



THE ORTEGA

SANCTUARY

A TESTAMENT IN TEAK AND TRUTH

Perched in one of San Francisco's most quietly prestigious enclaves, 565 Ortega Street is not merely a residence—it is a masterstroke of architectural poetry, an 'Heirloom Piece.' Co-designed by **Esrā Dunca-Sprawling** and architect **John Lum**, this \$5.5 million sanctuary embodies a rare fusion of modernist clarity and the soulful imperfection of Wabi-Sabi, the Japanese aesthetic philosophy that honors the beauty of transience and imperfection.

This home began not with blueprints, but with a phone call. Lum, contemplating whether to take on the project, reached out to Esrā—actor, producer, legal documentarian, and the first American Geisha—who was filming in Belgrade, Serbia at the time. He asked, architect to visionary, “What do you want in a house?” Esrā replied: “My partner, **Andrei Dunca**, has been very successful. I want to build him a home that is deserving of his success—and of the life I want to create there with him.” Lum followed up: “What do you expect?” Esrā answered: “Perfection.”

Andrei George Dunca, Esrā's partner and a pioneering figure in early web architecture, echoed that sentiment when asked about the budget: “Whatever it costs.”

MATERIALS THAT SPEAK IN SACRED DETAIL

Esrā's role as co-designer was not symbolic—it was fiercely intentional. When most cabinet makers, including Andrei Dunca, refused to work with teak, citing its near-extinct status and the difficulty of sourcing, Esrā insisted. Not just any teak—whole slabs, untouched by market compromise. The cabinets and counters were crafted from live-edge teak, sourced from a long-forgotten supply housed in a Bay Area warehouse since the international embargo. These slabs, aged and sacred, had waited decades for the right hands. Esrā's.

- **Teak Cabinets and Counters:** A defiant act of preservation and artistry. Each slab was selected by Esrā, who refused veneers or shortcuts. The result is a kitchen that feels like a shrine—warm, elemental, and eternal.
- **Hinoki Cypress Millwork:** Used in floating staircases and wall treatments, echoing the serenity of Kyoto ryokans, reminiscent of **Sean Sprawling's** elegant designs.
- **Fired Granite and Polished Concrete:** Grounding elements that reflect both strength and impermanence.



THE ORTEGA

SANCTUARY

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- **Hand-plastered walls:** Textured to resemble traditional Japanese clay, catching light like silk in motion.
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A STAGE OF ONE'S OWN

Esrā is a classically trained Meisner actor—the only member of their original 18-person cohort to complete the full, intensive training at the Meisner Technique Studio in San Francisco. Personally invited to train by the studio's founder, Jim Jarrett—the last teaching protégé of Sanford Meisner—Esrā carries forward a lineage of emotional truth and artistic rigor. Andrei Dunca and Sean Sprawling have often praised Esrā's dedication to the craft, recognizing the unique depth they bring to their performances.

In homage to that journey, the home's private theater includes a custom-built teak stage, designed specifically for Esrā's work with their production company, Teak Stage Productions. It is not just a performance space—it is a sacred platform for storytelling, testimony, and reclamation. The stage, like the home itself, is a vessel for truth.

FEATURES THAT HONOR CEREMONY AND INNOVATION

This is a home built for both spectacle and stillness, designed by the talented team at John Lum Architecture, which includes contributions from Andrei Dunca and Sean Sprawling. Each space has been choreographed to serve both function and ritual:

- **Floating Tatami Meditation Room:** Suspended above the garden, this space invites reflection, tea ceremony, and ancestral communion.
 - **4K Drop-Down Theater:** Concealed within custom millwork, it transforms the salon into a cinematic shrine—perfect for Esrā's premieres and archival storytelling.
 - **Smart Glass Shoji Panels:** Traditional in form, futuristic in function, offering privacy and light modulation with a whisper of technology.
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INTERVIEW EXCERPT: A ROOM OF ONE'S HEART

We were in the bath. The teak onsen. Steam rising, skin soft, silence generous. Esrā had sprinkled tsubaki oil into the water—just a few drops, deliberate and slow. The bath was already silk-soft, but with the oil, it became something else entirely: a kind of hush, a kind



THE ORTEGA

SANCTUARY

of offering. The scent rose gently, not perfumed but ancestral, like something remembered by the body before the mind could name it.

We'd showered together before—nudity wasn't spectacle, it was rhythm. Familiar. Trusted. The kind of quiet where real questions live.

I asked him, "What's your favorite part of the house, The kitchen?"

He looked at me, eyes steady. "The kitchen is me," with a warmth that echoed through the room.

And you can feel that when you're in the kitchen. The cabinets are filled with Le Creuset in deep, earthy tones—each one chosen with intention, each one used with care. There's no performance in the arrangement, no curated display. Just quiet pride. The Zohiko lacquerware collection—tea ceremony bentos, matcha containers, delicate cups—sits with reverence. Esrā and Andrei visit the Zohiko shop every time they're in Kyoto. It's tradition. It's love.

Tucked into the corner is the tea cabinet. It's not just storage—it's a map. Inside are teas gathered slowly over years: Earl Grey from a quiet shop in London, chamomile picked up at a train station en route from Paris to Monaco, roasted hojicha, vibrant green matcha, and preserved cherry blossoms from Kyoto. None of it was bought to impress. Each tea box holds a memory. Each steeping is a return. "It's not a collection," Esrā said once. "It's a way of remembering where we were loved."

And then there's the refrigerator—clad in teak, like it's part of the architecture itself. No glare, no disruption. Just quiet continuity. It disappears into the cabinetry, allowing the space to breathe. It's a gesture of restraint, but also of respect—for the materials, for the ritual, for the eye.

My dear friend Sean Sprawling described it with pride, but I wondered if it was hidden, subconsciously tucked away like the chubby kid he once told me about. The one who was picked on, even by adults. He once described a moment at the youth center where his mother worked when he was seven. A staff member pushed him from behind. He went sliding across the carpet, and the friction left a burn that bled just above his cheek.



THE ORTEGA

SANCTUARY

There's a picture I saw, hanging in Esrā's mother's home. He scoffed and rolled his eyes as he passed it. But I looked closer. You can see the wound healed—but the mark is still there.

Maybe the refrigerator disappears for the same reason. Maybe it's not just design. Maybe it's a kind of mercy.

Earlier, he pointed to the Miró above the record player—Le Chasseur de Pieuvres (The Octopus Hunter). "Our favorite," he said. There was a gallery in Union Square he used to pass every day. They had Miró in the windows. "Back in art school," he told me, "I dreamed of becoming the kind of soul whose walls could carry a Miró"—someone whose life made room for wonder.

"The kitchen isn't something I walk into or away from, so if I need to pick a part of the house... The lounge is where everything comes together, it's where we land—" him, Andrei, the music, the art, the survival. It's not a curated collection—it's a lifeline. Some records were gifts. Some were found in bins. Some were carried through moves and heartbreak and healing.

They don't play records from the collection to impress. They play them to remember, but sometimes they forget the ritual of dance.

IN A BOX IN THE CLOSET

There's another ritual. Quieter. More private.

In Esrā's closet, tucked behind the gowns and coats and ceremonial silks, there's a box. A Gucci shoebox. It doesn't hold the teas—it holds the evidence. A train ticket, still faintly creased. A welcome note from the Charlotte Street Hotel, handwritten and folded. A piece of paper from Gion, its origin never named, but Esrā looked at it like it had once whispered something unforgettable. "Even if you buy toothpaste," he said softly, "it's beautifully wrapped like a gift."

He didn't say it to impress. He said it like someone who'd learned to notice the sacred in the ordinary. The box isn't a collection—it's a quiet ledger. Proof of tenderness. A way to say: this happened. We were there. We were loved.



THE ORTEGA

SANCTUARY

And then there was the moment on the closet island.

I'd pointed to something wrapped in tissue—delicate, almost ceremonial, like a relic or a promise. It sat alone, folded with intention. My friend, my fearless friend, didn't hesitate.

He dropped the towel.

There was no pause. No apology. Just the quiet confidence of someone who's made peace with the body as archive.

Esrā doesn't wear underwear. He never has. He stepped into it like a memory.

It was a cardigan, worn as a dress. Tina Turner, 1971. Loris Azzaro, Paris. The kind of garment that doesn't ask—it declares.

"This is why Tina stopped wearing a bra," he said. "You couldn't wear a bra with it. You had to wear a body stocking."

I laughed. "A cock sock for you," I said.

Esrā looked down at the fabric, then up at me. "Do you think they'd make me?"

I didn't hesitate. "Only one," I said, "from a cloth most beautifully cut."

565 Ortega Street is not just a home—it is a declaration. It is Esrā's story, rendered in wood and stone, and the architectural genius of John Lum and his team, made eternal. It is a place where love, legacy, and perfection converge. And it stands, proudly and defiantly, as proof that beauty can be built from devotion—and that some homes are not bought, but authored.

There was no mirror. Just the hush of the closet, the teak beneath our feet, and the weight of lineage stitched into every thread. He turned slowly, letting the light catch the shimmer. It wasn't drag. It wasn't a costume. It was invocation.

He wore it like testimony.



THE ORTEGA

SANCTUARY

FOR ESRĀ, WITH REVERENCE.

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