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Even a vase got a tattoo. PAGE 2

THE CALIFORNIA GARDEN

Serenity: It's in season

After the flurry of the holidays, breathe in the quiet beauty outside. The winter landscape may be dormant in some regions, but here in Southern California the garden is alive and more tranquil than ever. The lingering hues of autumn mix with the early shades of spring. Some sites, stripped of their gaudiest colors, become studies in nature's nuances. Crowds are smaller. Calm reigns. We highlight four of the region's landmark residences: a graceful Hollywood estate, an eccentric mountain wonderland, an Eastside spiritual retreat and a classic Western ranch — all places of quiet contemplation, open to the public, waiting to deliver the most peaceful moment of your year. *Page 9*

ALLEN J. SCHABEN *Los Angeles Times*

ARTFUL WHIMSY
Bent crescent wrenches add a twist to a snow-dusted sculpture garden in Idyllwild.

ANNIE WELLS *Los Angeles Times*

MEDITATIVE OASIS
The grounds at Self-Realization Fellowship on Mt. Washington beckon to visitors.

MEL MELCON *Los Angeles Times*

WHERE TIME STANDS STILL
John MacPherson and his daughter Amy, 5, at the historic Orcutt Ranch in Canoga Park.

IRIS SCHNEIDER *Los Angeles Times*

HOLLYWOOD HIDEAWAY Timeless beauty awaits at the Wattles Mansion and Gardens estate, which is about to celebrate its 100th year.

INNER LIFE

A treehouse like no other

Bedrooms are perched high in its branches. The first floor curls around its trunk. At this 4,000-square-foot storybook home in Ojai, an old oak truly stands at the heart. PAGE 3

STEPHEN OSMAN *Los Angeles Times*

MODERN LIFE

Dec. 31? Oh, lucky you

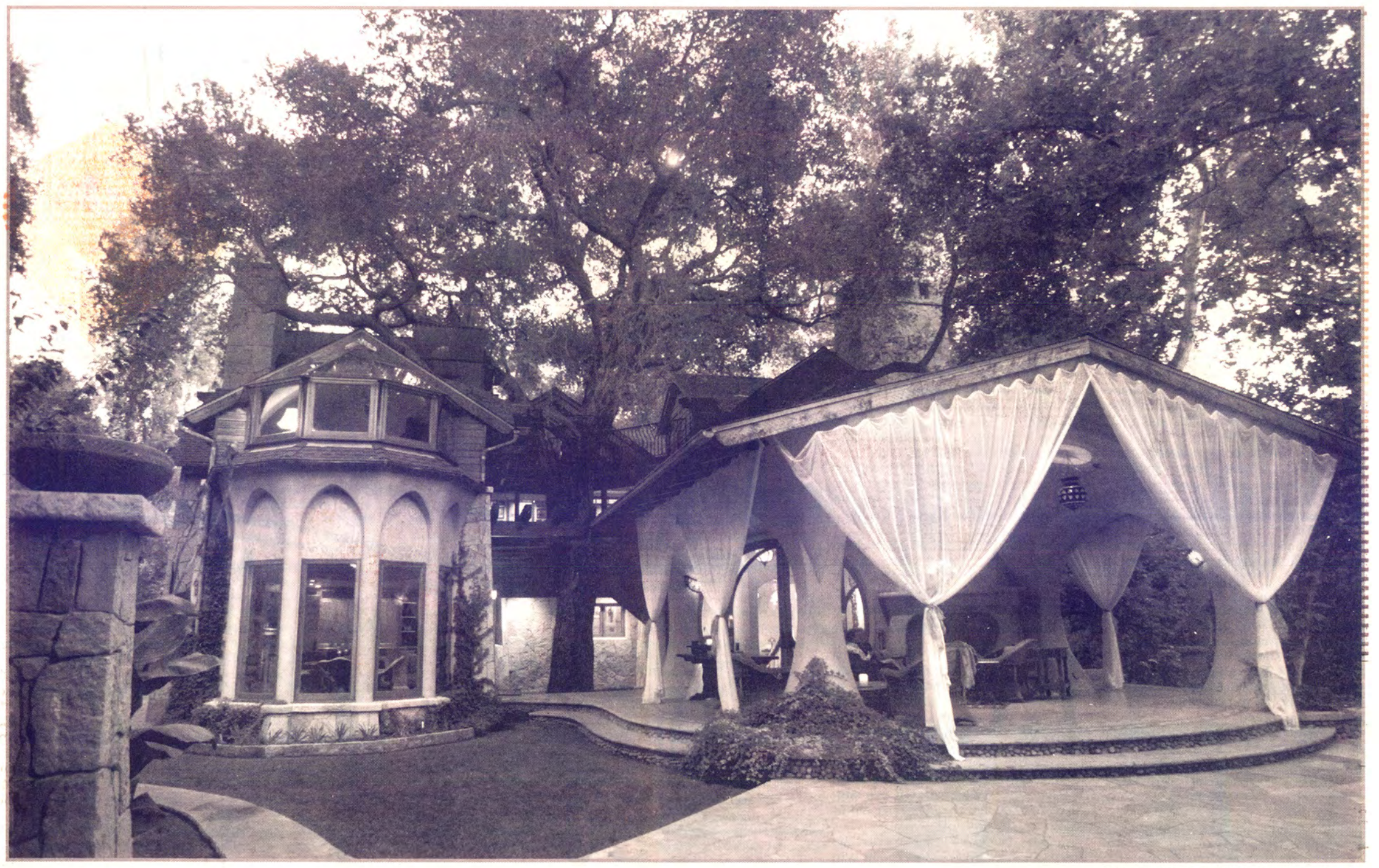
By BETTIJANE LEVINE
Times Staff Writer

THEY cook, they clean, they shower in the extreme. At midnight they eat hoppin' John or 12 grapes or a dozen black-eyed peas — all supposedly prescribed by the ancients to bring good luck in the new year.

Canvas Southern California and you'll hear a thousand different home rituals — ethnic customs, family traditions or just plain kooky rites of weirdness — that are meant to be lucky. Skeptics may call it

[*See New Year, Page F4*]

WENDY WAHMAN *For The Times*



Photographs by STEPHEN OSMAN *Los Angeles Times*

RUSTIC RAMBLER: *The Whitmans built their new house of Ojai stone and timber, adding structures around the tree trunk, including a spacious outdoor living room, right, with a fireplace.*

INNER LIFE

Nature at the heart of it all

An Ojai family lived for years in a tiny stone house with a detached bedroom built high in a tree. When they were ready to add on, they devised a series of fairy-tale spaces linked together around their beloved oak.

By BETTIJANE LEVINE
Times Staff Writer

YOU'VE heard of tree lovers and tree-huggers and all sorts of houses built to avoid cutting down nearby trees. But Marc and Julia Whitman went a step further. They made their favorite tree a part of their architectural plan. They built their house to interact with the coast live oak. Their ground floor curves around its aged trunk. Their bedrooms nestle among its branches. Their rooflines accommodate all its major limbs. They can see and hear their tree as it bends with the wind and changes with the seasons as viewed through almost every door and window.

The question is, why would the Whitmans build such a fairy-tale treehouse, especially when they had acres of usable land at their disposal? They could have built a more conventional (and less costly) house anywhere on their property.

But love is strange. And after years of living in a small cabin beneath the comforting canopy of the old oak's branches, they loved the tree too much to leave it. It wasn't even a matter for discussion. They would build a new, larger house, and the tree would be part of the plan. "It's integral to the design," Marc says.

BREEZY HAVEN: *Julia and Marc Whitman, left, are framed in the gathered white drapes of the porch, with its pillars sculpted into the shapes of tree trunks. The floor is randomly scattered with inset tile leaves. Above, a handcrafted hanging lamp casts a patterned glow on the curving ceiling, which has a circular skylight. "We live out here," architect Marc Whitman says.*

THE couple's playful take on design can be seen publicly in the whimsical Southwest and south of the border themes in their two Ojai inns — Blue Iguana and Emerald Iguana. It was after Julia decided they could convert two abandoned motels into charming inns that the couple finally had the cash to build their treehouse.

"We didn't want to borrow money to build," Marc says.

That good fortune occurred well into their 20-year marriage.

Julia Taft and Marc Whitman married when she was a student of 20 and he was a fledgling architect of 28. Both had grown up in Ojai; both were nature lovers. A wedding gift from her father was 40 acres of land with nothing man-made on it except for a small 1931 cabin built of local stone and timber. The cabin sat alongside Santa Ana creek, with a huge old oak right behind it.

The Whitmans updated the cabin with electricity and hot water before moving in as newlyweds. Soon, expecting their first child (a son who's now 19), they needed more space.

"The cabin was way too small; we needed a place to sleep," Marc says. But they had no money to build a proper addition.

So he quickly came up with what they thought would be a temporary solution. High above the little cabin, he constructed what he calls a 700-square-foot box that became the family's bedroom area.

"It was ugly. It looked like a chopped-off house we'd built high in the tree." They charitably referred to this addition as their second floor. There was no way to reach it from inside the cabin. Marc built an outdoor staircase for that purpose.

He also constructed an even higher room, which they called the loft. It was reached by climbing to an outdoor deck on a ladder that went through a hole in their bedroom ceiling.

For the next 15 years, as their two children grew, the Whitmans lived with this oddball architectural arrangement, climbing the outdoor staircase to get in or out of their bedrooms, braving the elements and the occasional jibe from friends who wondered when the architect would get his act together to build the proper family home that he and his wife had talked about and dreamed of.

Now they've done it.

THE family's 4,000-square-foot house, completed two years ago, is a seamless addition to the old cabin, part of which they've kept intact. The original bedroom stands untouched, and the cabin's living space has become part of the large new kitchen.

The new house is built of the same Ojai stone and timber as the old — and it is essentially a series of joined cabins that reach around either side of the tree trunk, and up into its branches. "We even dug the foundation by hand, to preserve and protect the tree's roots," Marc says.

A fan of Art Nouveau and flamboyant Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi, Marc's design is whimsical and curvaceous, with almost no angles: Ceilings are pillowy plaster curves of varying heights. Corners are rounded. Doors and windows are arched and mullioned with swoops of mahogany, which Marc says he designed as abstract salutes to the shape of leaves.

SOAKING IT ALL UP: *The old-fashioned bathroom captures a treehouse feeling with its arched ceiling of wood and curved window.*

The largest space in the house is the outdoor living room, a vast ceilinged porch with a huge fireplace and plump seating. "We live out here," Marc says, staring up at the circular skylight, which offers yet another view of the beloved tree. "Wait a few weeks," he adds like a proud parent. "The leaves will have changed color and it will look even better."

The couple's love of nature is expressed in dozens of handcrafted details, inside and out. The porch pillars are sculpted into tree trunk shapes. The porch floor is scattered with inset tile leaves, spaced to look as if they had randomly fallen from above.

Five indoor fireplaces are framed with custom-designed tiles with images of wildlife and foliage. Even the iron balconies, the grills over heating vents and their daughter's glass shower door are custom designed with flora and fauna themes.

Furniture, all designed or selected by Julia, is upholstered in subtle earth and forest tones, all of it with a comfortably informal yet elegant attitude.

EVEN for rustic Ojai, with its abundance of nature lovers, the Whitmans' way of life appears nature-oriented in the extreme. Their property, adjacent to Los Padres National Forest, is an unfenced playground for wildlife. And the family's daily viewing is a lot like a nonstop diet of Animal Planet.

"We get black bears, rattlesnakes, mountain lions, rodents. I can't even list all the animals we see," Marc says. "When we wake up, we don't turn on 'Good Morning America.' We look out the window and enjoy the show."

The Whitmans' treehouse now has proper rooms and indoor stairways that lead to the second and third floors. But they didn't want to lose their old way of life completely, Julia says. So the stairs to the loft don't lead into that room. Instead, they deposit you on an outdoor deck.

"We still have to go outside if we want to enter the loft," she says. "We kept it that way as a memory of what we used to have."

bettijane.levine@latimes.com