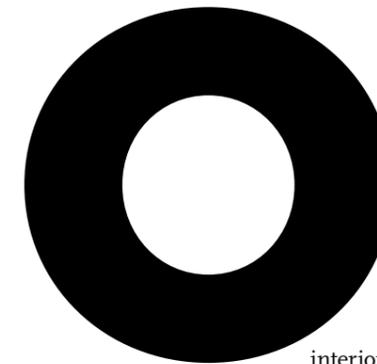




The Cadillac of Homes

Rolling into retirement, a former car designer puts a sleeker finish on Santa Fe style

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY | PHOTOS BY DANIEL QUAT



One day, as construction was getting started on Dennis and Beverly Little's Las Campanas home, the project's production manager matter-of-factly pointed out to Dennis that of course the Littles would want to make some changes along the way. "No," Dennis replied. "We're done."

He and Beverly, acting as their own general contractors and interior designers, had carefully chosen everything, from the custom plaster wall colors to flooring to appliances, including all the lighting and plumbing fixtures and every finish in the house. Instead of responding with vague gestures when asked about the size and placement of their cabinets, Dennis sat down with the cabinet-maker and sketched out the design and style, down to the hardware and type of wood.

This is what happens when a former world-class car designer and an ultra-organized former educator build a home. The Littles knew what they wanted, and Dennis's 30 years as a designer for General Motors, including nine years as chief designer at Cadillac Design Studios, gave him the tools and experience to envision and communicate—and in some cases create—what they had in mind.

"I'm inside the engine compartment of a '67 Jaguar. Give me a minute and let me get out," Dennis says when reached by phone one day this summer. He and Beverly have owned the gunmetal gray E-Type Roadster since 1977, and while the engine is being rebuilt, Dennis is removing and restoring other parts. He climbs out and joins his wife to talk about the home they've lived in since 2006, when it was completed after a smooth, barely 13-month construction period.

With clean, strong lines, sets of tall and narrow windows, and utilitarian materials like cold rolled steel, the Littles's home immediately took its place on the advance edge of what has become a swelling wave of contemporary architecture in Las Campanas. Dennis now serves on the luxury subdivision's architectural review committee, and calls the trend "a different spin on Santa Fe style."

The Littles, both Ohio natives, moved to Santa Fe in 1999 after 31 years in the Detroit suburb of Rochester Hills. They'd been looking for a place to retire, Dennis from car design and Beverly after teaching public elementary and junior high school and then 12 years as a learning consultant in a pioneering general education support program for high school students. They wanted a place that was "completely different, and New Mexico obviously filled the bill," Dennis says.

For their first Santa Fe house, a downsize from their Michigan residence, the Littles



A tall steel sculpture, the first that Dennis built, is powder coated in red and “huge,” a welding classmate exclaimed—to which Dennis responded, “Well, I designed cars.” Opposite: Beverly also studied welding, after which the couple designed and built a rusted-steel sculpture together. Her favorite tool is the plasma cutter.

hired architect Deborah Auten. When they decided to sell that house and build their dream home, they turned to Auten again. They wanted not only a more contemporary look, but also room for visits from their two grown daughters, both designers in Los Angeles. (Kelly is an interior designer and Christie founded and owns Vine Street Market USA, specializing in eco-friendly fashion totes.) This time the Littles included a separate guest wing, a media room, and generous outdoor living spaces, one for each of the three bedrooms and a large portal off the living room. When the couple is sitting outside watching the sunset, Beverly says, “It’s so quiet we can hear dragonfly wings.”

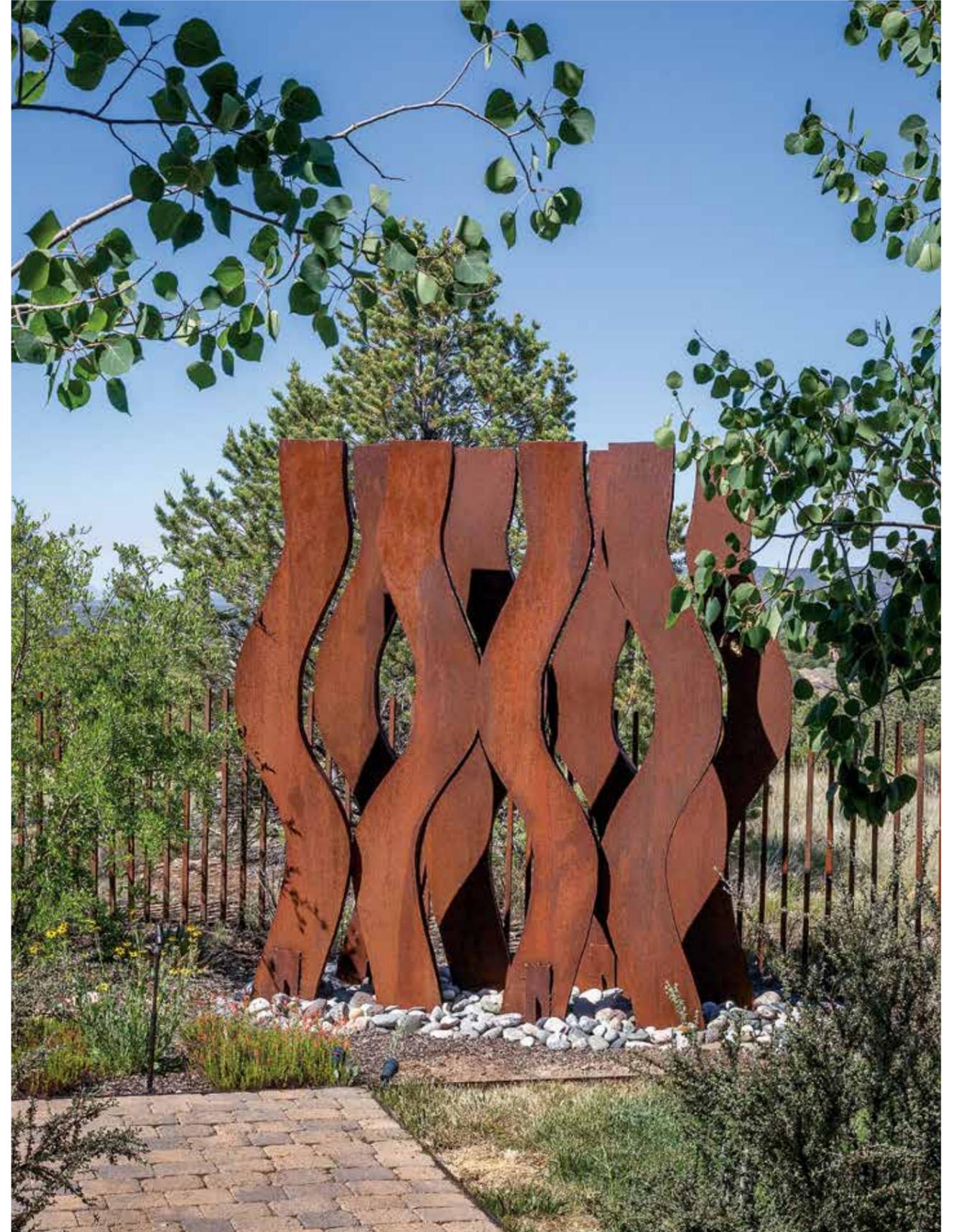
The new design also included a three-car garage for the Jaguar, his-and-hers Harley Davidson V-Rods, and two Cadillac

models. His is a Cadillac XT5 all-wheel drive and hers is a sporty ATS turbo. “We both like speed, but she’s the one I’m always telling to slow down,” Dennis says. Beverly smiles and adds, “On our motorcycles I always take the lead.” In 2010, the couple’s shared appreciation for finely built and meticulously maintained rides led them to establish and helm the annual Santa Fe Concours d’Elegance that draws entrants from around the country and raises money for local youth organizations.

As the Littles gathered inspiration for their new home, they compiled an “idea book,” a binder filled with magazine photo clippings and Dennis’s sketches, annotated with sticky notes. It was an effective means of visual communication with each other and the architect. Some elements

they loved didn’t make it into the final house, but many did—like using dark gray, cold-rolled steel to clad the vertical surfaces of the kitchen island and the large refrigerator surround. Along with a soft matte finish on the black slate floors and silver-gray plaster walls, inspired by the color of a juniper branch, they wanted a nonreflective surface on the steel.

It was perhaps an unexpected choice for two people with a passion for shiny motorcycles and cars. Yet in this case the absence of ultra-polished surfaces helped create what some may consider an oxymoron: a highly contemporary house that is welcoming and warm. Adding to this feeling is a diffused quality of light achieved in part through several sets of tall, narrow windows inspired by the late Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta, whose work in





Clockwise from left: The hallway is gently lit by narrow vertical windows inspired by the late Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta. On the wall hang paintings by Dennis. On the dining table is a dark-green patinaed bronze sculpture made by Beverly, cast from paper packing material dipped in wax, beneath an Italian Nessel light fixture. Black slate floors and silver-gray plaster walls provide a neutral background for the couple's artwork, including a large painting by Dennis inspired by the Neon Boneyard in Las Vegas, Nevada. The chairs are vintage chrome and maroon leather Wassily, alongside a mid-century stainless steel arc lamp.

Santa Fe includes the Santa Fe Art Institute. "For me as a designer, the repetition of the windows allowed that special play of light—sunlight or moonlight," Dennis says. The Littles's choice of finishes and window arrangements also allows the home's artwork, much of it produced by Dennis, to become the focal point.

The home is also situated to showcase the natural beauty for which this part of the country is so famous. In Michigan the Littles lived surrounded by trees for 30 years. Back then, when Dennis would see sketches of cars from designers in other parts of the world, he was struck by how

those artists sometimes incorporated deep orange, red, and purple reflections in the car's windows and chrome. "I'd wonder, where are they getting these ideas? Then we moved out here—to these sunsets," he says, his voice touched with awe. He and Beverly appreciate Auten's skill in orienting their home for the evening sky and also assuring that virtually every window faces mountain views, primarily the Jemez, but also the Sangre de Cristo and even the Sandia.

It's against this striking backdrop that the Littles shared their home with family and friends in September as they hosted a

wedding reception for their older daughter, Christie. It's also New Mexico's expansiveness and beauty, previously unimaginable to them, that made another feature, an art studio, almost a necessity.

The son of a machinist, Dennis took his father's advice as a young man and enrolled in mechanical engineering at Ohio University, where he and Beverly met. But math was not his good friend. He switched to art and discovered a natural talent. Combining that with a strong interest in cars (as a teen he won the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild Styling Award in the model car competition), he earned a



With a clear sense of what they wanted in every room, the couple chose dark gray cold-rolled steel to clad the vertical surfaces of the unconventionally shaped kitchen island and large refrigerator surround. Pieces from their eclectic art collection add color and interest.



Clockwise from bottom: Guests enjoy the portal, with outdoor furniture designed and built by Dennis. The Littles stroll by their gray 1967 Jaguar XKE Roadster and his-and-hers 2007 Harley Davidson V-Rods as they entertain car-loving friends: Lynn Springer, by her red 1964 Porsche 356C Coupe; Chris Hancock, in black shirt with his black 2001 Aston Martin Vantage Coupe; John Paul Gonzales, near his 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing Coupe; and Phillip Coombs and MaryEllen Collins, with MaryEllen's silver 2002 Boxster S visible in back. Beverly, at left, and Dennis at the table, right, share a toast with friends.



BFA in industrial design, which included a course in car design. General Motors hired him right out of school, and his drawing skills were put to years of good use in that pre-computer-aided era.

These days Dennis's creative output takes many forms. With time on his hands during construction, he learned welding at Santa Fe Community College and began to work with steel. Along with steel cladding for use in the kitchen, he fabricated steel furniture for the first time. He recounts a visit to Los Angeles, where he and Beverly were drawn to an outdoor furniture set with a midcentury modern look. Dennis wanted to buy it. Beverly disagreed, saying the furniture sat too low. Dennis tried doing a sell job, but Beverly stood firm. "So I thought, I know how to solve this," he says. He designed a similar set at the right height. He cut and welded the steel, had it powder coated, and built a sofa, two chairs, and an outdoor daybed. He also created

abstract outdoor sculptures, exterior light fixtures, and the entrance courtyard's broad, pivoting gate, all finished in rusted steel.

And he took up acrylic and watercolor paints, with which he had dabbled some years before. After decades of rendering extremely precise and detailed drawings of future cars, he found it liberating to wield a paintbrush with no parameters or anyone else's expectations involved. At first he attached the brush to the end of a stick to help him relinquish tight control. Although he no longer needs the stick, his unconventional approach involves working with the canvas flat on the floor or leaning against the studio wall. Today he spends time in the studio when the mood strikes him, making art for pleasure rather than for sale.

But a couple of years ago he had an assignment. "I told him it was time to change the artwork in the house, and he came up with four fabulous abstract

paintings," Beverly says. The paintings, the largest of which measures 72-by-72 inches, were inspired by a visit to the Neon Boneyard in Las Vegas, Nevada, an outdoor museum of retired neon signs.

While the studio was originally built for Dennis, he scooted his art materials over and made room for a jeweler's bench a few years ago after Beverly took a jewelry making class. She now creates contemporary pendants and bracelets, cast or fabricated in sterling silver, with nature as her inspiration—casting pencil cactus twigs or seedpods, for example. "As a teacher for 31 years I didn't think I'd ever do artwork," Beverly says. "But out here I think you allow yourself to be more free in spirit."

Dennis's career involved creativity, but, like his wife, he previously didn't feel strongly compelled to express himself through art. Now he does. "Just living in New Mexico is so inspiring," he says. "If you open your mind to it, you feel it. It allows the creativity to flow." ✨

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