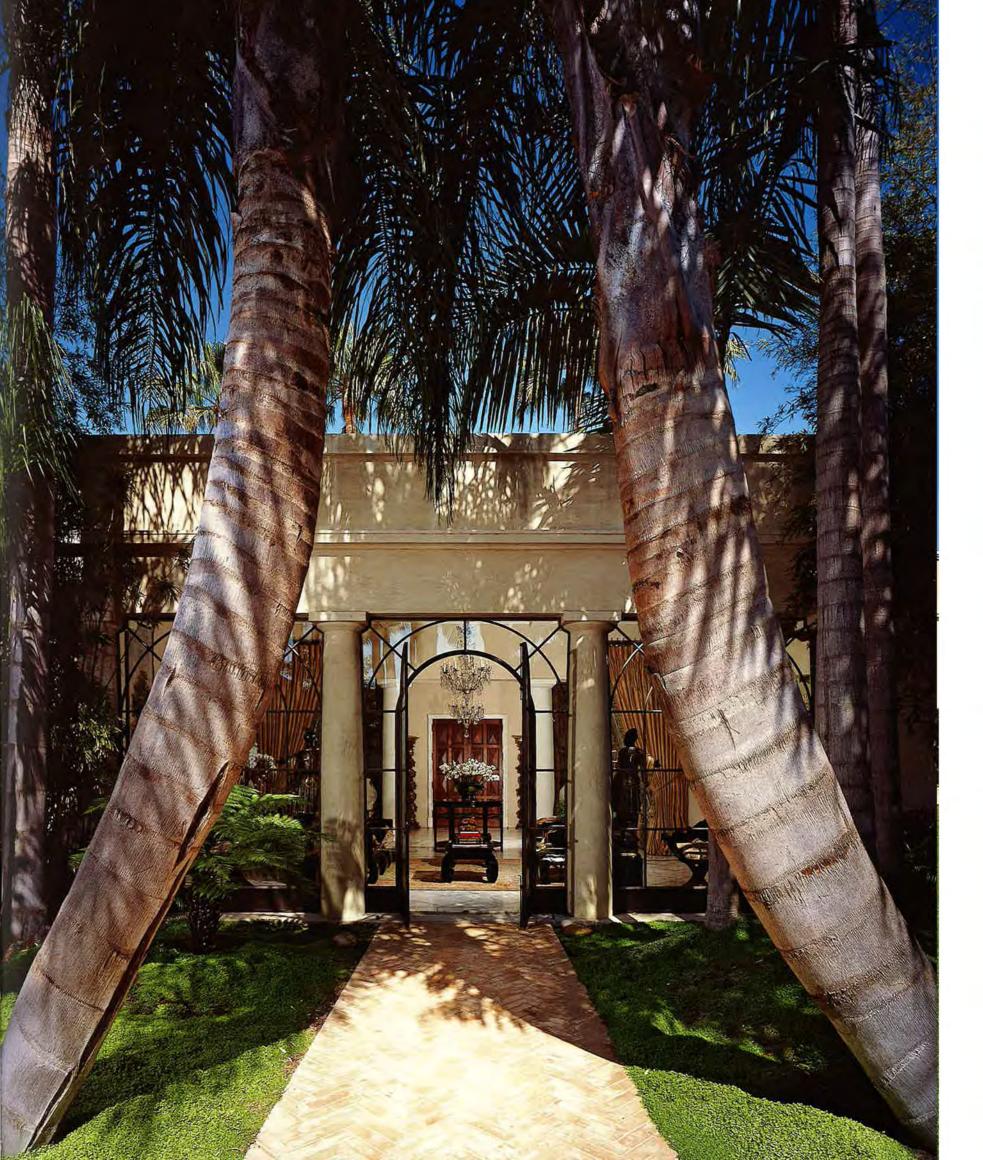


SOLANA



Frederick Forest and
Sarah Griffith Peabody House







Above: Lily pond. Opposite: View from courtyard to entry hall

THE FIRST VIEW OF SOLANA ("SUNNY PLACE")—WITH ITS DRAMATIC

juxtaposition of ornamental entry and severely simple walls—reveals the masterful hand of its designer, Francis T. Underhill. He was not a trained architect but apparently developed his ability through extensive travel and keen observation; his minimalist treatment of this 1915 Santa Barbara (originally Montecito) estate reveals his awareness of contemporary innovations in American and European architecture. He was ahead of his time too in conceiving Solana's architecture and landscape as a fully unified composition, using the lush and varied landscape as a foil for the architecture's simplicity and to belie the rational order of its gridlike plan.

Because he worked largely in the Santa Barbara area, Underhill has not received the wide recognition his talent deserves. He moved to California from the East in the 1880s and began designing projects for his family and friends. By 1910 he had an architecture office in Montecito.¹

The owners of Solana, Frederick Forest and Sarah Griffith Peabody, likewise were transplanted Easterners.² A self-made man, Frederick Peabody transformed a Troy, New York, manufacturer of shirts, collars, and cuffs into the extraordinarily successful firm of Cluett, Peabody & Co., owners of Arrow shirts. Beginning in 1906, on his second visit to the area, he began acquiring land in Montecito, eventually purchasing a total of seventy-nine acres.³

Peabody hired Charles F. Eaton, a gifted landscape architect and a central figure of the local Arts and Crafts scene, to develop the grounds. Another landscape architect, Peter Riedel, was subsequently engaged to landscape the property.



Above: Archival view of north loggia. c. 1915. Santa Barbara (Calif.) Historical Museum. Right: North loggia today

Peabody and Riedel added many trees to the existing oaks: seven thousand eucalyptus trees, begun as seedlings, mature orange trees, a palm weighing twelve tons, and a giant, twenty-ton rubber tree.⁴ In June 1911 the local newspaper reported that Underhill was making drawings for Peabody's residence. It was described as mission style, with a plastered exterior, a concrete foundation, concrete porches with concrete columns, and a tile roof. The cost was estimated at five thousand dollars.⁵ When the building permit was issued in 1913, the house was valued at fifty thousand dollars and the garage another three thousand dollars⁶—a price driven high by the cost of concrete.

Underhill located the house at the highest point of the property, with a long drive leading to it from the road. In front of the house is a large, rectangular entrance court that affords panoramic views from the Pacific Ocean to the Santa Ynez Mountains. The house stands at the east end of the court; its severe entrance facade is magnificently balanced by the lush nature before it. Two wings project from what appears to be a one-story house. (In fact, a partial lower floor is nestled against the hillside that drops to the south.) A string course reiterates the horizontality of the facade, which is broken only by a large, glazed terra-cotta door surround. Several varieties of palm trees and Italian cypress frame the facade and the marble steps leading to the front door.

Underhill's decision to treat the facade as a solid, protective wall reflects the Spanish urban design tradition, with a defensive exterior allowing for the interior to flow safely and easily to the outdoors. The principal floor is organized around a central courtyard, which in turn surrounds a large oak; today palms and other semitropical plants make





Above: Terrace overlooking Pacific Ocean, Below: Courtyard



In the extensive gardens Underhill designed an arch-shaped pool (now used as a lily pond) that repeats the curve of the house and rear terrace. It was fitted with a hydraulically operated platform designed to support an orchestra. A rose garden has been established where the Peabodys had seating for an amphitheater.

Solana is a complex and pioneering interpretation of the Mediterranean house. It was radical for its simplicity of form, its clear and consistent plan, and its early integration of architecture and landscape. It's a work of immense importance to the history of the Mediterranean house and, more broadly, American country house design.

- 1. David Gebhard, "Francis T. Underhill." 105.
- 2. The Peabodys, who had five children, divorced in 1918. In 1920 Frederick Peabody married Katherine Burke, who had been a Red Cross volunteer during World War I. "Santa Barbara's Most Decorated Woman," "Solana" file, Montecito History Room, Montecito (Calif.) Branch Library. Upon her death in 1959, sixteen acres of Solana's grounds were donated to the city of Santa Barbara for a public park, which was named in her honor.

- Once Peabody established residency in Montecito, he was an active participant
 and philanthropist in many city institutions, including public schools, Cottage
 Hospital, Lobero Theater, and Ocean Front City Park, "Stroke Proves Fatal to
 Mr. Peabody and Death Takes Civic Benefactor," Santa Barbara Daily News, Feb.
 24, 1927, Section 2, 9–10.
- 4. "F. F. Peabody" File, Gledhill Library, Santa Barbara Historical Society.
- 5. "Off Beat" clippings, "Solana" file, Montecito History Room, Montecito (Calif.) Branch Library.
- 6. Myrick, 335.
- 7. David Gebhard, "Francis T. Underhill," 106.
- See David Gebhard, "The Spanish Colonial Revival in Southern California (1895–1930)," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 26:2 (May 1967), 140, 142
- 9. From 1959 to 1979 Solana was owned by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, which was created in response to the abuse of American civil liberties in the McCarthy era. The organization held conferences and published studies on such topics as integration, academic freedom, and national security. Among the luminaries invited were John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., William O. Douglas, and Henry Kissinger. "Guide to the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions Collection, 1950–1991," MS 18, Special Collections, Davidson Library, University of California Santa Barbara; Michael Redmon, "What is the History of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions," The Independent, June 5, 2002.