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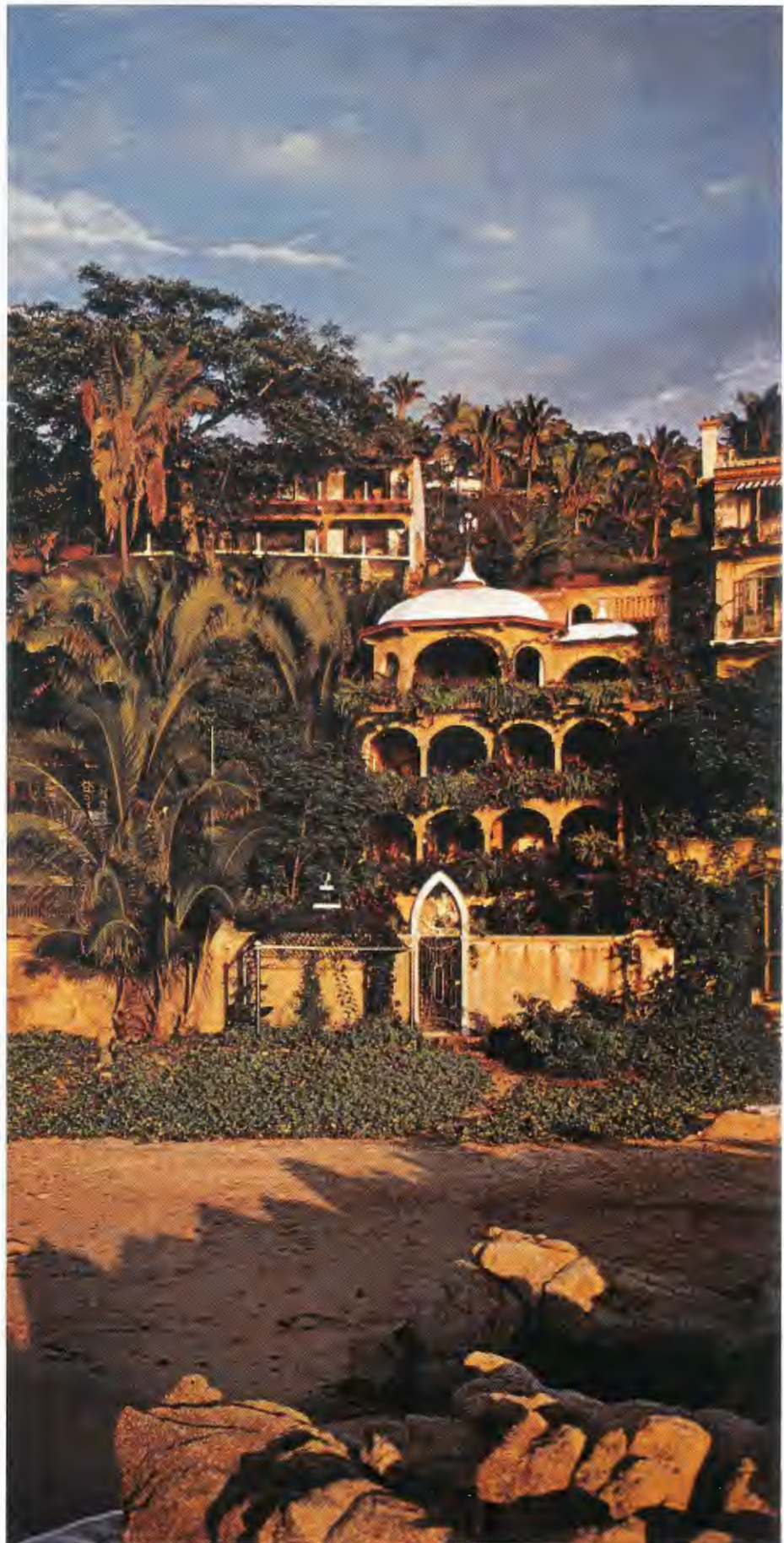
FOR CENTURIES THE PHOENIX, that legendary bird rising from its own destruction, has fascinated poets and painters and writers. Now part of popular mythology, it is the symbol that came to inspire and inform the design of Hasi Hester's unusual house on the beach at Puerto Vallarta.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Hester—whose fabric and furniture showroom is well known in Los Angeles—was guided by three separate enthusiasms in the creation of a dramatic and, at first glance, incongruous house. Like so many before him, he was drawn by the lure of Mexico itself; he has a special affection for the Gothic magnificence of Venetian architecture; and he holds a firm, and personal, belief in the legend of the phoenix.

That these widely different elements have been combined with elegance and authority is the triumph of *Palazzo Fenice*. Perhaps it is strange to find what is essentially a small Venetian palace named after the phoenix on Conchas Chinas beach in Puerto Vallarta. But it does not seem strange to Hasi Hester nor to the many friends and clients who have visited him in this enchanted setting.

"It's my small corner of peace," says Mr. Hester. "The world outside can get hectic, and the beauty I find here is as rare as the time to enjoy it."

Perhaps more important is the fact that Puerto Vallarta has a very personal meaning for him. He has come here often over the years, in the process seeing a village of five thousand people—and three automobiles—turn





Venetian Fantasy in Mexico

Designing a "Miracle of Illogical Coherence"



into a town and resort with a population now over sixty thousand.

Some time ago, after a serious accident, he instinctively returned to Puerto Vallarta in order to recuperate—to swim in the ocean and to ride horseback along the beach. His recovery was almost miraculous, and he knew then that he had found his "small corner of peace" and that here he had to have a house of his own.

With his head full of visions of Venice and a personal identification with the legend of the phoenix, he knew what sort of house he wanted and what its name was going to be.

"I had the whole thing completed in my mind long before I ever actually saw it," he explains.

The day came when he found what he wanted. The house, he will admit, was "the ugliest in Puerto Vallarta," but it had the right location and the right feeling. In front of his eyes he no longer saw an unpromising house—but rather, an image of the completed Palazzo Fenice.

"I had the pleasure of seeing a fantasy fulfilled," says Mr. Hester, "in one of the few places in the world where it all could have happened."

OPPOSITE: The result of dedicated restoration, the *Palazzo Fenice* descends four levels to the beach at Conchas Chinas, which reminded Mr. Hester of the Grand Canal and so inspired the arched Venetian design. ABOVE: Tropical greenery converges with the structure so that it becomes an integral part of the architectural statement. BELOW: An Entrance that is reminiscent of bygone eras reveals ruddy terra-cotta walls derived from native brick and baked in the sun.



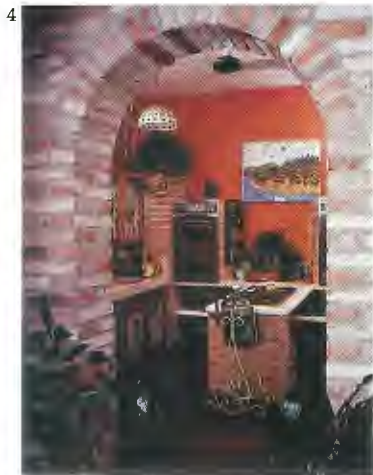
Little is taken amiss in Mexico, and the Latin temperament accepts the amiable eccentricities of foreigners. If the *señor norteamericano* wanted a Venetian palace, he would have it.

To turn the vision into a reality, however, was quite another matter. First of all, it involved taking the house down to its foundation and starting from the beginning. Surprisingly, the lot itself is not unlike a site in Venice—narrow, located between the road and the water, the house high and multistoried with a garden behind.

Working with architect Jim Meares and consulting his own library of books on Venetian architecture, Hasi Hester selected the arches and columns and doors he wanted to duplicate. The hexagonal living room, for example, was inspired by the Baptistry in Florence, large open arches on each of the six sides under an eighteen-foot cupola. Over and over again the major theme of the house is joyfully repeated: Let the outside in.

Remodeling was accomplished in less than six months through the efforts of a team of local artisans who carved the stone columns and arches and carefully duplicated the doors and stairways of another civilization.

Nevertheless, the house that rose from the ruins of the old is strangely appropriate, and the small Venetian palace by no means seems out of place in Mexico. Spanish Colonial architecture does carry with it an echo of Venice. Indeed, the very bricks themselves—made only in Puerto Vallarta—give the house, in Hasi Hester's

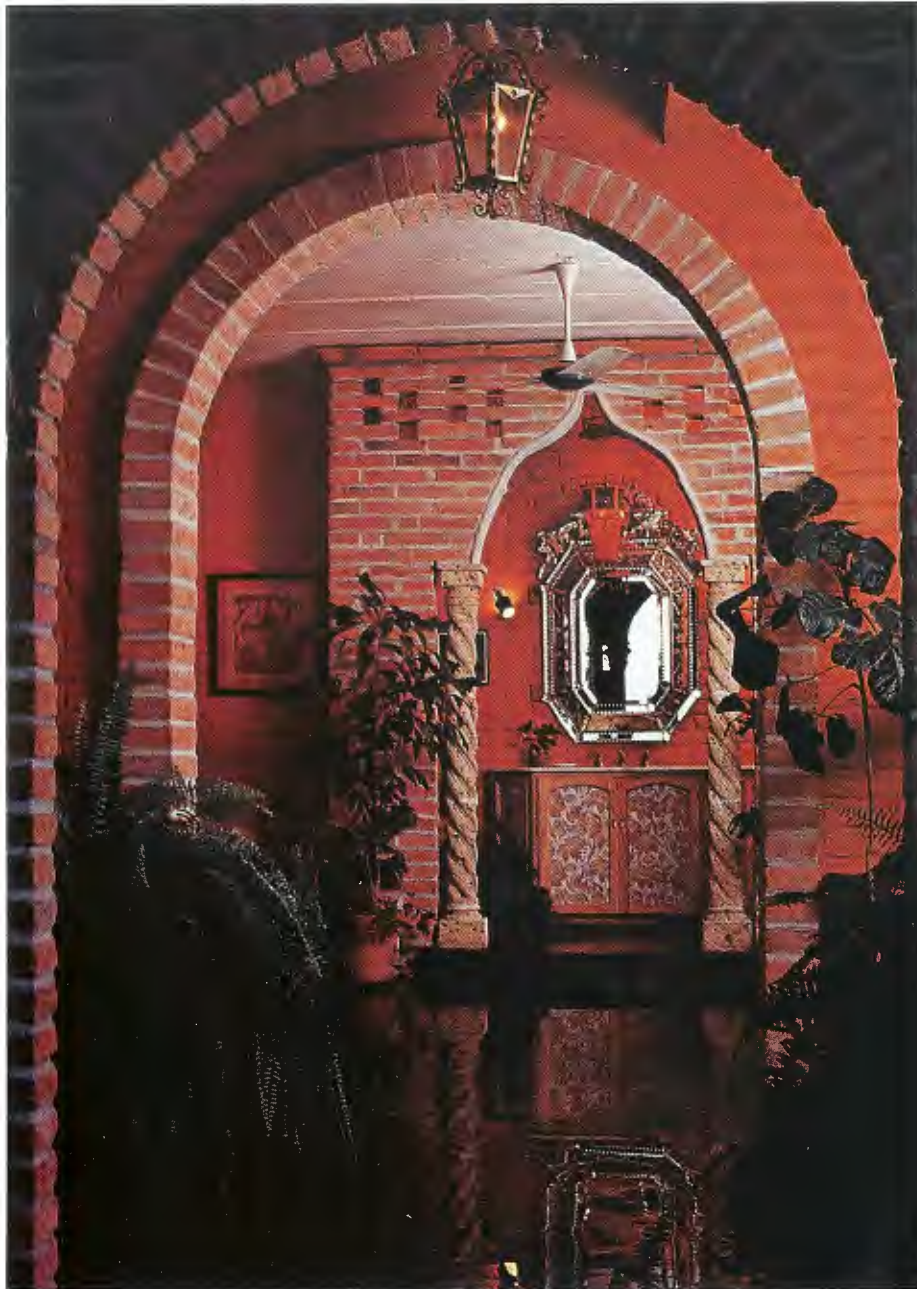


1. A puzzling vine known locally as *Gloria* produces a wisteria-type bloom with red and green berries, and trails over the Terrace walls. 2. A Puerto Vallarta *Plaza with Church* by artist Manuel Lepe colors the Entry Hall. 3. Living Room space is unbounded as gracefully curving arches on all of its six sides open to other areas of the house. An 18-foot cupola with rope detail reproduced from the Doges' Palace in Venice perpetuates the capacious feeling. 4. Another Manuel Lepe oil in the Kitchen brightly depicts Puerto Vallarta as it was ten years ago. 5. and 6. A harmonious juxtaposition of furnishings and foliage draws the garden inward to the Living Room. Appointments include a Vidale painting of relaxed life in Puerto Vallarta, and custom-designed desk and cabinets. The rustic dining chairs are upholstered in pigskin.





“The perfect room is a lush garden with chairs.”



words, “a marvelous pink terra-cotta color, very Venetian in feeling, with the same quality of light.”

The house, too, is entirely consistent with the tropical climate of Puerto Vallarta. And that climate has dictated the indoor/outdoor arrangement.

He wanted to bring the outside into his house, to have no rigid boundaries between the man-made and the natural. The whole was to be one harmonious unit: the sea and the sky and the garden flowing back and forth through arches supported by columns and topped by soaring domes.

These great open arches—and the fact that most of the interior is filled with plants—illustrate the graceful way in which Hasi Hester has made the most of the natural setting.

“You know,” he says, “my idea of the perfect room is a lush garden with lots of comfortable chairs around.”

And this is precisely the feeling he has created in Palazzo Fenice. A great deal of the charm of the alfresco atmosphere was made possible, Mr. Hester feels, by the work of his good friend Gabriel Urrutia who did the landscape architecture. Everything unites to form the rich background for

LEFT and ABOVE: A Gothic arch separates Bedroom from Bath in the Master Suite. Venetian columns, Mexican antiques and an embellished Indian chandelier create a dramatically eclectic mood in the Bath. OPPOSITE: Warm earth colors and cool reflections from a hand-constructed tile floor offset the simplicity of a trim bamboo bed and 16th- and 17th-century engravings in the Master Bedroom. A noblewoman commands attention in an 18th-century pastel.





“...a lovely setting of fantasy where I can keep the world at bay.”



a life of relaxation and hospitality.

It is no wonder that the owner and his friends return time and again to this magical setting. Everything has been carefully arranged to give the illusion of living outside, on the beach or in the garden. Perhaps the most entrancing moment is the dinner hour—in a brick pavilion near the beach, surrounded by the ocean and the stars and the night.

“This is my little island,” says Hasi Hester with obvious contentment. “A lovely setting of fantasy where my friends and I can keep the world at bay. Part of the pleasure, I suppose, is knowing I have a house that will *never* really be finished.”

His vision of the phoenix is without end; there are more fantasies to be turned into reality; and a comfortable and imaginative house will continue to weave a spell of unexplained magic.

Magic? There are not many places in the world where it is possible to walk through a small English garden to the beach, to ride white Arabian horses on the sand with a Venetian palace in the background.

Hasi Hester’s house is—in the words of an Italian critic describing the Doges’ Palace in Venice itself—“a miracle of illogical coherence.” □

LEFT and ABOVE: The gracious “Lido” suite awaits guests at the *Palazzo Fenice* where a handsome insignia decks the loggia ironwork. Leather chairs, identical to those in the dining area, are crafted in a 15th-century fashion. OPPOSITE: An irregular coastline punctuates the horizon, adding dimension to an already unparalleled seascape.

