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Thought Leader Conversation: Rancho La Puerta President Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood On Bringing Spa Life Home



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I write about wellness design and home trends.



Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood is the president of leading resort spa Rancho La Puerta. COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

One of the biggest cliches in the residential design world is “spa-inspired.” Spa style, spa features and spa amenities have been showing up in glossy ads and editorial layouts for decades before Instagram or Pinterest clicked their way into our consciousness.

There are probably thousands of stories of remodeling clients sharing snapshots of showers and vanities from their recent resort vacations with their design team, declaring, “This is what I want!” Clients redoing their kitchens will also often ask for features that can help them cook the healthy menus they enjoyed during recent trips. The goal of these photos and requests is always bringing spa style back home.

Some of them could have originated at a rustic spa resort just across the border from San Diego in Tecate, Mexico. The 80-year-old [Rancho La Puerta](#) is frequently rated as one of the best destination spas in the world. Now healthy living fans don’t have to remodel their kitchens or bathrooms to get its amenities for themselves.



Residential bathrooms like this one at the Residences at Rancho La Puerta have long been inspired by ...
[+] COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

The property is creating a new home community for spa enthusiasts to live in on site. Homes at the [Residences at Rancho La Puerta](#) start at 1,961 square foot casitas priced from \$733,163 and go up to 4,299 square foot villas starting at \$1,692,000. Even the entry-level units feature a wellness home technology package that automates water and air quality and offers circadian lighting. They also include outdoor living spaces and comfort amenities like meditation areas, hammocks and water fountains.



Hammocks like these at the 80-year-old spa have inspired hammock spots at the new residences being ...
[+] COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood is the daughter of the destination spa's founding couple who grew up on site and is its president today. In this Thought Leader Series installment, she shares how her family's focus on wellness has led to the expansion of Rancho La Puerta into a wellness design community – and what that means for a new generation of resident enthusiasts.

Jamie Gold: You have a fascinating life story. How has it inspired and informed your career?

Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood: The Ranch of my childhood in the 1950s was dusty, improvised, rustic and exceedingly productive. I milked goats, gathered eggs, and lived without electricity. In my college years in the '70s, during the back to the land movement, I was ahead of the curve having been raised by a village of loving, resourceful and hardworking Mexican men and women. Chopping wood and carrying water was part of my DNA.

My innate artistic nature, [my father's philosophy](#) and my passion for the natural world were the inspiration I carried into my work as healing garden designer and an organic farmer. An understanding of the interconnected nature of all things guides my work.



Much of the spa cuisine's produce served at Rancho La Puerta is grown on site. COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Gold: Rancho La Puerta is widely known as one of the world's leading spas. How, when and why did the idea for wellness-designed residences emerge?

Brightwood: Rancho La Puerta sits in a beautiful, expansive valley at the foot of a sacred mountain with a creek that runs through an oak woodland. We purchased the neighboring ranch about 25 years ago, knowing that it would allow Rancho La Puerta to grow and protect our access to the mountain. I had always hoped to preserve our valley's agricultural traditions and had designed an eco-village on nearby land. Three years ago, we found the perfect partners to help us develop the land as a marriage of wellness community, eco-village and working vineyard.



Rancho La Puerta's Baja location inspires the resort's rustic architecture. COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Gold: What do you see as key elements in the relationship between home and health?

Brightwood: I have always loved environments that are designed to celebrate our connection to the natural world. By this, I mean a home that is sensitive to seasonal changes, reminding us of the rhythms and cycles that have shaped our bodies over the millennia and enlivening the senses. We live in a world of so much unhealthy stimulation, distraction and hurry, I feel that a home should be a place where we can shed our stress and all the world demands of us at the door and feel safe enough to fully inhabit our bodies.



Rooms should be designed with nontoxic materials and outdoor connections.

COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

The construction materials need to be free of toxins in order to support our bodies with a healing environment. This extends to purified air, water that is alive, surfaces and textiles with no volatile organic compounds, relief from constant immersion in electromagnetic fields and lighting conducive to sleep and work.

Gold: I've defined the Five Facets of Wellness Design as Health & Fitness, Safety and Security, Accessibility, Functionality, Comfort and Joy. What features and amenities will the residences provide in the way of supporting any or all of these facets-especially accessibility for older residents or others with mobility issues?

Brightwood: The Residences at Rancho La Puerta have been designed to grow with you and will be built with the infrastructure to retrofit and support mobility. For example: metal plates for grab bars will be standard under shower tiles to allow for grab bars if and when needed. Closets will be designed to convert into elevators in the two-story Casas and Villas.

There are multiple master bedrooms in the Casa and Villas units that offer an upstairs and a downstairs space of equal size and virtues. Ramp options will also be provided, as well as other services such as food deliveries right to the doorstep and in-home massages. Many homes will have their own swimming pools, hot tubs or dipping pools. In addition, in the Resident Village Center there will be a communal lap pool, jacuzzi and cold plunge.



The residences have multiple bedrooms and circadian lighting systems to optimize sleep. COURTESY OF RANCHO LA PUERTA

Gold: I understand that residents – both full-time and part-time – will have full access to the spa as part of their ownership. What design elements (e.g., sauna, steam room, whirlpool, lap pool, gym, other) will they access at the spa, rather than within their own residence? Are those walkable to the residences?

Brightwood: In addition to the daily wellness program provided to the homeowners, they will have access to The Ranch via daily passes for purchase (based on availability). Additionally, the residents will have access to the Villas Health Center—and its generous menu of spa treatments—all of which lie within walking distance. Our extensive guided hiking program of over fifty miles of trails will be available to the Residents to partake in too.

