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# Not Quite the Moon—Taos

Photographer David Zimmerman finds uncompromised freedom on the far side of New York City



BY RACHEL PRESTON PRINZ | PHOTOS BY PETER OGILVIE

David Zimmerman's renowned career as a photographer started not behind the camera, but in what he describes as a "terrible" effort at sculpture and painting in his teens, where he would take courses both at his high school as well as at Milwaukee Art Museum during the summer months. His shift to the camera came later, inspired by a European adventure in which he first attempted to document how he saw the world from behind the lens. This new vision, though of continental pedigree, was profoundly colored by his work on an Israeli kibbutz in the Golan Heights during the Yom Kippur (October) War of 1973, where he worked to save enough to travel the Sinai desert before heading to Europe.

After his travels, Zimmerman returned to Wisconsin and took up work in a camera store, taking darkroom classes in Milwaukee while he waited for a spot to open in the photography program at

the Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara. Milwaukee was not his end game; he had a bigger story to tell, and he wanted to bask in the influence of people who were pushing the bounds of their medium. His world changed again one day when a woman named Marilyn, a film and photography teacher in an inner-city magnet program, came by to drop off some film to be developed for her class. A deep friendship and eventual romance developed, and they married in 1979. Marilyn applied to Brooks, where she was immediately accepted into the newly formed film department. The Zimmermans left Wisconsin for California.

In 1982, after completing their studies at Brooks, the couple moved to the borough of Queens in New York City, and David started working for some of the city's best photographers, including a stint as an architectural photographer with the famous Skidmore



David Zimmerman with *Wanda* (2010), a pigment print of an oil spill worker from his 2010 *Gulf Coast* series in Louisiana. Zimmerman drove to the Gulf of Mexico following the BP oil spill to document the effects of the disaster on residents and workers. Opposite: The Zimmermans' east-facing living room embraces the view across the Taos mesa to the Sangre de Cristo mountains.



A view from the gallery shows the New York-loft influenced studio.



Solar panels on the roof provide enough energy for three to four days of power, and help shade the roof structure.

Owings and Merrill architecture firm. Within two years he had opened a studio and built a successful career photographing landscape, environmental, and fine art projects. It wasn't long before some of the world's biggest brands were seeking his unique skills, and David and Marilyn began renovating lofts in Chelsea to create inspired studio spaces where they could manifest their visions. New York's east-west alignment meant creativity was required to make something of the north or south light, but together they made each space into one that would work for both of their evolving careers.

David got a pilot's license, so he could evolve his work in a new direction. He also traveled to India as a guest teacher, the first of many visits there. He was immersed and he was inspired. Marilyn would join him from time to time between his solo trips, when he would burn through rolls of film as he cataloged the culture and sights. Returning home to an entirely different world would give him fresh perspective and purpose. Evolution suited him.

Then, five years ago, something shifted. The Zimmermans made the decision to leave New York. City life was great in many ways, but something was missing—they realized that their relationship with the spaces where they lived and worked was punctuated with compromises of light, of proportion and of comfort, and they realized that the "big" creative spirit they had found in New York was moving to new neighborhoods and reflecting a new attitude. It was time for them to move on, too—to something that felt complete, uncompromised, and totally different. Now that their daughter was grown, they could try to find that place where the rules were a little fuzzy, and where innovation was allowed free reign. David says of their escape that they "set out in search of a totally new energy that we could tap into," adding, "It had to be way off the path we knew. Really, it was going to be the moon, or Taos."

They began to travel. Finding themselves called to the desert

Southwest, they would find their peace between Amarillo and Holbrook. A solar-powered camper allowed them to be wherever, whenever. David could camp at an airport before taking off for work in his home-built plane. An important lesson was revealed: Sustainability also offers freedom. Unencumbered by attachment to any place, they were free to search, though for what they weren't sure exactly. They did know that they loved the wide-open spaces and independent spirit of the West. When they got to Taos, they knew something was right. Developed enough, it allowed remoteness and isolation when needed. It wasn't long before they bought land and hired an architect.

The transition began officially some two years ago when they moved into the solar camper where they would live for four months while their house was being finished. David spent most of his time trying to finesse the details of the house while fulfilling client orders, and he would routinely crash Marilyn's completed workspace with his equipment to close outstanding business from their old life in New York. Eventually the home was completed, and both could begin the process of redefinition that Taos inspires.

From the approach to the live-in studio on the vast sagebrush mesa that David and Marilyn Zimmerman call home, it becomes clear that the driving forces that built this home were artistic vision and a love of architecture, combined with a passion for the work and a desire to fuse that with life. Designed and built by the Zimmermans with Ken Anderson of Edge Architects, the rastra, adobe, and frame constructed LEED-certified home uses a combination of passive solar design, thermal mass, rain catchment, and solar power, which provides all the off-grid needs of anyone who comes here to find solitude and inspiration. The home's cisterns collect 5,000 gallons of water per inch of rain, and its solar array can provide four days' worth of uninterrupted power. >

The home's siting within the landscape had to consider its place within the desert and the watershed of the famous Rio Grande Gorge. The house had to be set back from the gorge to protect the watershed and its status as a National Wild and Scenic River; land and home had to work together to support sustainable ideals set out early in design; and at David's insistence the structure had to avoid the juvenile yucca growing nearby. It wasn't until stakes were laid for the foundations that anyone realized the entire home would have to be shifted to protect the young plant.

The design is simple, elegant, and uncluttered. The exterior shape and arrangement are dictated by the interior arrangement of spaces and the way they are used. The house was designed for light, as varying architectural elements douse one in light and shadow, heat and cool, inside and out. Simplicity amid exquisitely crafted modern detail pays tribute to the New Mexican aesthetic and equally respects form and function.

A layered mosaic of squares, portals, and a staircase form the

western façade. To the south, a great porch stands with its back against the western winds, just far enough from the house to create a luxurious space made up of equal parts relaxation and inspiration. A doorway leading to the porch beckons visitors in from the bright, stark western façade and its buttressed moorings in the vast landscape. Stone grounding connection to earth, a raw stucco wall behind, and rich stained ceilings resting on square supports form a sensuous Indian-temple colonnade of aged turquoise and teak. The texture-rich frame softens the edges of the view north toward the modernist residence that is the star of this show.

The eastward façade is as airy as the west is earthy. With a two-story window wall of exclamation-pointed windows shaded by stucco overhangs, this is the only place where solar design is set aside to allow for pure delight. Seen from the living room and kitchen beyond, these windows embrace the vast mountain view afforded by the remoteness from civilization and are positioned to embrace the sunrise over the mystical and revered mountain.



David Zimmerman in his upstairs photography studio.



The porch has its back to the west, screening the hot desert winds and framing a mountain view through its temple-front facade.

On the edge of positive and negative space, intersecting light and dark, with swaths of view wide enough to create a sense of absolute stillness, the interior of the home reflects both its custom purpose and unique pedigree. The eastern living space, with its window wall and open kitchen, partake of the “out there” of Taos. Even the sumptuous leather chairs in the living room testify that the space is flexible and adaptable, that it provides an intimacy that works as well for moments of sociability.

The square windows along the west wall of David’s large loft studio cast long shafts of white light on the dark-stained thermal mass floor. A wall of south-facing windows echoes the sitting porch to the west, while another row of high windows uses a light tray to bounce light into the deepest reaches and keep the room from overheating. This open, two-story space allows for an entirely different state of mind, one that recalls the lofts that David and Marilyn converted in New York. Past a computing office that can be shuttered into near-darkness for editing, the bright studio space opens wide to provide for drafting and cutting tables, rolling carts full of photographic implements, a sitting area, walls and light walls lined with draft shots and plotters and rolls of paper.

This space is for work, and this work is a new story, discovered in Taos and told through David’s poetic lens. He has found inspi-

ration in a nearby community that lives nearly without knowledge by its neighbors, a secret place of homes made almost entirely of found objects. The dance of light and shadow in his work seems to echo everything one hears about what Taos does to people. Upstairs, the still-life room—with its cacophony of tools to create perfect lighting—seems dusty. David has found a new muse, it seems, and she flows in and out of the light, as the house does.

Time has been kind, it seems, in allowing the Zimmermans to create a modern live/work space that embraces a new interpretation of Taosño detail, is technically advanced, and creates a livable, affordable space for a truly working life—space that beautifully and simply fulfills its purpose and allows the Zimmermans to fulfill theirs. As David points out, “Living out here, you learn to become partners with the land.” And the land seems to agree with their decision to make Taos home. This spring, five years later, their fragile yucca plant has bloomed for the first time. ✱

*David Zimmerman’s Desert series, currently being shown at the Hulse-Warman Gallery in Taos, earned him the 2009 Sony World Photography Awards L’Iris D’Or Grand Prize. His work is also being shown at the Susan Spiritus Gallery in Newport Beach, the A. gallery in Paris, and Capital Culture in London. Marilyn Zimmerman is working on a documentary.*