PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL

Architect brings celebrity touch to Arizona

Sep 5, 2004, 9:00pm MST **Updated: Sep 2, 2004, 8:57am MST**

Two or three times a month, an architect and developer who specializes in estates for movie stars and sports figures travels from his Bel-Air, Calif., office to Scottsdale to oversee his first Arizona mansion.

Mauricio Oberfeld, a partner in Dugally Oberfeld LLC, is finishing one luxury house in Desert Mountain, starting another nearby and working on a design for a third. If his company's exclusive homes become popular in the metro Phoenix market, "then we'll be there for a long time," Oberfeld said in an interview from his Los Angeles office.

Dugally Oberfeld's homes for the rich and famous share one trait -- their original designs.

"When people walk through this house, they feel its design," he said. "I don't know of anyone who has walked through this house and hasn't felt that there is something unique and strong."

Dugally Oberfeld was established in the 1950s. It has a client roster that includes actors Denzel Washington, Sylvester Stallone, Kelsey Grammar and Geena Davis, and baseball players Mark McGwire and Chuck Finley. Before Oberfeld joined the company a few years ago, partner Aleck Dugally supervised the design of homes for celebrities, including John Wayne and Rita Hayworth. The firm's third principal is Matt Dugally.

Oberfeld, 33, teamed with Scottsdale architect James Hann to work in Arizona.

The nearly finished house in Desert Mountain, priced at $4.8 million, is expected to be on the market in a few weeks. Construction started in mid-2003.

Each time Oberfeld visits, he walks slowly through the rooms, analyzing colors and designs from every angle and at different times of day. He looks for the way each architectural element meshes with every other component, from the size and depth of "pillowing" on the custom wood panel doors to the shape and color of the stones trucked to the site from Telluride, Colo.

If a design element clashes with the rest of the total picture, it comes out. Cornices on the fireplace mantle in the master bedroom have been replaced twice.

For Oberfeld, no detail is too small. He instructed the workers about the grout between the Colorado stones. The grout is wire-brushed during application, allowing the edges of the stones to stand out from the grout.

"He works in only one speed -- top quality," said Keith Marshall, a Desert Mountain sales executive who is co-listing the property with partner Mike Doyle.

Architects and developers say that when a building or home is finished, it makes a statement. Walking through Oberfeld's Desert Mountain home, one can almost hear whispers pointing out each detail.

"When you see this house," Oberfeld promised, "it will talk to you."

The house sits on an acre-plus site bordered by desert washes and far from golf cart paths and tee boxes, ensuring privacy. It has 7,184 square feet, a three-car garage, and a backyard with covered patios, a fire pit, a lawn and two lookout points.

Inside, the two-story house entices visitors with subtle design elements that tease the eye from room to room. The wrought iron railing on the staircase was made to Oberfeld's satisfaction, as were the small molten glass windows near the ceiling in the upstairs bedrooms. The large but elegant baseboards were milled to his specifications because generic baseboards were unacceptable.

Arches are a dominant design in the house, from the small and large wood-framed windows in the bedrooms, to the massive windows in the great room, to the doorways. Small arched windows are over the staircase, for more light and a feeling of space.

The wood beams are a focal point of total design. When the methods workers used to distress the beams didn't meet Oberfeld's standards, he had his personal tools shipped by Federal Express from Los Angeles to Scottsdale.

"Distressing isn't just about beating it up with a hammer. Distressing is to make it look like it's been there forever, and you need special tools to do that."

Oberfeld said the company has about 20 luxury homes under construction at any one time.

"You make an effort for all of them to be special, but some are more special than others, and I think this house is one of those houses that is truly special," he said.

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