

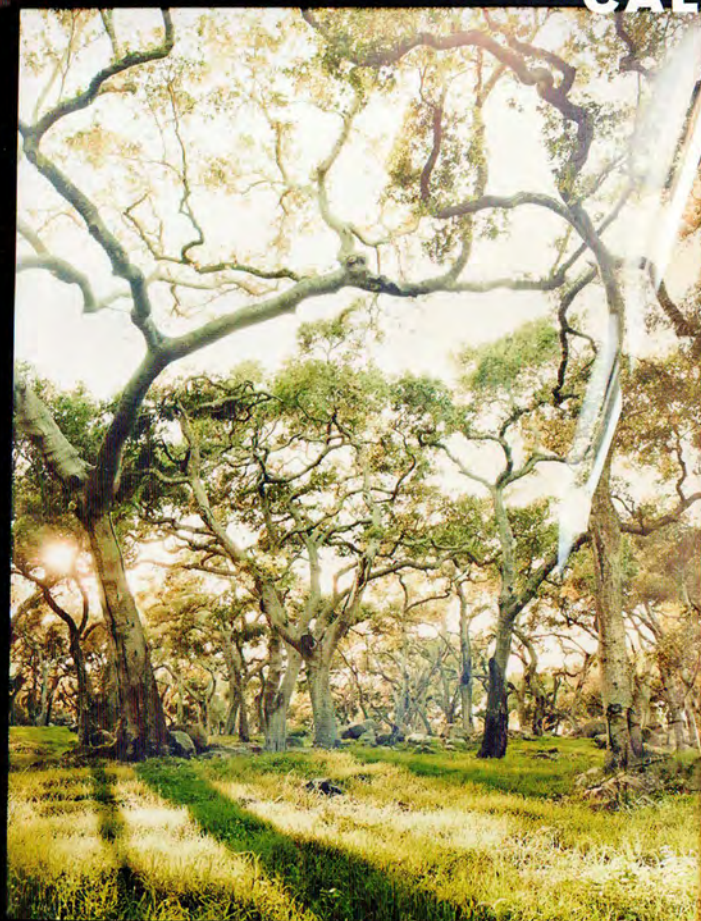
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MONTECITO

NATURALLY MODERN

Photographer John Russo's contemporary mountaintop masterpiece matches his image of an idyllic second home.

By Jennifer Blaise Kramer

Interior Photography by John Russo | Portrait by Michael Blumberg

John Russo is no stranger to flash. A celebrity photographer in Los Angeles, he's constantly surrounded by lights and glamour as he focuses his camera on some of Hollywood's most recognized faces. But when the weekend rolls around, he checks out of the city and heads to his recently renovated dream retreat in the Montecito hills, where nature is the most alluring sight.

Situated next to Santa Barbara, Montecito means "little mountains" and is full of peaks and valleys. Having grown up on the East Coast in New Jersey, Russo calls Montecito the West Coast's version of South Hampton, with its charming villages and vintage estates. His parents live nearby, along with many old friends, including Sheryl and Rob Lowe, and the parents of Armie Hammer, whose wife, Elizabeth Chambers Hammer, contributed to *100 Making a Difference*, Russo's photography book that highlights leading philanthropists (due out in December). With long-standing ties to the neighborhood, Russo was eager to make Montecito at least a halftime home and



GREAT ROOM Interior designer Erinn Valencich created a custom bookcase to run the length of the kitchen wall, which not only provided architectural interest and depth, but a place for homeowner John Russo to showcase his photography, vintage cameras and books. In the adjacent living room, a linen couch layered with textured pillows and a Hermès blanket face a walnut and brass custom cocktail table designed by Valencich. Opposite page: Russo relaxes on the patio of his Montecito home.





GATHER 'ROUND From left: Valencich designed Cabo chairs—soon to be added to her Erinn V. furniture collection—upholstered in Lee Jofa's Wilderness Granite fabric to complement Russo's circular wood dining table. Made from polished fruitwood and burlap, the mod egg-shaped pendant from Currey & Company adds a graphic touch; out front, drought-friendly turf plays peekaboo on the patio, which is decked out with Restoration Hardware lounge furniture and metal lanterns.



found the ultimate, modern bachelor pad up a tight, windy road, with views in every direction. "I love being up here and having the mountain view versus the ocean view," Russo says. "I have the best view of Gibraltar, a rock that looks like Yosemite."

While the property's location was ideal, the home was initially quite dated. The exterior was a stale beige, and the interior was disjointed with a lot of little rooms. Partition walls were everywhere, blocking most of the vistas that make this site so special. "In every room, they'd made two rooms out of it. It must have been popular in the '70s. Maybe they thought it was glamorous, but clearly it wasn't," he says, adding that the master bedroom alone had been split into three parts. "I didn't want all those walls up—I wanted all those walls to come down."

Working within the same footprint, Russo opened up the home with a vision of an all-white shell, and light

flooding into all the previously closed-off spaces. He did a lot of the initial planning and heavy lifting himself, and also enlisted interior designer and reality-TV star Erinn Valencich of Erinn V. Design Group, who'd helped with his previous two properties. "John has a clean, streamlined aesthetic. However, I always like to bring in some natural elements to soften him a little," Valencich says. "This was a drywall box and needed some personality and interior architecture."

To add depth and dimension in the living room, she veneered a TV-cabinet wall and created a statement built-in bookcase that runs the length of another wall. Visually, the piece added a strong focal point in the open space, which is shared with the kitchen and dining room. When styled with Russo's vintage cameras and photography books on everything from Paris to Playboy, both the bookcase and room instantly became infused with architecture and personality.



MASTER OF THE HOUSE From left: Clerestory windows in Russo's bedroom bring a bit of the outdoors in. Behind the custom headboard, trompe l'oeil Concrete print wallpaper by Piet Boon adds textural intrigue, while a flat-weave rug from Caravan Rug Corp. integrates soft contrast in similar tones. Layers of dark Restoration Hardware bedding, a sleek chair from Interior Illusions, and Russo's own framed photography round out the masculine look; the hillside home's graphic structure and modern, architectural landscaping shine in the moonlight.

Incorporating more wood, metal and natural warm tones than in Russo's other home in the Bird Streets neighborhood of L.A. was all part of their common design goal to "keep it masculine, but not cold and stark." Brass and leather bar stools found in Carpinteria warm up the all-white Italian kitchen. Adding softness to all of the sleek, straight counter lines, open shelves are graced by organic, handmade bowls. Fortunately, the small space is surrounded by windows, so greenery pops in from every vantage point, along with spectacular mountain views from the deck. In the sitting room, sofas surround a custom oak and brass table and a pair of tree stumps for cocktails. To further differentiate this space, Valencich lined the walls in a smooth stone-inspired wallpaper with a taupe plaster effect so realistic it warrants a triple take before you realize it actually is a wallcovering.

The same idea is used in the master bedroom, where the walls don a concrete-inspired paper, lending the space a rugged, rocky look. Opting out of a traditional headboard, Valencich designed a giant architectural wood box behind the bed, which anchors that side of the room and offers a warm contrast to the concrete. As she does for most of her clients, Valencich designed most of the furniture in Russo's home; she's had a furniture business for 11 years under the label Erinn V. and prefers building unique, custom pieces, getting exactly what she and her client want—and with better lead times. In the master bedroom, she also designed the geometric side tables

and floating shelves. She and Russo decided to do a dramatic tile treatment on the fireplace for yet another layer of richness and warmth. "John and I came together and complemented each other," Valencich says. "He's good at a big white box, but was ready for the next evolution."

Simple, striking features in each room enhance Russo's minimalist vision. Bathrooms are sleek with easy integrated vanities; since this is a second home, there's less need for storage. A guest suite with its own entrance is tucked below the kitchen, ensuring visitors have privacy. Off the driveway, a white, midcentury-style carport houses Russo's favorite Ferrari California T, and he plans to add a pool table for outdoor gatherings. Meanwhile, patios are party-ready with low-profile Restoration Hardware lounge furniture. Drought-friendly faux grass plays peekaboo in linear cutouts that make their way up the path to the front door, while succulents, olive trees and lanterns make this modern house right at home in Montecito.

Spellbound by his surroundings, Russo has photographed the natural landscape throughout the process of remodeling his home. Nearly all of the artwork inside is his, including a series of framed black-and-white succulents, which pulls nature—and classic Santa Barbara style—into the hallway. The massive mural-like photo in the master bedroom captures 12 California oak trees found in Montecito that he finds mesmerizing. "They're so magical, spiritual and uplifting," Russo says. "Every morning when I wake up, I want to see those trees." ■



SHADES OF GRAY The marble master bathroom sports a custom open vanity designed by Valencich and modern drop pendants from Cedar & Moss.

DESIGN DETAILS

TYPE
Single-family

LOCATION
Montecito

INTERIOR DESIGN
Erinn Valencich
erinnvdesigngroup.com

ARCHITECTURAL PLANNING
Patrick Hall
dainconline.com

CONSTRUCTION
Arunas Design & Construction
arunasdesign.com

CABINETRY, WOODWORK & PAINTING
Emilio Hernandez
egcabinets.com

COMPUTER AIDED VISUALIZATIONS
Claudiu Cengher
claudiucengher.com

LANDSCAPE DESIGN
Ragolio Rangel & Maurizio Cruz
818.216.5508

VENDORS
Caravan Rug Corp.
Flat-weave carpet in master bedroom
caravanrug.com

Cedar & Moss
Pendant lights in master bathroom
cedarandmoss.com

Erinn V. Collection
Oak & brass coffee table and Clooney chair in living room, dining chairs in dining room, nightstands and metal side table in master bedroom
erinnv.com

Erinn V. Design Group Custom Furnishings
Metal bookcase in living room, wood bookcase in dining room, bathroom vanity
erinnvdesigngroup.com

Innovations
Palazzo/Athenaeum wallpaper in living room
innovationsusa.com

Jane Clayton & Company
Casamance glazed fabric on headboard
janeclayton.co.uk

Lee Jofa
Wilderness Granite fabric on dining room chairs
leejofa.com

NLXL
Piet Boon Concrete wallpaper in master bedroom
usa.nlxl.com

Porch
Barstools in kitchen
porchsb.com

Wayfair
Mirrors in master bathroom
wayfair.com