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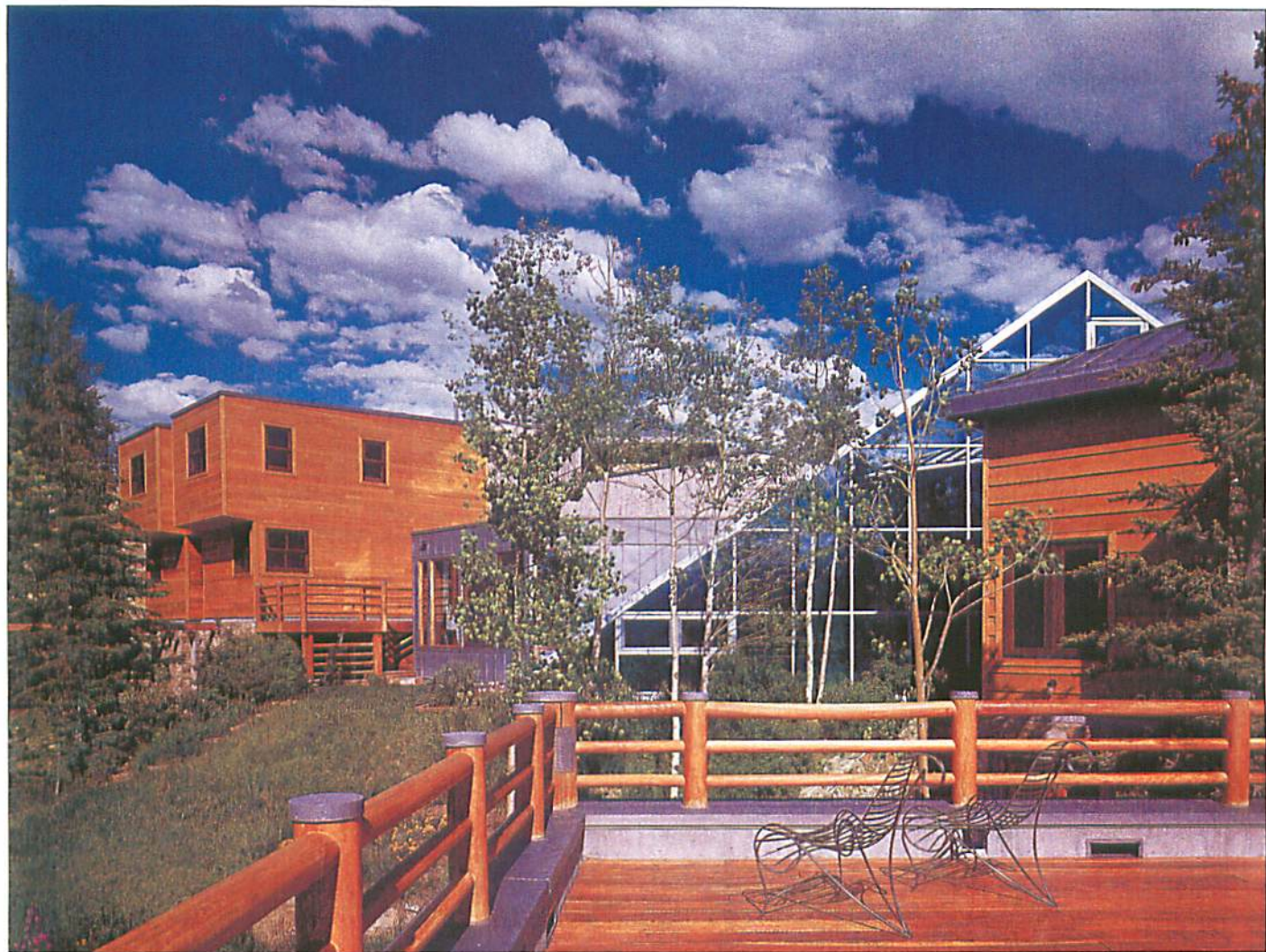


AN ASPEN RENAISSANCE

EUROPEAN THEMES REINTERPRETED FOR THE AMERICAN WEST

Architecture by Horacio Ravazzani/Interior Design by Sills Huniford Associates

Text by Judith Thurman/Photography by Durston Saylor



When James and Betsy Fifield decided to build a house in Aspen, he was still the chief executive of EMI's music division, and they lived a multicoastal life, with residences in California, New York and London. His heart, however, was in Colorado, where he had spent his childhood, and they were both passionate skiers. Fifield told his wife that he wanted to commission "a legacy in the mountains: something glamorous, important and original that would be in our fam-

ily for generations." She, an artist with a background in contemporary design, took up what proved to be a daunting executive challenge: "I set out to realize Jim's vision of paradise."

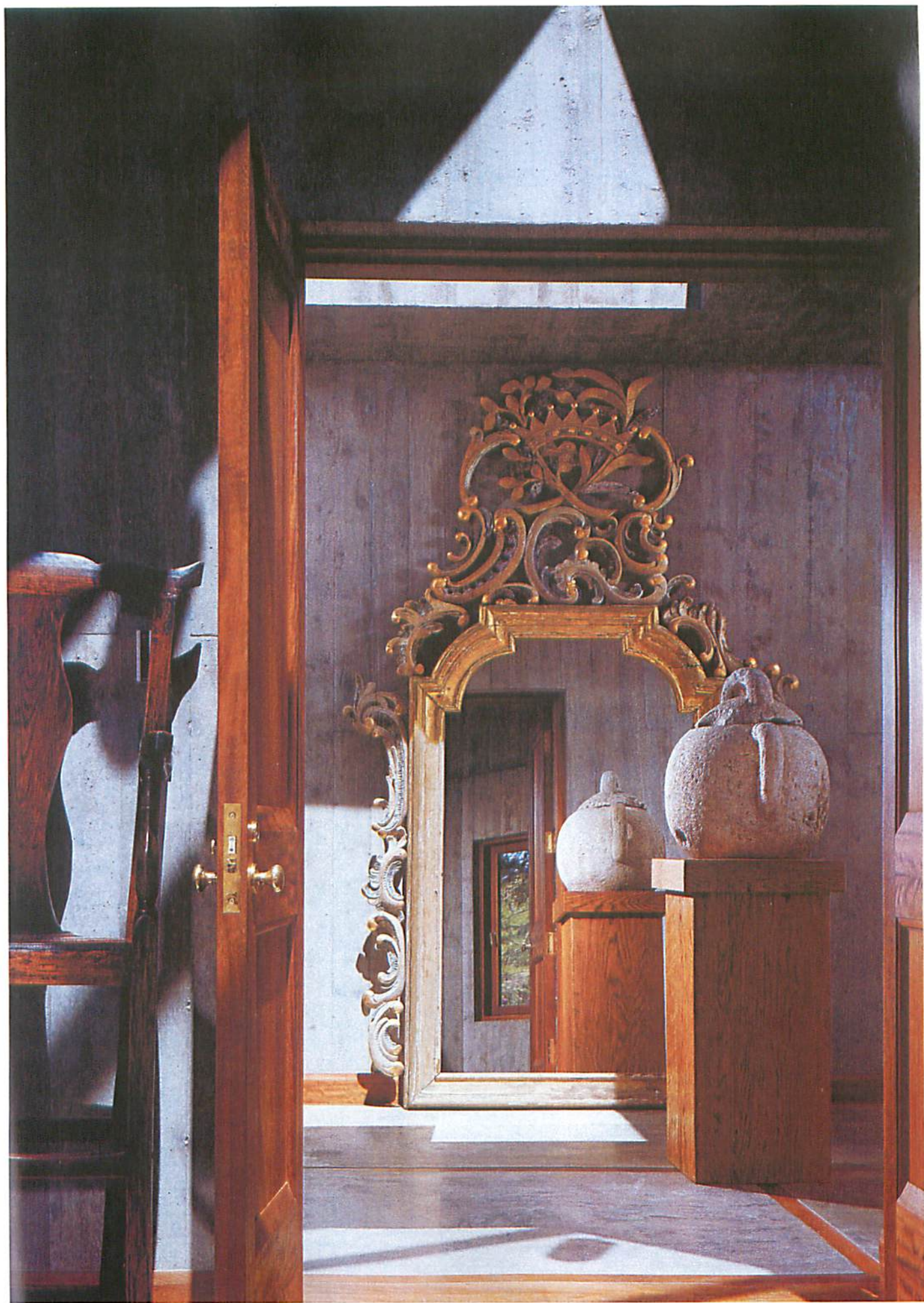
Last year the music mogul, who has a virile appetite for adventure, traded one kind of hard rock for another. He became the CEO of The North Face and relocated his company's headquarters to the pristine valley town of Carbondale, thirty-five minutes by motorcycle (Jim Fifield's commuter vehicle of preference) from

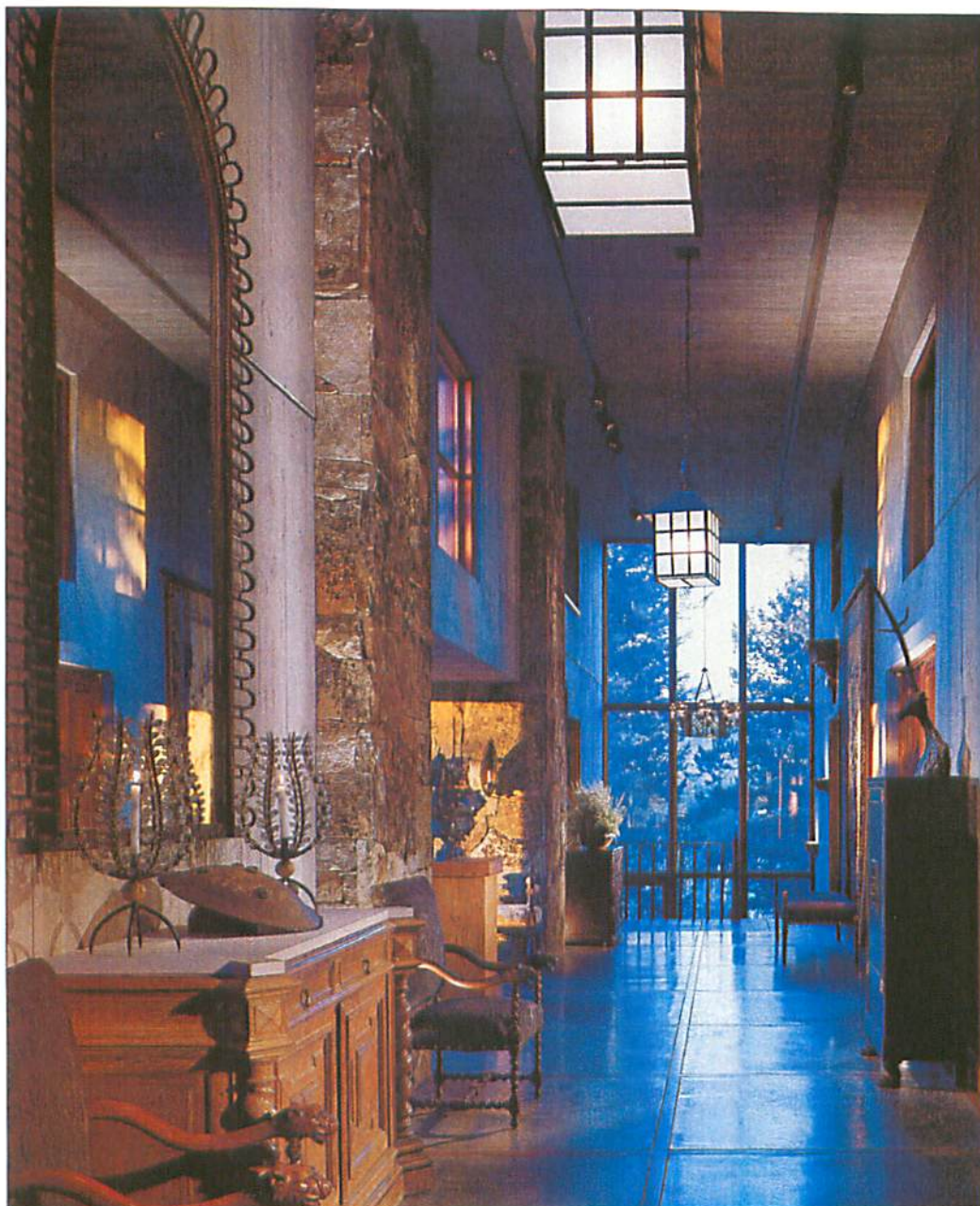
his Aspen property—a thirty-acre site of heart-stopping beauty. The holiday refuge and future family heirloom was suddenly to be their year-round home.

There is, of course, nothing unusual about multimillion-dollar showplaces in America's best-heeled ski town. A new one seems to be finished every month, and if it is not filled with antlers, kilims and distressed leather, it has crystal chandeliers and malachite lap pools. The Fifield residence, however, is something unique in scope, detail and distinction:

ABOVE: In his design for the Aspen residence of Betsy and James Fifield, Uruguayan architect Horacio Ravazzani used "an alternate and irregular arrangement of volumes," he says. The glass pyramid, which bisects the length of the residence, is a greenhouse.

For the interiors, New York designers Stephen Sills and James Huniford "took a modernist approach, with references to the past," says Huniford. OPPOSITE: In the gallery, which has board-form concrete walls, are an ancient Roman jar and a Portuguese mirror.





a 15,000-square-foot compound of Colorado stone, board-form concrete, greenhouse glass and African iroko wood, with furnishings that recall the moody Flemish palaces and Baroque hunting lodges of northern Europe. It is the product of an eminent if unlikely collaboration between Uruguayan architect Horacio Ravazzani, whose austere modern houses first captured Betsy Fifiel's admiration in the pages of this magazine, and New York-based interior designers Stephen Sills and James Huniford, who are fa-

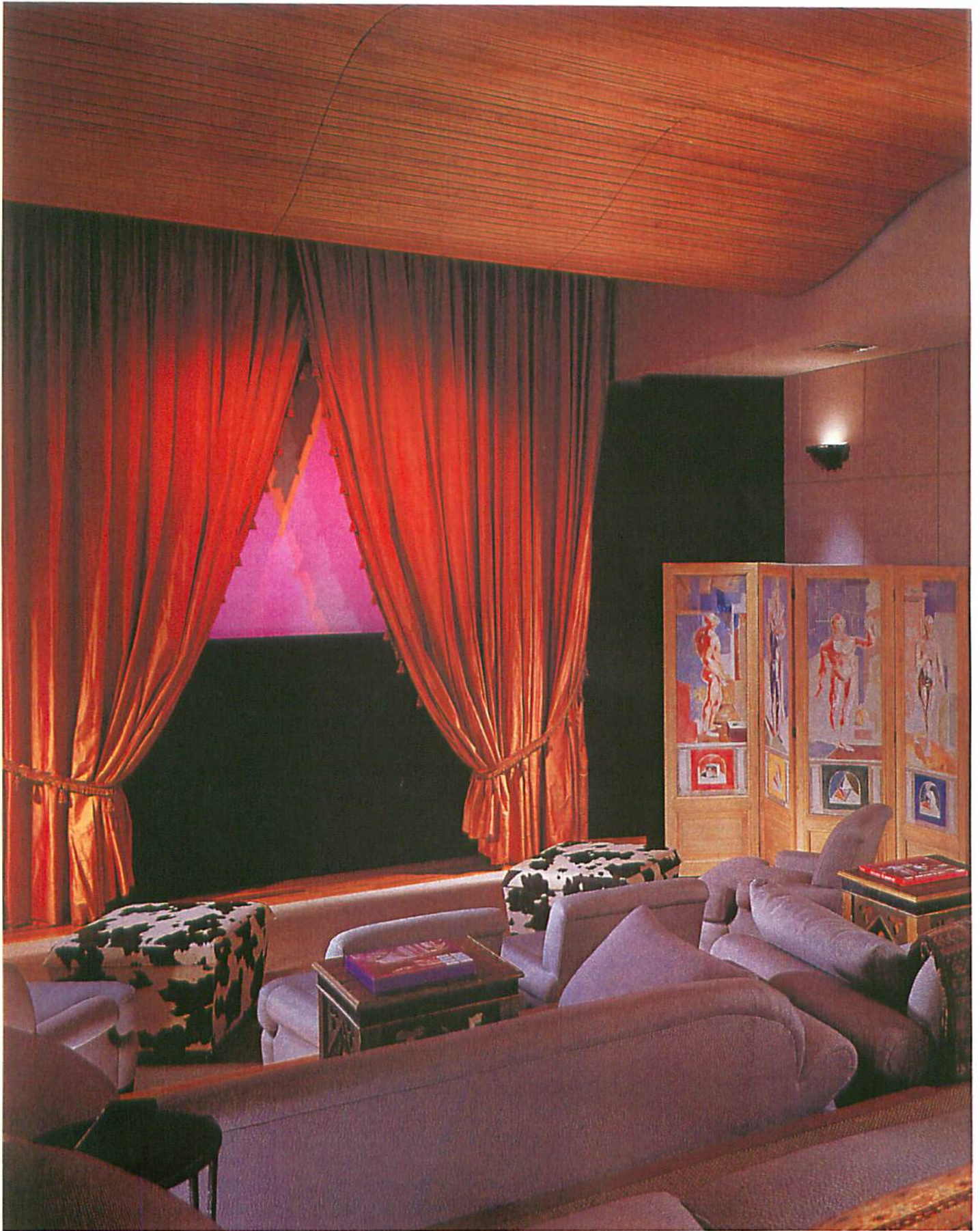
mous for their subtle grandeur.

"I put together an extraordinary team," says Betsy Fifiel with just pride. "We hired Horacio after the first interview. We loved his idiom, but to some degree the design was a surprise. I hadn't imagined a two-hundred-foot gallery or a greenhouse for tropical flowers among the pines at eight thousand feet. When the plans came in, I realized that the scale of the project required designers of commensurate imagination, and that meant Stephen and Ford, who were involved practical-

ABOVE: The imposing stepped gallery, which follows the gradations of the mountain, acts as the spine of the house, linking rooms on three levels. "It's not just used as a hall," Sills notes. "We created several different seating areas, and they get a lot of use."

RIGHT: "The Fifiels said they wanted the house to be 'castle-like,'" says Sills. For the double-height living room, he and Huniford chose late-Renaissance-style pieces, including a pair of 17th-century Dutch chandeliers and a 17th-century-style Flemish mirror.

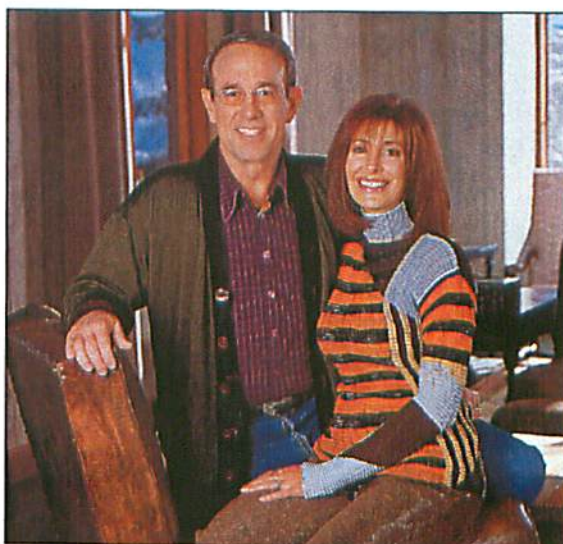






LEFT: Animated by an undulating wood ceiling, the screening room is "more fun," Sills says. In keeping with the lighter tone, the designers furnished the space with a circa 1940 French folding screen, ottomans upholstered in cowhide and a silk taffeta curtain.

James and Betsy Fifield (right) "both love antiques," Sills says. "In the city they had Biedermeier, but in Aspen we used robust, masculine furniture because the house can take it." ABOVE: The guest bedroom "is a mix of European furnishings and American comfort."



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ly from the beginning, planning the décor from blueprints and floor plans.”

The Fifiels, says Sills, “gave us an opportunity to create an American country château of sober splendor on a princely scale. The refinement of the interior architecture makes a dramatic counterpoint to the more rustic beauty of the structure that contains it. We’re known for our modernist approach to classicism, but here we wanted to reinvent a seventeenth-century aesthetic that has, for so long, been unfashionable.”

The Fifiel house was designed both for large-scale entertaining and for the intimate life of a family with three children, one still very young. The greenhouse, a glass pyramid lushly planted

with orchids and bougainvillea, serves as both a breakfast room and a banquet hall. It divides the guest wing and Betsy Fifiel’s painting studio (she will have her first show of watercolors next year, in Aspen) from the main structure. Sills and Huniford, who often draw their inspiration from old-master paintings, have given each of the small guest suites the chastened richness of an interior from Vermeer.

The formal rooms on the first floor open to the gallery—an “interior street,” as Sills calls it—with heated floors of moss-green slate and walls of board-form concrete. It is arranged for living and conversation—not just for passage—with sofas, tapestries,

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ABOVE: “The master bath resembles a wonderful sitting room,” Sills says. “We offset the modernism of the room with strong individual elements—dueling tubs, Moroccan tile, a Dutch settee.” Insect motifs—“a subtle but magical detail”—are cast into the plaster walls.

RIGHT: Moroccan tiles extend into the master bedroom. “We wanted pattern and vibrant colors as well as hard surfaces for the floors,” says Sills. “It’s like an Italian palazzo.” The tester bed is English; the 1820 wrought iron torchère is Italian. Henry Calvin bed fabrics.



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mirrors and sculpture. In the baronial living room, the iroko-wood ceilings are thirty feet high, and the focal point is a palace mirror in the seventeenth-century Flemish style. Its ebony frame would be suitable for a very large Rembrandt, but Betsy Fifield has decided she will not hang art there or elsewhere in the house because, she says, "it would detract from the monastic mood of the architecture."

What is most monkish, or, more precisely, abbeylike, about this great room is the symmetry of its furnishings and the rigor with which they have been edited. Sills and Huniford designed the ten-foot sofas, upholstered in suede, and a banquette in olive mohair. They enlivened the rather somber *chiaroscuro* of the interiors with richly textured antique fabrics, like the African chevron cloth that covers a Tudor-style English bench, and a rare French Gothic-style needlepoint rug in a Fabergé palette of pistachio, magenta and chartreuse. On one of their many shopping trips to Europe ("It's a lot of work," Huniford allows, "to fill a house this size"), the partners found a pair of seventeenth-century Dutch brass chandeliers that were "shockingly perfect in scale and presence" for the room. And they were gratified that their clients, who prefer to entertain by candlelight, decided not to have them electrified.

While most of the public rooms are on one level, there is an underground theater, a mezzanine office and a second-floor master suite of breathtaking and somewhat deceptive sparseness. The floors in the stair hall, bedroom and bath have been laid with an intricate mosaic of Moroccan tile that was designed by Sills and Huniford and handmade in England. "Its strong geometry and color," Huniford notes, "help to balance the ceiling height and to enrich the coolness and simplicity of the furnishings." The Fifields "scavenged" the nineteenth-century marble tubs from a Roman junkyard, and their designers, eschewing the cliché of his-and-her baths, set them at the center of a light-filled corner room with walls of softly waxed white plaster, a Dutch settee upholstered in antique French homespun and the refined sensuality of a Moorish *hammam*.

It should be noted that in the late sixteenth century the Low Countries were ruled by Spain. The Spanish colonial influences, the ubiquity of iron and silver, the marriage of sumptuous weavings to severe furnishings—a deliberate tension between the expression of wealth and the rejection of opulence for its own sake—are entirely appropriate to the designers' notion of the Flemish Baroque and to their ambition to "reinvent" it in a lucid and disciplined modern way. The house, in fact, recalls a very handsome recent production, at the Met, of Verdi's *Don Carlo*. The libretto of this court romance has a subversive democratic subtext, and so does this décor. Sills and Huniford have respected Ravazzani's raw modernism by leaving the rooms uncluttered, and that is why—for all their European hauteur—they also feel so New World. Not so far away (at least from the designers' own country house in upstate New York) there are a few surviving colonial Dutch manors of natural stone and wood with a distinctly kindred spirit.

All great châteaux are years in the making, and the Fifields' house took a staggering 1,890 days from the ground breaking to the housewarming. More than a hundred tons of boulders were trucked up the mountain. A small forest of iroko was imported from the Ivory Coast. Two thousand yards of concrete was poured on-site. The hardware order was so large that the company agreed to an unprecedented custom mill run of unlacquered fixtures. The clients gave their design team creative carte blanche—and the team, in turn, gave the clients something more than just its professional services. "Everyone involved was committed to an ideal of perfection," Betsy Fifield says, "and the crew told me that their experience was very emotional—that it was more like an opera than a construction project."

Yet what's most remarkable about the Fifield residence is not how vast or fabulous it is but how little self-indulgent. What might have been a temple of excess—an operatic clash of styles and egos—is an edifice that defers to its landscape and an interior design that sets a benchmark of rational luxury for the millennium. □