

MATT THOMAS

by Erin Elder

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Matt Thomas' house, like many in Taos, is old, beloved, and unassuming. It's a spring morning in 2023 when I visit; Matt and his dog Madhu meet me at the gate.

"I'm celebrating 20 years in Taos!" he exclaims when I ask, "19 in this house."

The house is a 113 year-old adobe. With its original structure and spirit still intact, all 900 square feet have been carefully reinforced, resurfaced, adjusted, modernized, organized, designed, and retrofitted. Designer furniture and modernist art live comfortably amidst raw vegas and mud walls. I move from room to room exclaiming over the details — a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf crammed with books, chalkboard paint and subway tiles in the kitchen, tasteful lighting, even hand-stenciled wallpaper.

In the office, which is actually the heart of this home, I open a wooden cabinet.

"I made that," says Matt sheepishly.

"You're a furniture builder?!" I exclaim.

"Well, I just needed a place for the printer."

As Matt gestures at the perfectly ensconced printer, I begin to see evidence of it elsewhere — a nook for the washing machine, a clandestine medicine cabinet, a special shelf for soap, a niche for keys — indeed, Matt has built a home in which every object is considered and belongs.

We head out to the studio, taking the long way around. Matt points out his new garden beds and we admire the budding lilacs. Across the lawn, we wave to visitors on the guest house porch. "We have tango dancers staying with us," he explains. "Richard brought them from Buenos Aires."

Richard is Matt's husband. He runs an inn just down the street where he has space for gardening, raising chickens, hosting people, and dancing. "I met Richard during my first week in Taos," he says, still surprised. Fresh from architecture school, Matt was attracted to Taos for its green building. He became entranced by the climate, the mountains, the light, the small town vibes, and increasingly, Richard.

"When I arrived in Taos, I was struggling with my identity. The community was really nurturing and helped me come out." Matt was born and raised in a small, conservative Missouri town. It was a decent place to grow up — to build forts in the woods, to be part of civic life, to experience good old-fashioned community — but not a place where Matt could be truly free.

In Taos and with Richard, Matt blossomed. In 2011, the two worked together to produce Pecha Kucha, a fun, fast-paced approach to storytelling that featured people from all over town, from small business owners to local artists to farmers and community organizers. Running for over 12 years and with hundreds of presenters, the event was a multi-voiced and vibrant expression of local community.

In 2013, Matt saw another opportunity to bring urban design strategies to Taos. During the town's Fall Arts Festival, he organized a free one-night event that featured a giant robot sculpture, an immersive light environment, performance and installation art. 10 years later, Paseo Project has grown into a full-blown nonprofit organization that runs a residency program, collaborates with local organizations, works in schools, and produces public art, including an annual international art festival that transforms Taos with interactive art, technology, and light.

"This is my happy place," Matt declares as we enter his backyard studio.

A tall table sits in the middle of a small room; we perch around it on stools. I notice a sewing machine, a stack of catalogs, rolls of paper, and many, many beautiful artworks. Despite the smallness of the studio, everything feels orderly and peaceful and very productive.

I ask Matt if there were creative spaces in his childhood home.

"Oh yes. Dad had a woodshop and mom had a sewing room. We were always making things with legos and cardboard and whatever we could find."

Though Matt has chosen a different lifestyle than his parents', the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Textiles, construction, wood, thread, material, structure, patterns — Matt's visual language is the creative offspring of both mom and dad.

"I'm working with a pile of dress patterns from my mom." He hands me a waxed, folded, and sewn-over pattern, a test for a larger piece. "I think of this as queering the tools of my ancestors. It's interesting to subvert or find contradictions in the way these tools are understood."

For years, Matt has made quilted building-block 2D artworks that tumble, emerge, repeat, fade, and syncopate. Recently the quilts have gotten bigger and more imaginative; there are quilts of tyvek, quilts of reclaimed plastic bags, even a performance that used a giant sewing needle to quilt a piece of farm land. There is a plywood dress and an inflatable cinder block. There is sometimes pink, sometimes mirror, and always a careful labor that holds everything together.

I ask about the future. This afternoon, he's helping a friend install a show, then meeting with a new batch of PASEO interns. He's also designing a sheep barn for a client and making a book about acequias. He hands me a sketch for the latest backyard project: a yoga room surrounded by built-in sleeping nooks.

Indeed, whether it's founding a community art program or recording a history of local waterways, whether it's helping a trans kid feel welcome or housing a visiting tango dancer, a room for yoga or a home for sheep, Matt Thomas builds space for each to belong.