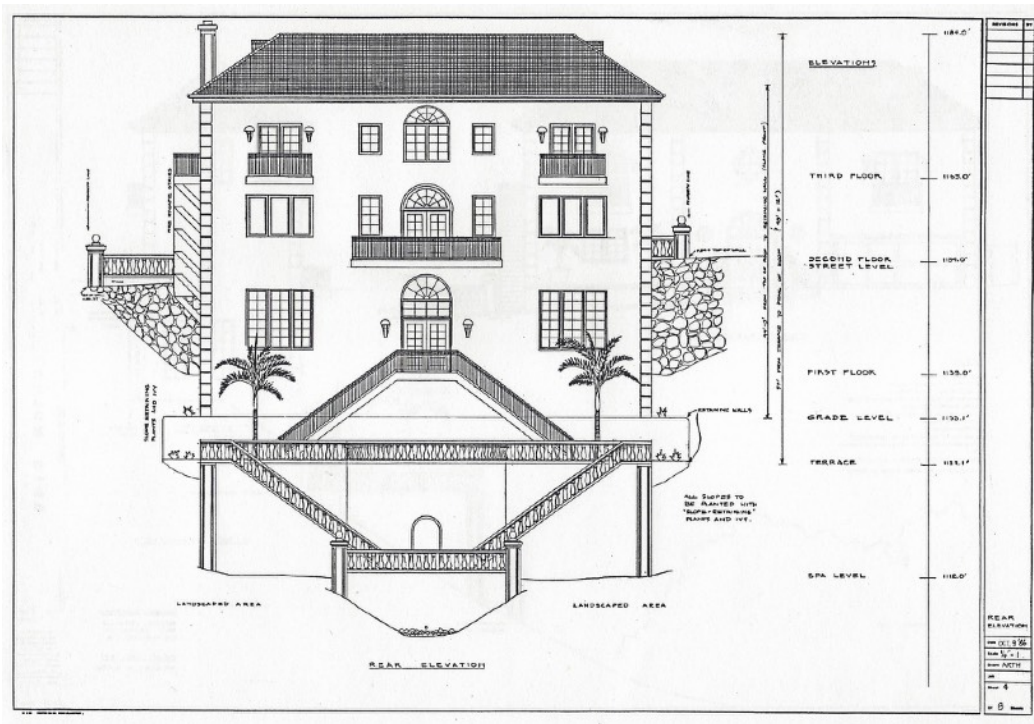


**Evolution of Hollywood Cove:** This panel shows 6030 Mulholland Hwy from 1986 to 1990. I lived in the blue tool shed during the first year of construction. It had a sleeping loft with the window visible in the photo. The refrigerator, microwave, and tools were underneath. I climbed on the Hollywood Sign only once, in 1982, four years before buying the lot.





Me, after completing the framing and sheathing. Summer 1988.



My design for 6010 Mulholland Hwy, at the entrance to Hollywood Cove, done for the owner/builder, Amado Padilla. I also did the rough carpentry on Amado's five staircases, including that perilous one hanging off the left side. Unfortunately, the first flight of stairs was off by  $\frac{3}{4}$ " because I didn't take into account the landing at the top. After tearing it apart and rebuilding it a second time, I never made that mistake again.





Hollywood Cove, showing the first three houses and a view of downtown Los Angeles in the distance. Taken from the hiking trail heading up to the Hollywood sign. Later, I sold a lot below the foreground and another house was built at the end of the cul-de-sac. The very strange tale of this fourth lot, as well as the even stranger story of how I came to own 6030 Mulholland is told in my memoir. It concerns a prophetic story I wrote in Paris in 1980. Below shows the entrance I built to the cul-de-sac—gated against cars—but open to pedestrians.



the day I could hear the shrieks of people who took it upon themselves to scale the 45 feet-tall letters on the sign. I had only climbed on the sign once, years before I bought this lot, but I would often go up on the hill above the sign to admire the panoramic view of both LA and the San Fernando Valley.

Being that the house was on the side of Mt. Lee, in earthquake-prone California, a substantial portion of the structure remained unseen. The deep foundation system, which included a basement, consisted of four reinforced-concrete 36" diameter piles up to 44 feet into the earth, tied in two directions with concrete grade beams. Recalling my boyhood tunnels with their plywood and dirt roofs, the indestructibility of this overbuilt foundation gave me a deep sense of satisfaction. Even The Big One couldn't take down a house with a footing like that.

With average of two helpers, along with my brother Greg who flew in from Texas one week and helped hang sheetrock, it took 15 months to build. The house is located at 6030 Mulholland Highway, which had been an undeveloped stretch of the famous Mulholland Drive. My original plans also called for a main house—I even did a conceptual painting showing how it might look—but it never got built.



With Jose Luis, my good friend and helper. Together we did about two-thirds of the work. The tool shed was by now covered with morning glories and the freezer was filled with TV dinners. Summer 1988.

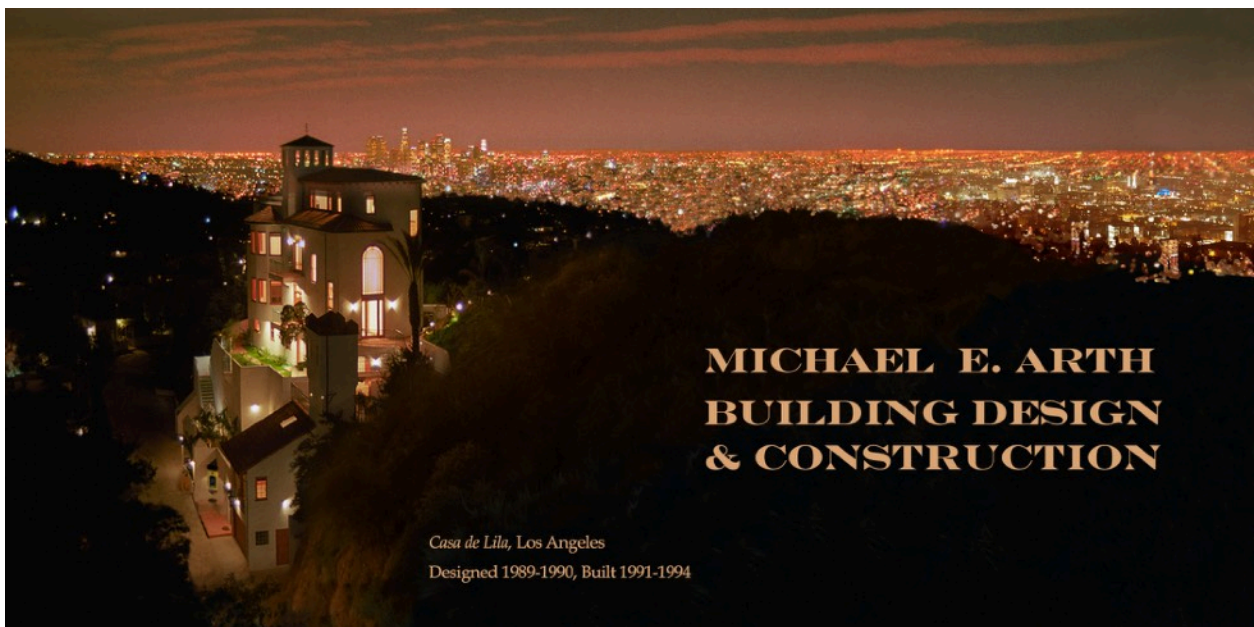


The great room of 6030 Mulholland. The bedroom and office was in the loft. 1989.



Walk-out basement and first floor level of the Mulholland house. Above this were two more floors. All had great views. 1990.

**Casa de Lila 1990-1994:** Skipping over a few projects, the next major project was a seven-story villa on the top of a mountain ridge in Hollywood. It was an estate

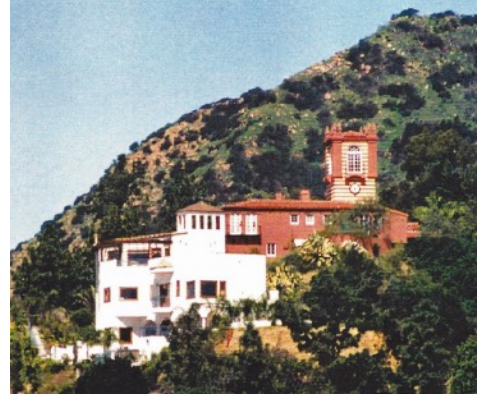




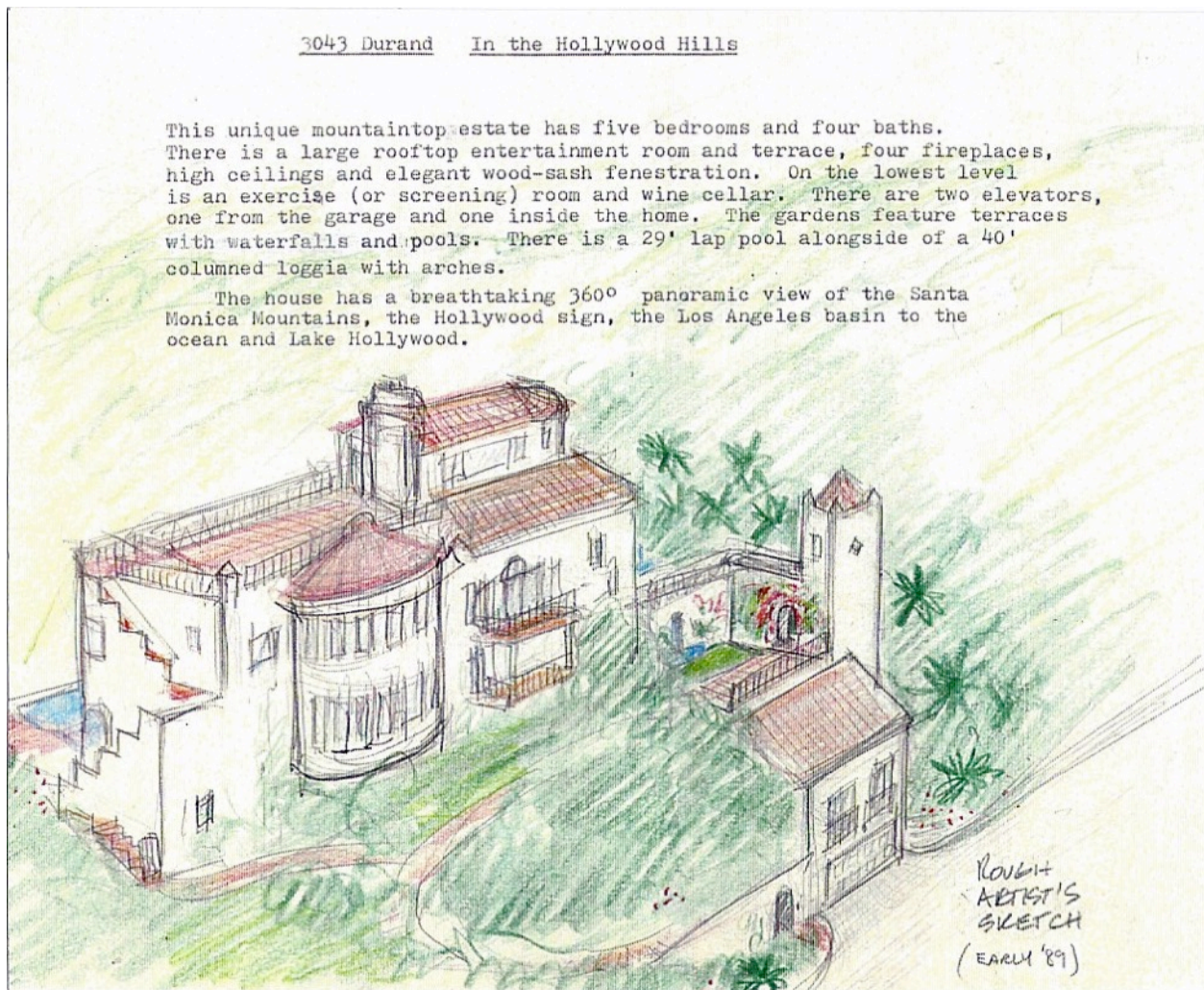
on three lots with a view of everything in all directions. It was modest in interior space, but imposing in stature—like Madonna on stage in stilettos.

It had a stream, waterfalls, an infinity pool and two elevators. It took four years to design and build, and, with a nudge from the early 1990s recession, it bankrupted me. Fortunately a buyer, Steve Taylor, stepped in and paid me to finish it. He also became a good friend, so all was not lost. Steve decided to keep the house as an investment, and never moved in. Instead, I was invited to live in the guest house for four more years in exchange for managing the rental of the

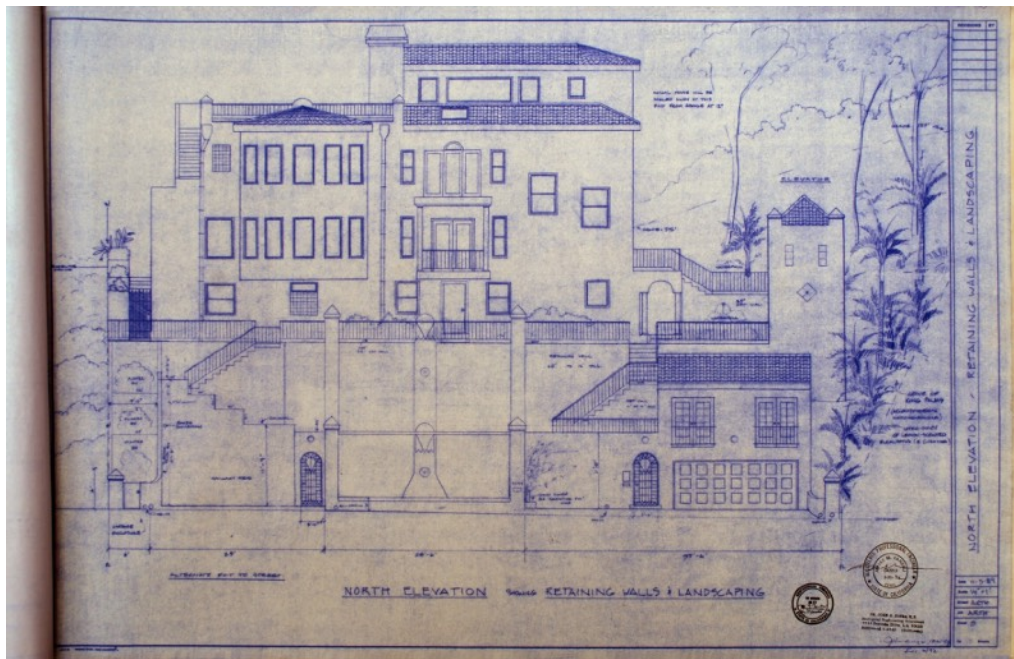
main house—to Guns 'n Roses drummer, Matt Sorum. The parties were spectacular. During one of the parties, Kato Kaelin, fresh from testifying in the O.J. trial, reassured me that my guest house was better than his guest house. Beginning in 1993, Madonna became my literal “girl next door,” living in Bugsy Siegal’s former residence and gambling den, the showy nine-story Castillo del Lago that was like...well, Madonna on stage in stilts. It was quite a production after she had it painted red with yellow stripes. And at the same time, I was renting out the Mulholland house to actor Keanu Reeves, keeping the basement for myself as a storeroom and alternative residence. But I digress....



Casa de Lila and Castillo del Lago



My first drawing of the proposed compound looks slightly squashed down.

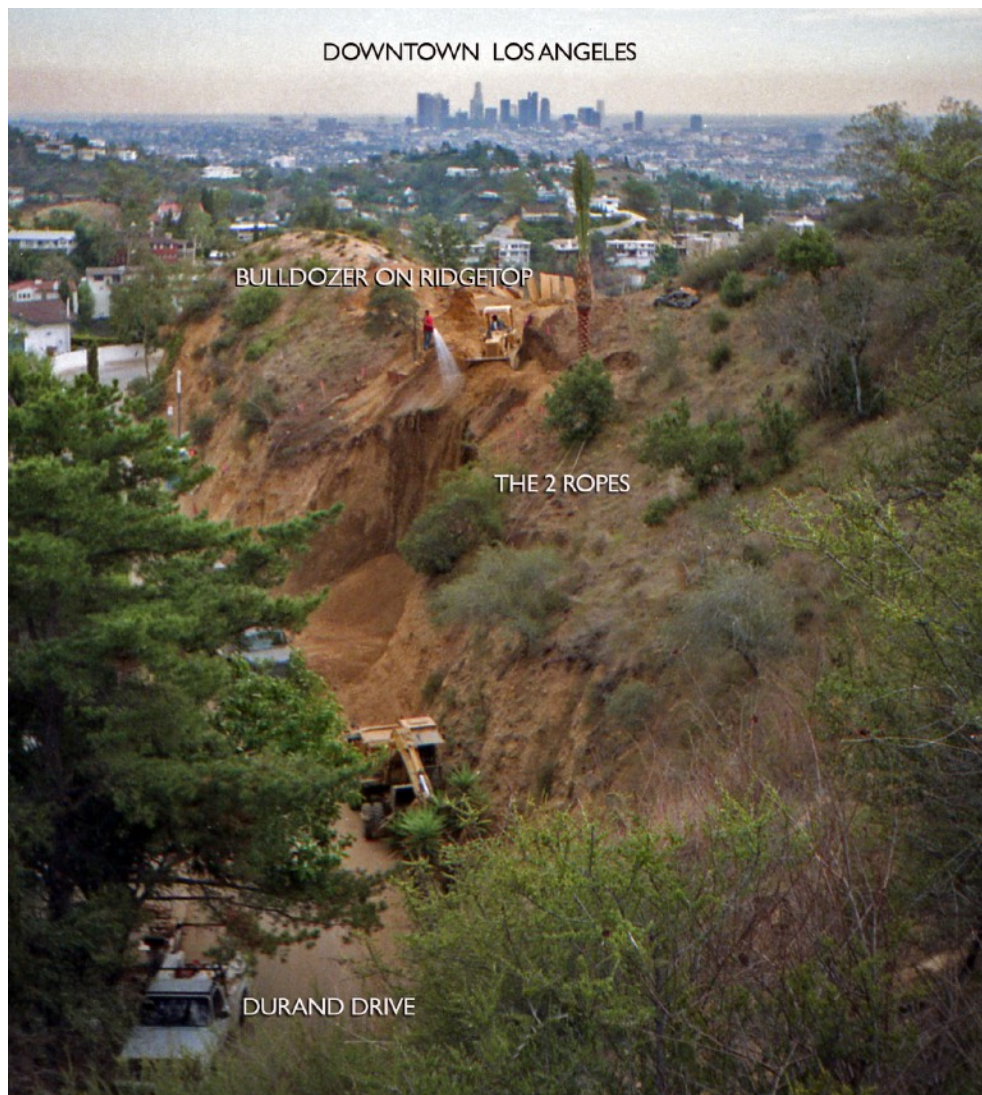


The blueprint and drawing captures the ultimate look of Casa de Lila.



The lot upon which the house stood, and the two additional lots purchased by Steve to enlarge the grounds, had been considered unbuildable since the Hollywoodland tract was first laid out in the 1920s. This allowed me to buy the main lot for only \$75,000 but necessitated a huge additional risk, effort, and expense in infrastructure. At times, during the cutting of the terraces in decomposed granite, I felt like me and my mostly Latin American crew were rebuilding Machu Picchu. Just as we were starting the grading I fell off a cliff because the rope I was using to climb up pulled out the tree stump it was tied to. I slid down in an avalanche of dirt and rocks. Just when I thought I might be okay, the stump landed on my head. It resulted in a peach-sized lump on my head and a herniated disk that took years to heal. After the rope was secured a second time, one of my workers rolled up that rope and added another—unsecured—rope that was used to pull up tools. Not knowing there were two ropes, I grabbed the wrong one and took another fall. This time, the pile of dirt at the bottom broke my fall.

We had to cut down the top of the ridge with a bulldozer tied to a crane and more than 100 trucks of decomposed granite had to be removed to lower the ridge



enough so a house could fit on it. We also had to hand-dig 16 caisson piles, and associated footings and grade beams, to secure the buildings and retaining walls against earthquakes. The infinity pool was essentially cantilevered because it was built to the edge of the higher cliff on the south side.



Me with most of my international crew in 1991. That's Jose Luis on the left in a blue shirt, and his brother Javier on the far right. This reminds me of the photo with me and the crew on the steps of my 1964 fort.





The gardens with the statues, stream, waterfalls, fountains, and swimming pool was almost as important as the house itself. We planted a Moreton Bay Fig Tree (*Ficus Macrophylla*) in the circular east garden. It's a type of banyan tree with imposing buttress roots and multiple trunks formed by aerial roots that drop down from the mother tree. The idea was that someday the aerial roots would march out over the edge of the surrounding cliffs.

Before: me making rocks until after dark. 1993.

After: the stream and waterfall near the main entrance. The stream continued under a bridge and there was another waterfall on the lower level of the main house.





The stream from the upper bridge. We made most of the rocks out of colored and stained stucco, which were stamped from moulds taken from real rocks. We also used real rocks where appropriate. The aim was to make it all look as natural as possible and, over time, as the plants grew in, it looked even better.



Statue of Sekhmet, the Egyptian cat-faced goddess in the palm-lined garden in front of the guest house. This was the view from my front door. The statue was cast from a prop used in Orson Welles' 1941 classic movie, *Citizen Kane*, and in the movie was located at Charles Foster Kane's Zanadu estate. The statue fit both the pyramidal theme of the garden and the



Day and night views of infinity edge pool with Los Angeles below.





Top floor of Casa de Lila. 1994

### **Coming Soon**

The second installment of this series on Design and Construction, Water Feature Designs 1996 - 2001, will focus on projects where the landscape and water features were more important than the buildings, like El Cielito Springs in Santa Barbara:



**The third installment** will focus on my project in downtown DeLand, Florida, which involved rebuilding the former “Cracktown” into the Garden District, beginning in 2001. While the *Design and Construction: The Garden District 2001 to 2018* web page autobiography is under construction, there is a **Garden District page** that has many articles about this neighborhood project. The Garden District is an ongoing 18 year long project, that includes 34 rebuilt homes and/or businesses that I rebuild in the early years, and 13 proposed homes on a pedestrian lane called Palm Garden Cottages.

Of the more than 60 homes I’ve designed and/or built, my favorite is the small one I’m living in now, which I’m planning to make somewhat bigger. It will have a natural swimming pool (filtered by plants) and waterfall (powered by solar energy). And there will be a rope swing. The inside of the little guest house will look like a gypsy wagon, and it will be reached by a bridge that traverses a stair-stepping waterfall.

It is immensely satisfying to think and dream about something and then bring it into physical reality through physical effort. The result is three-dimensional art, and a home for me and my loved ones. But the home is only one part of a community, which is imbedded in a town, a state, a country and an interconnected world. It is the security and sanctity of that world that most concerns me now.



Phoenix Court, in the Garden District, DeLand, FL, before and after. 2001 - 2004

