

ART and living

the magazine that brings art to life

Jeff Koons: ON TRACK

Discovering
Art Center College
of Design

Italian Design:
Women at the Helm

Richard Landry

Peter Blake at
Tate Liverpool

Fine Art Galleries:
Jack Rutberg
Moeller



\$12.00

Summer 2007





John Finton: Master Craftsman

By Lynn Morgan



(Opposite and Above) Seek, Richard Landry designs are brought to life by John Finton's building prowess. Photos by Erhard Pfeifer.

John Finton is building a house—but not just any house, to be sure. It's a tycoon's personal statement and the fruition of an architect's vision, a palatial residence at a prominent piece of property on Sunset Boulevard.

Before it sat as an empty lot for over two decades, the house's address was known to locals as "the Sheik's place" not because Valentino ever slept there, but because the thirty-eight-room, 1926 Italianate villa that once occupied it was owned by a Saudi prince named Mohammed al-Fassi. The prince and his Italian-born wife, Sheika Dena, bought the house in 1978, painted the white villa a bilious shade of *absinthe* green, poured bright molten copper over its red tile roof, and shaded the classical statues lining its fence in disturbingly life-like flesh tones, replete with detailed pubic



John Finton, master craftsman. Photo by Steven Barston.

regions—much to the dismay of neighbors and the glee of the local media. Denounced as a desecration and an eyesore (and ultimately the contested prize in a contentious divorce), "the Sheik's place" mysteriously burned to the ground in 1980 while its owners were out of town. The arson was never solved, and one of the most visible and valuable plots of land in Southern California remained empty for years.

Today, a new house is finally rising on the notorious site under the close supervision of master builder John Finton of Finton Associates, Inc. It seems overwhelming, even in its nascent stages, yet it is a "fairly typical" project for Finton, whose firm is one of the pre-eminent contractors for architectural building. He has built hundreds of dream palaces such as this.

Designed by Brian Biglin of Biglin Architectural Group, the



Finton is renowned for ability to recover unique materials for projects. Here, Santa Barbara rubble stone comprises a Richard Landry-designed outdoor fireplace. Photo by Erhard Pfeiffer

house is an imposing structure that will sprawl gracefully across the enormous Beverly Hills lot, evoking the designs of Stanford White and Richard Morris Hunt, the society architects who created Classical Revival homes and retreats for the robber barons of the Gilded Age. The three-story, Beaux Arts-inspired house will be composed of more than 20,000 square feet of imported Portuguese stone, detailed with balustrades, plasters, and pillars. The design respects the history of the building's setting, restoring its lost glamour and exorcising any lingering demons of bad taste. Bigin has envisioned a contemporary version of Versailles' Petit Trianon and entrusted Finton to make it a practical reality.

It is a close collaboration, a necessary symbiosis between artist and artisan.

"A lot of times, the architect's vision is just that: a vision," Finton reflects. "It's up to us to execute that vision and make it real."

Over the past eighteen years, some of the world's most acclaimed architects have looked to John Finton and his firm to execute their visions; some of the wealthiest clients in the world have relied upon him to create baronial homes for them.

"Most successful people are perfectionists," Finton muses. "They recognize quality. You don't get to be successful at that level if you aren't the best at what you do. Their taste reflects that; they recognize perfection and want it in their homes."

It is that affinity for perfection that makes John Finton the contractor of choice for architects like William Hablinski, Grant Kirkpatrick, William Hefner

and Richard Landry. His clients include the likes of Jennifer Lopez, Simon Cowell, and Sam Nazarian, as well as others who dream of mansions of Gatsby-esque proportions.

According to Finton, however, it isn't just size that creates grandeur; if the architect's credo is that "God lives in the details," this contractor is the one charged with seeing those details become a reality. He will travel great distances and sometimes take extraordinary risks to acquire the right raw materials for his projects—a demolished municipal building in Scotland provided a Richard Landry-designed house in Beverly Park with antique wooden beams and stone pavers; a nickel-plated bar taken from a venerable Paris bistro was installed in one of his Beverly Hills projects. Finton even once imported an entire antique library ceiling from France and built a brand-new room beneath it.

"I like to work with recovered materials," the contractor explains. "We could have taken new materials and aged them to make them look old, but they wouldn't have

looked authentic and wouldn't have cost any less."

"One client wanted biblical stone floors—stones that Jesus actually walked on," he continues. "So I went to Israel—to Jerusalem—to find salvaged antiquities."

Even a potentially perilous journey across miles of Jordanian desert in search of a master stone carver living far outside of Amman was just another day on the job for Finton—armed guards and border checkpoints notwithstanding.

"The architect will know how he wants something to look; it's my job to know where to find the right materials...and to find the right craftspeople to do the work," he explains.

Finton will travel to the point of origin to watch stone being taken out of the ground; he'll then sign and number each piece he selects to make sure the materials of his choice make their way to the fabricators. And he is just as fastidious when buying materials locally, relying on Stone Mart in North Hollywood for fine marbles and exotic hardstones.

Building projects are enormous undertakings in terms of both time and money; construction often takes years. According to Finton, the process is very intimate. "I will frequently see a client or talk to them every day or at least three or four times a week," says the master builder.

This constant communication allows John Finton to achieve his professional goal of giving each of his clients exactly what they want. "I enjoy the building process," the contractor reflects. "I've worked with some extraordinary people building things I am proud of." ■