

An Artist's Eye for Luxury Living in Santa Fe

Douglas Atwill, an 85-year-old painter, has been designing and building homes for more than five decades—and now they are some of the hottest properties on the market.

By NANCY KEATES

Every morning, Santa Fe artist Douglas Atwill paints for a few hours in a light-filled studio. After some gardening, a short nap and a bit of writing, he starts work on his latest passion project: a new house he designed for himself and is helping build a mile away.

"I wanted a bigger living room," he says.

Mr. Atwill is 85 years old. This is the 60th house he has renovated or constructed, most of which are homes he has lived in then sold. And nearly all of them have been in Santa Fe, making him a legend in this artsy desert city.

"You can just walk into one of his houses and know it is his," explains Darlene Streit, a real-estate broker with Sotheby's International. She says the homes he designs have a distinct style: a mix of colonial, contemporary, French Provençal and old-world New Mexico adobe. Tall ceilings, large windows, skylights and courtyards are recurring features. She recently listed a 10,464-square-foot, eight-bedroom, nine-bathroom house redesigned by Mr. Atwill in 1980 with an asking price of \$3.2 million.

Gary Hall, a broker with Barker Realty/Christie's who has sold about 20 of Mr. Atwill's houses over the past 25 years, including repeat sales, says they always go for a premium. "All you have to do is put his name on a listing and the phones come off the hook," he says.

Brian Blount, a real-estate broker with Keller Williams Realty, adds that Mr. Atwill's homes always get a high per-square-footage price in Santa Fe. "You can teach an artist how to be a builder, but you can't teach a builder how to be an artist," he says.

Mr. Atwill grew up in Pasadena, Calif., and Midland, Texas. He studied English at the University of Texas and was on his way to earning a Master's degree when he decided he didn't want to teach.



Douglas Atwill in his studio.

PHOTO: JEN JUDGE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

He got a job in an advertising agency in Odessa, Texas, then moved to Virginia to work in a commercial art studio.

It was in Virginia in 1965 that Mr. Atwill got his start in homebuilding, when he and his late partner, Pete Stewart, renovated an old farmhouse in Cumberland County, about 60 miles from Richmond. When they found they didn't fit well in the rustic, Southern culture, they explored living in Europe, but that was too expensive.

They chose New Mexico, where they had met each other at breakfast at La Fonda Hotel several years earlier, and in 1969 rented a house in Nambe, half an hour north of Santa Fe.

At the time, Santa Fe was affordable for artists, and there were a lot of old adobe-style houses that were inexpensive and needed work. The couple bought a property in 1970 on Canyon Road—once mostly cornfields, now the epicenter of the city's art-gallery scene. They renovated all five houses on the property, then built a sixth one, where Mr. Stewart died in 1975.

Mr. Atwill continued his work alone, moving every three or four years. He uses the money he

makes from selling one house to buy and renovate or build the next house.

As he writes in his own book, "Douglas Atwill Houses," "It still is the process of building a house that delights me, not the owning of a finished one." It is a process as creative as painting, he adds, the main difference being that with painting he doesn't have to rely on anyone else to get the job done.

His current home, which he built in 2015 (he declined to disclose the cost), is an earth-red stucco with a flat roof, 1,730 square feet, one bedroom and two bathrooms on 1 acre. The windows in the south-facing house are paned, tall and narrow and have white shutters. French doors that open to the exterior patios are everywhere, even in the bathroom. "So you can get out," he explains. The ceilings have big wooden beams called "vigas," used in traditional adobe architecture in New Mexico. The interior doors have traditional, Federal-style white trimwork, a nod to what is called Territorial architecture—a colonial look developed and used in New Mexico during the American occupation between 1846 and 1912. The studio in back has a redbrick floor and white-painted wood trusses. Inside are a small

writing desk and an easel with acrylic paints and brushes. Light comes pouring through skylights and the french doors open to the walled interior courtyard that holds the garden, which he designed with gravel paths, apple, pear, plum and peach trees, and an area for vegetables. His paintings of bright red and yellow poppies and snowy mountain landscapes are on the walls above a white slipcovered sofa and two Marcel Breuer Wassily chairs.

In August, Mr. Atwill sold this house for \$1.6 million to Jennie March-Aleu, a 62-year-old retired television producer from Boulder, Colo., who also owns a house in Rancho Mirage, Calif., and has let Mr. Atwill stay on while he builds his new house.

Ms. March-Aleu looked at about 300 homes online and 18 in person before she stumbled upon his newly listed property late one night. Three days later, having been in the house for four minutes, she made an offer. “It opens your soul,” she explains.

It is the quality of light that differentiates his houses, says Billy Halsted, 69, a house designer in Santa Fe, who calls Mr. Atwill a mentor. “He really changed the way Santa Fe did houses. He made it more sophisticated.”

The two men still lunch together every Monday (at the Santa Fe Bar & Grill) and Thursday (somewhere else).

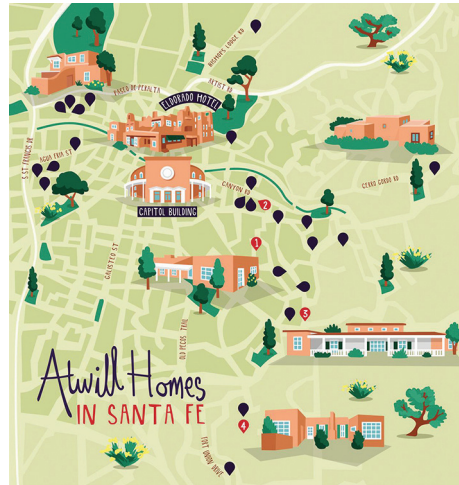
Santa Fe has changed. There were three art galleries when Mr. Atwill moved there; now there are more than 150. A luxury golf community called Las Campanas 10 miles out of town added an elite element to the area when it opened in 1992. And many of the homes Mr. Atwill designed have since been renovated and enlarged. “People like what they see in my houses. Then they come and change it,” he says. He has noticed that people put curtains on the windows and close up the skylights.

Still, much stays the same. Santa Fe’s culture retains its liberal bent, and Mr. Atwill knows many of the same artists and writers that he knew years ago. And there is still untouched land just a short drive from the city.

His newest house, No. 60, with its big living room, should be ready by June. “I am ready to move on,” says Mr. Atwill. ■

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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/artist-transforms-luxury-living-in-santa-fe-11558624631?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=13>



Map shows the location of Atwill homes; the red dots represent those that have recently come on the market, as listed below.

ILLUSTRATION: KERRY HYNDMAN

Courtesy of Neil D. Lyon, CRB, CRS, GRI

