

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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YOUR HOME ON THE WEB

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## Homes

# Making the Cut

## Cowboy Heaven Comes to Earth on a Santa Ynez Horse Ranch

**Architecture by David L. Leavengood, AIA/Interior Design by Amy Weaver/  
Landscape Architecture by Carol Puck Erickson, ASLA, and Brian Brodersen,  
ASLA, of Arcadia Studio**

**Text by Patricia Leigh Brown/Photography by Laurie Black Published October  
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When I was five years old, I wanted to be a cowboy,” a former investment banker confides somewhat bemusedly. “I could never quite get over that.”

Fast-forward to 1999, when the boy, now a successful executive, purchases a 4,998-acre ranch in California’s Santa Ynez Valley as a home for his cutting horse operation, christening it Rancho Latigo after the leather straps to which the cinch is secured on a saddle.

David Leavengood enlisted local artisans, including metalsmiths, to bring in a handcrafted quality.

Today, with miles of horse trails and views of untrammelled mountains enveloped in fog, the ranch bears little resemblance to the overgrazed and weed-ridden landscape that the owner and the Seattle architect David L. Leavengood originally encountered. Leavengood is considered one of the country’s foremost authorities on ranch

architecture, working on rustically inclined estates in Montana, where he lived and taught for 18 years. “The ranch was pretty beat-up, platted for development and crisscrossed with a lot of horrible roads,” he explains. A team of -ologists—geologists, hydrologists and plant ecologists—spent nine years restoring the land, getting rid of thistle, mistletoe and other invasive species, cleaning up streams, repairing eroded hillsides and reseeding unused roads. The result: “a national park comeback,” in Leavengood’s words, in which native willows and bunch grass, black bears and mountain lions, have all returned.

For the house, the architect looked to the simple Spanish colonial styles of South America, inspired by 18th- and 19th-century Colombian residences like the Casa Cuervo near Bogotá and the Hacienda Calibío in Popayán, which are also built around courtyards. “They’re very direct, with a strong sense of weight,” Leavengood observes of the rural Valencian and Andalusian styles of New Granada. Compared with their Southern California counterparts, “there’s far less detailing, with more wood,” he notes. “That began to resonate with both the client and myself.”

For his part, the owner wished to avoid western clichés. An accomplished cook—Bolognese sauce and chocolate gâteau are fortes—he wanted an abundance of “warm and private spaces” for conversation.

Leavengood enlisted local artisans, including metalsmiths, to bring in a handcrafted quality; the heavy ceiling beams are reclaimed railroad trestles, complete with bolt holes.

To further the warmth factor, the owner turned to Amy Weaver, of the Weaver Design Group in Marin County, who followed her client’s penchant for opulence by selecting silk-velvet draperies, antique Persian rugs, English and Italian antiques, and custom chandeliers and fireplace surrounds. “He wanted more of a European feel, more sophisticated than a traditional ranch,” Weaver says. “I followed his lead. We brought a city look to the ranch without being too precious.”

Resident niceties include a 10,000-bottle wine cellar and a swimming pool designed with input from children, teenagers among them, who requested permanent diving boulders (Dad, a competitive swimmer, prefers laps).

“Ranches are essentially hamlets, small villages,” Leavengood remarks. As such, land planning and reclamation—including five 35,000-gallon underground cisterns—must all be resolved along with architecture. The additional challenge at Rancho Latigo was designing for both humans and horses. The latter reside in a handsome 10,000-square-foot barn with rubber mat flooring and motorized clerestories for ventilation. “Not every horse gets a room at the hotel,” he says wryly.

Let other men his age swat around golf or tennis balls—the owner of Rancho Latigo is happiest in spurs, boots and chaps, engaged in intricate equestrian choreography. His distinctive yen is for a two-and-a-half-minute-long competitive event in which the rider must quietly separate, or “cut,” a particular cow from the herd, loosening the reins and allowing the horse to do the work in sprints and turns, with no guidance from the rider. “It’s the greatest ride ever,” he says of the mid-19th-century practice that evolved when cattlemen gathered herds on plains with few fences. “But I like being on my feet eyeball-to-eyeball with a horse, developing trust. You can’t be in a rush around them. You’ve got to dial yourself down.”

What better way to dial oneself down than to create a refuge built around an enduring passion? At Rancho Latigo, rugged terrain is made poetic by the equine landscape—in which paddocks, riding arenas and shady arbors with fieldstone watering pools celebrate the unique relationship between man and horse, bringing a human dimension to the wild.

The owner takes none of it for granted, considering himself a fortunate steward. “At the ranch, we have had the opportunity for the earth to regenerate and repair itself,” he says. Along the way, the spirit gets restored as well.