



There is a sense of place that most of us experience when we walk into a courthouse,

recreate at a park, or return to our homes after a difficult day at work. As we experience historic events, we are often clued into their importance by the impressiveness of the architecture or place where they occur.

In particular, the intersection of architecture and law is powerful. The august judges' chambers, the impressive and powerful courthouse halls and the ivy-covered walls of law schools impress upon residents, visitors and guests the importance of the buildings and the serious transactions that occur within. These places are almost always large, monumental and, of course, historically important.

So, imagine yourself on a meandering and contemplative walk. You're on a small road winding through a neighborhood, where native Sonoran plants host hummingbirds and butterflies. The light breeze and call of mourning doves create a lovely, peaceful atmosphere. But peeking through the bushes, a little adobe home pokes its roof apex through the trees.

Would you think "law"? Would you think "civic discourse"? Would you think about moments that preceded historical events? Unlikely, but true, because this little adobe house was the 2,000-square-foot home that John and Sandra Day O'Connor designed and built to raise their three sons. As it happened, that was also the site for numerous moments at the kitchen table, on the patio, and across the cooking area, where international guests chatted, legislators hammered out differences—and where an Arizona lawyer was vetted for her selection as the nation's first woman Supreme Court Justice.

The History

Sandra Day O'Connor grew up on the Lazy B Ranch in Greenlee County, Arizona. There, near the New Mexico border, was a plastered adobe house where the young girl spent a great deal of time, as she was an only child until she was eight years old. Although life on the ranch was spare—no running water or electricity until she was seven—she learned to drive, fire rifles and ride horses before her siblings were born. Reading, cowboy friends and a pet bobcat kept Sandra busy and interested in all of the things ranch life could provide. As she writes in *Lazy B: Growing up on a Cattle Ranch in the American Southwest*, "I developed a love of the land and for the way of life on the ranch that has stayed with me. Spending hours each day at the dinner table discussing ranching, politics, or economics is a treat many young people don't experience." Although she stayed in El Paso during the school year with her Grandmother Wilkey (maternal grandmother), she always returned to the Lazy B and the peace and rustic comfort it provided. As she and her brother Alan write:

The earliest memory is of sounds. In a place of all-encompassing silence, any sound is to be noted and remembered. When the wind is not blowing, it is so quiet you can hear a beetle scurrying across the ground or a fly landing on a bush. ... We belonged to the Lazy B, and it belonged to each of us. ... We want to belong to a place familiar to us.

If we have such a place, we are part of it and it a part of us. Clearly, this was an important and impressionable time for the young girl.

Because of those fond memories, when the time came to build a home in the Phoenix area, John and Sandra picked a place where the Praying Monk and Camelback Mountain were visible, where the Sonoran Desert and the quiet was all-encompassing. Reminiscent, once again, of her childhood, they chose to build an adobe home.

The House

When the couple decided to build an adobe structure, few people knew how to build them or even where to acquire the bricks. One day, when discussing their dilemma, someone offered, "Why don't you talk to Old Mister Ellis on Cattletrack Road?" They did, and in 1957, George Ellis began forming the adobe bricks. He used the mud from the Salt River banks—the very materials from the very place that the Hohokam used for their homes so very long ago. Ellis, like the Native American construction crews that came before, shoveled the mud into brick-shaped forms, which were then baked in the sun.

Then the O'Connors hired a young architect, D. K. Taylor. Influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright, he designed a long, narrow home with large overhangs to protect the adobe bricks. He included large floor-to-ceiling windows that gave the illusion the outside existed inside.

When the bricks were turned out from the forms, they were stacked according to the architect's specifications, with more adobe mud serving as the mortar between the bricks. Once the bricks were stacked, the mud mortar dried, and all the walls were covered with skim milk.

The young couple stacked the bricks and painted the skim milk to finish the walls themselves. O'Connor recalls, "John and I hand-scraped every one of these indentations in the adobe ourselves with an electric conduit, because the builder wasn't prepared to do that." She promises, "When the house is moved, I will help to paint the walls once again with skim milk, just like John and I did years ago."

The floor plan of the house looks like an arrow with long eaves to protect the adobe brick from melting in the rain. There were three bedrooms, but the three O'Connor boys shared one room. The master bedroom was at one end of the house, with the three sons in the room directly next to it.

FROM THE MUD OF THE SALT

BY ANDREA NORMAN

Legal History Reborn in
The O'Connor House

The adobe home where John and Justice Sandra Day O'Connor lived and raised their family is being moved from Paradise Valley to a new location in the Carl Hayden Campus of Sustainability in Papago Park. The intention is to create The O'Connor House and Center for Civic Discourse. It will be available for people and organizations to come together and resolve conflicts or disagreements, peacefully.

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Then, a guest room and bathroom followed.

Save a pantry/laundry room, the remainder of the house was a great room that consisted of a kitchen separated only by an island stove. It lent itself to effortless interactions between people in the kitchen (namely O'Connor herself) and people in the living room (their guests). Justice O'Connor says now that with the adobe bricks and the Frank Lloyd Wright influences, "The home represents the best of Arizona."

The Events

The home's floor plan performed exactly as John and Sandra hoped it would, facilitating and inviting discussion while food was prepared. Justice O'Connor was an avid cook and baker. She wanted to be a part of everything as she toiled in the kitchen. Some

people remember her making brownies for school events as they discussed legislative issues. The family lived in the home from 1957 to 1981, forming a generation of memories. In addition, significant events shaped people who visited, as well as Arizona legislation.

Because no one would hire a female attorney, O'Connor started her own practice. In a Maryvale retail center, she and a partner practiced landlord-tenant law, drew up wills and handled domestic relations cases. She also accepted appointments to represent indigent defendants. Then, in a dilemma still common among working women today, her babysitter quit. Unable to replace her, Justice O'Connor spent the next five years at home. The energy she had poured into her practice was redirected into her community. During that time, she was a key person in the formation of



John and Sandra in their Paradise Valley home.

O'Connor credits her adobe home with providing the setting for compromise and collaboration. Over potluck or specially prepared dinners, Justice O'Connor hosted Democrats and Republicans to reach bipartisan solutions for closely divided issues.



Paradise Valley as its own township. Today, she talks about how Paradise Valley was formed in her living room. At that time, she also served as a referee in court and was involved in many other community activities.

When their children went to school, she secured a position in the Attorney General's Office—three-quarter time for half-time pay. After several years, a county supervisor appointed her to a vacancy as a state legislator in District 24. She remembers, wryly, that was when the phone began ringing at all hours of the day and night with calls from constituents. However, she also speaks of how privileged she felt to work on the issues. Specifically, she notes the amendment to the Arizona Constitution that changed the selection of judges in select counties from a partisan selection to an appointment by an independent commission. She states that this change in the Arizona Constitution has created “as fine a

group of judges and judicial system as any state in the United States.”

She credits her adobe home with providing the setting for compromise and collaboration with both sides of the aisle. Over potluck or specially prepared dinners, Justice O'Connor hosted both Democrats and Republicans to reach bipartisan solutions for closely divided issues. Leo Corbet, former President of the Arizona

State Senate, says:

Through the years that I served with Sandra, I used to marvel at her ability to go from Senate Majority Leader to gracious hostess with such ease. She would have the full Senate over for dinner within hours of debating legislation and never miss a beat. We wrote the Grand Jury bill on her kitchen table while she was baking cookies for one of her son's school events. She was always able to master both roles and do justice to both. (No pun intended.)

To this day, Justice O'Connor believes that it is critical for politicians to make friends on both sides of the aisle. She continues to worry about "partisanship at all levels."

Scott O'Connor, Sandra's oldest son, has other special memories. Although he doesn't remember, as his mother does, his sliding on the floor in his diapers, he does recall the house used as a "host" home for young leaders from Egypt, Pakistan and other countries. He remembers people in exotic native dress and the informal and relaxed setting that educated those young leaders about Arizona.

Perhaps the most historic events in the house occurred when Justice Potter Stewart retired from the Supreme Court. President Reagan had promised his constituents that he would appoint the first woman justice to the Court. O'Connor remembers talking with the United States Attorney General, William French Smith, about the possibility of being selected for the seat on the Court. She recalls being extremely skeptical about her potential appointment because her good friend and fellow Stanford classmate, William Renhquist, was already on the Court. (Renhquist was ranked first and O'Connor third in the Stanford class of 1952.)

Despite her skepticism, O'Connor was visited by Ken Starr and another gentleman, who were there to administer a high-level job interview. She states, "I don't remember exactly what we talked about, but we had a lovely salmon mousse for lunch."

She then traveled to Washington, DC, where she met with President Reagan. O'Connor says with a smile that he was "the nicest man" and was more interested in her cowgirl background than anything else. As she left the president's office, she thought, "That was an interesting experience; I'm glad I won't have to do that job!"

Yet just a few days later, once again in the adobe home, President Reagan called her. He said, "I would like to announce your appointment tomorrow; is that OK with you?" She says now, "Well, it wasn't!"

But, the rest, as they say, is history. Reagan wrote in his diary on July 6, 1981: "Called Judge O'Connor and told her she was my nominee for Supreme Court. Already the flak is starting and from my own supporters. Right to Life people say she is pro abortion. She says abortion is personally repugnant to her. I think she'll make a good justice."

The Current Project

The adobe house where so much had transpired was sold in 1981 and then again recently. The new, current owner, planned to raze the home and rebuild on the lot.

Because of the historic significance of the home, friends rallied and contributed money to save it. That was a daunting and involved process. It would mean moving it brick-by-brick to its new location in Papago Park on the Carl Hayden Campus for Sustainability. But why there?


According to Tempe Mayor Hugh Hallman, the Campus for Sustainability is becoming a central area to remember and celebrate "strong, intelligent women." The campus includes another adobe home, The Eisendrath House, a resort built by a Jewish woman who wasn't welcomed into the resorts in Phoenix. Also on the site are the Tempe Women's Club Xeriscape garden and the Evelyn Hallman Park.

The vision? Turn the home into the O'Connor House for Civic Discourse, a place where people can come together to reach consensus in a peaceful, collaborative manner. The O'Connor House, a subsidiary of the Rio Salado Foundation, has generated enough money to move the house, but is working to raise more to reconstruct, furnish and landscape it. Lattie Coor is part of that effort.

Coor, Chairman and CEO of the Center for the Future of Arizona and President Emeritus of Arizona State University, says, "The restoration of the O'Connor House offers the opportunity to recreate a magic era in Arizona when contending parties, in the heat of battle, were gathered by Sandra and John O'Connor for fellowship and conversation. The result was compromise and consensus in solving the great challenges at hand."

Elva Coor, Chair of the fundraising committee (and wife of Lattie), adds, "It's important for people to realize that even the most modest of places can host and help create historically significant events."

When fundraising is complete, the house will be reconstructed in a place much like its original setting, a native desert environment close to where the mud from the house was originally sourced. And Janie Ellis—daughter of "Old Mister Ellis"—is the construction administrator orchestrating the move. Turns out, she has a love of adobe houses and has moved several to save them from the bulldozer's blade.

In 2010, when visitors view the site, they will see Sonoran plants, hear the buzz of bees and see the whirr of hummingbirds' wings as the home hosts dignitaries, politicians and others seeking a collaborative solution to the issues at hand—all in the spirit of one of its original builders, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. 

For More Information

The O'Connor House LLC, a subsidiary of the Rio Salado Foundation, is accepting tax-deductible contributions that will fund the move, reassembly and subsequent management of the home. The organization will provide oversight of the construction process, assume ownership of the home after relocation and provide for its long-term maintenance. More information is at www.oconnorhouse.org.

