



A perfect world - For actress Diane Keaton, it's preserving the past

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Diane Keaton (right) will speak about her book, "California Romantica" at the Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara on April 27.

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Above left: Florestal was the original name of the Hope Ranch estate built for the late Mrs. Peter Cooper Bryce in 1925-26. It was restored by her grandson, Marc Appleton, in 2006 and is now called Isla Mar. Above Right: Typical of homes designed by George Washington Smith were "asymmetries in the treatment of windows, grills, stairs and doorways" as in El Bosque, which is now owned by Joan and Roger Kreiss in Montecito.

PHOTOS BY LISA HARDAWAY AND PAUL HESTER FROM "CALIFORNIA ROMANTICA" BY



Tiles "ornament the floors and walls of the master bath" at the French Ranch in the Conejo Valley. The contemporary structure, which evokes the past, was designed by Thomas Bollay, a Santa Barbara architect.



A "River of Paradise," tiled in white and blue, runs through the garden from this shallow, octagonal pool at the former Ogilvy estate in Montecito.

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When actress Diane Keaton comes to the Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara on April 27 to talk about her recently published book "California Romantica," which features Spanish-style homes, including several in the area, sponsors of her appearance might have trouble keeping her confined to the Loggia Ballroom.

Don't be surprised to find her prowling around the grounds and darting through the lobby, courtyards and arcades, probably with camera in hand as she scrutinizes details of the Spanish architecture.

It was a weekend visit to The Biltmore with her family years ago that ignited her passion for Spanish architecture, which she reveals in the forward of the book. Recalling the stay, she writes, "Even though I was a girl, I remember the dark wood beamed ceiling in the lobby. It looked like it reached the stars and beyond; that's how high it was. I remember the coolness inside set against the heat outside. Shadow and light. Inside and out. It was a world of opposites. A perfect world.

"That was the summer it came to me: the idea that beauty could be felt from standing in the glow of afternoon light reflected on the colonnade of a mission. That's when I came to understand that the ache of romance lived within the walls of our Spanish heritage."

Ten years ago, the 60-year-old Academy Award-winning actress began creating her own perfect worlds by buying Spanish-style houses in the Los Angeles area and restoring them to their former grandeur before moving on to another one.

"I move around, but I stay in the same general area," laughed Ms. Keaton during a phone interview from her current home in Beverly Hills. "It's on the same street where I lived 10 years ago. In between, I lived in Bel Air and Pacific Palisades."

Built in the 1920s, the house took about nine months to restore.

"We finished about four months ago. It's a great house, kind of like a miniature mission with arches. The architect was Ralph Fewelling, who also designed the Beverly Hills Post Office," said the affable Ms. Keaton. "I'm excited that they are redoing the post office, which has been sitting empty for years."

Although she is not involved with the project, Ms. Keaton, who was born in Los Angeles, is actively involved with the Los Angeles Conservancy, which focuses on saving and restoring historic public buildings.

Saving historic homes that others might consider tear downs has become an obsession with her, she said. Her book, "California Romantica," which she worked on with journalist and author D.J. Waldie, is the "outcome of that obsession."

"It was my idea to do the book, which took a good year to produce between making movies," Ms. Keaton said. "It was fun to do but difficult because it was hard to make sure we got it right. I felt honored that Mr. Waldie agreed to write the descriptions. I had read his book 'Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir.' It's a classic. He also wrote 'Where We Are Now: Notes From Los Angeles' and is co-author of 'Real City: Downtown Los Angeles Inside/Out.' "

To find homes in Santa Barbara, Ms. Keaton enlisted the help of local real estate brokers, whose names are included in the back of the book. Revealing a precise attention to detail, she was careful to make sure their names were properly spelled should they be mentioned in this article. They are Suzanne Neal Perkins, Pamela Regan and Harry W. Kolb.

"I found they were just as interested in saving the architectural gems as I am," said Ms. Keaton. "They were extremely helpful and don't get credit for what they do. People like me need to give them their due." During her appearance at The Biltmore, sponsored by the Pearl Chase Society, Ms. Keaton will discuss the 20 homes featured in the handsome coffee-table book with dramatic photographs taken by Lisa Hardaway and Paul Hester. Five of the homes are in Santa Barbara, and all are designed by the iconic architect of his day, George Washington Smith. They are Ravenscroft, Casa del Herrero, the Ogilvy Estate, El Bosque (all in Montecito) and Isla Mar (originally named Florestal) in Hope Ranch. All were built in the 1920s.

Ravenscroft was built for Mrs. Geoffrey Stuart Courtney (who later married Mr. Ravenscroft), a "wealthy, demanding, eccentric client," who had survived the San Francisco earthquake and fire and wanted a house that "would shelter against any contingency."

Many Santa Barbarans are familiar with Casa del Herrero (The Blacksmith's House), which was built for George Steadman and his family and is open for public tours. It has been changed only slightly since it was completed in 1925.

Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ogilvy had their home built in 1926 and later owners enlarged and reshaped elements but "the long corridor through the center of the house still has its monastic qualities: plain and reticent."

Joan and Roger Kreiss, current owners of El Bosque, "discovered that the awkward arrangements of some previously remodeled rooms were resolved when they returned to the proportions Smith had laid out in his original plan."

Isla Mar was named Florestal when it was built in Hope Ranch for Mrs. Peter Cooper Bryce. It "represents one of Smith's most accomplished designs, oriented with panache to the sea, the coastal bluffs, and the mountains that rise to the north like a green wall."

Thomas Bollay, a local architect, designed the first home in the book, the French Ranch, a contemporary Spanish Colonial Revival in the Conejo Valley. Even though it is brand new, the house evokes the past of "lordly men on horseback and women in silk shawls embroidered in Manila and also the past of twentieth-century Californians who dreamed in the 1920s of men on horseback... All houses are in some fashion time machines," wrote Mr. Waldie.

Although Spanish-style houses epitomize a "perfect world" for Ms. Keaton, she acknowledges that mistakes are sometimes made in the design.

"Any structure has elements that are wrong -- an arcade facing in the wrong direction, for example. There is no such thing as perfect. They're like us -- imperfect," she said.

Of all the structures in the book, her favorite is Casa Romantica, a community center in San Clemente "with a courtyard surrounded by arcades. The first time I saw it, I said, 'What is that?' It is fantastically unusual. Nothing is cookie cutter. I have a soft spot for that structure because they saved it."

And her favorite architect?

"Wallace Neff. I think George Washington Smith was a genius, but Neff had a sensual, feminine touch that appeals to me," said Ms. Keaton, who feels that Joseph Plunkett, another prominent architect in the same period, is under-rated. "There was a house of his in Santa Ynez that I fell in love with."

Despite her passion for Spanish architecture, Ms. Keaton admitted that the beach house in the Hamptons, which was the setting for the 2003 movie "Something's Gotta Give" with Jack Nicholson, was "fabulous. People still come up to me and ask about that kitchen."

As if she didn't have enough in her life with her thriving movie career and her passion for preservation, Ms. Keaton took on the challenge of being a single mom when she adopted two children as newborns. Dexter, her daughter, is now 12 and son Duke is 7.

"Being a mother is the most profound experience on so many levels -- it's moving, frustrating, hard to figure out. They are who they are. Being a parent defines what love is in the most complete way," she said.

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