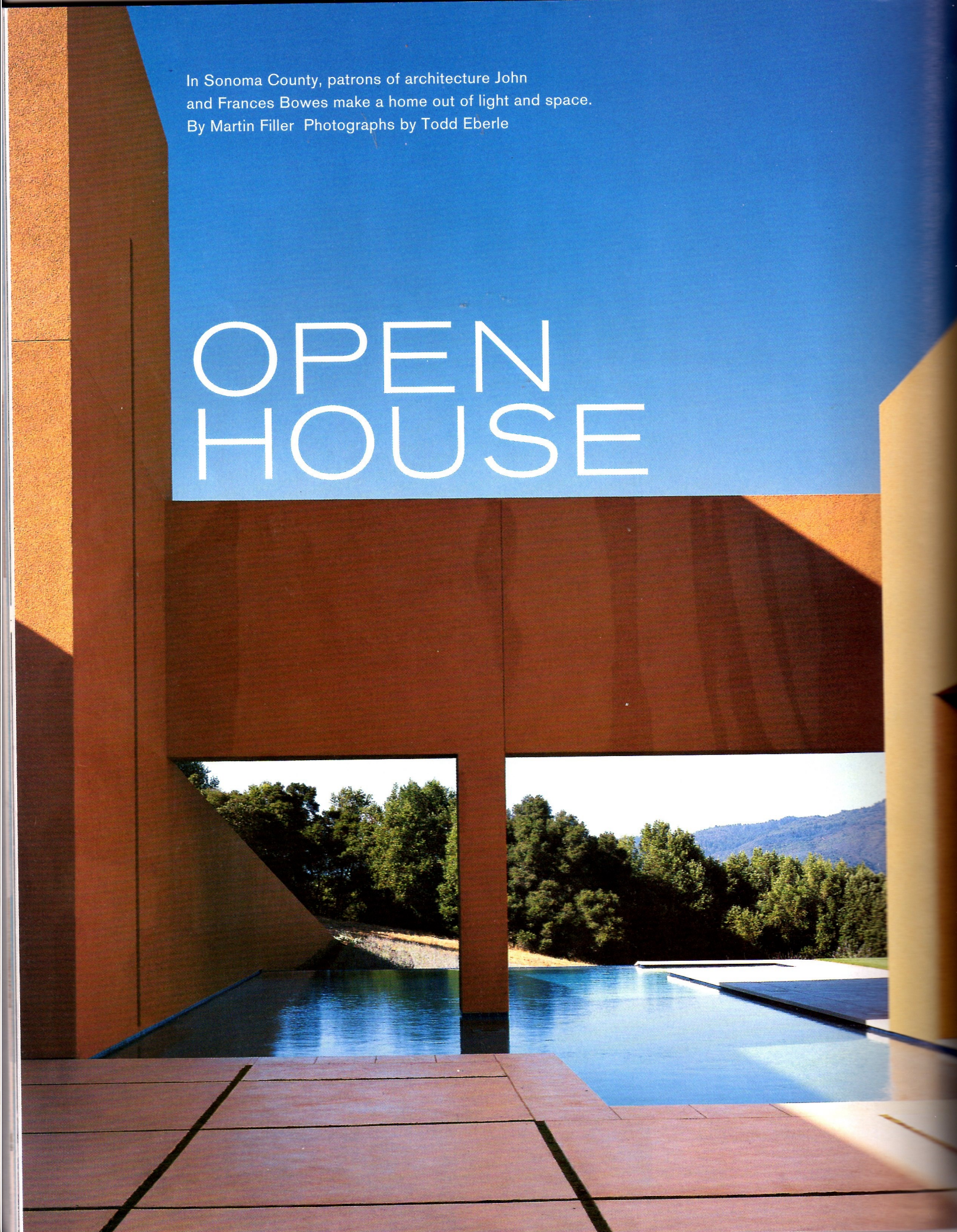


The Boweses collaborated with Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta on the house; its courtyard and pool (opposite) become the focus of family life during the day.

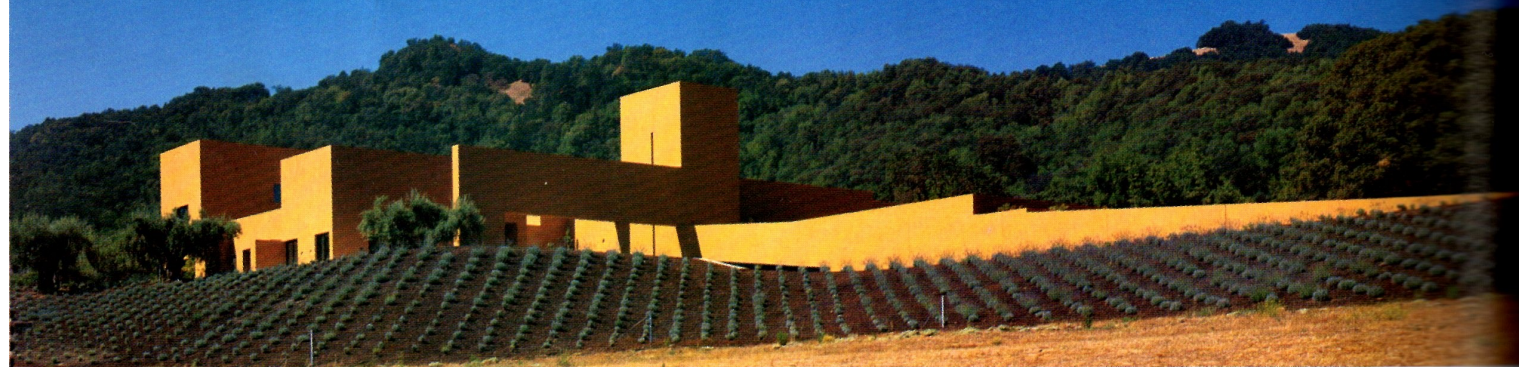


In Sonoma County, patrons of architecture John and Frances Bowes make a home out of light and space.
By Martin Filler Photographs by Todd Eberle

OPEN HOUSE



Casa Bowes makes even the most expansive California houses look puny.

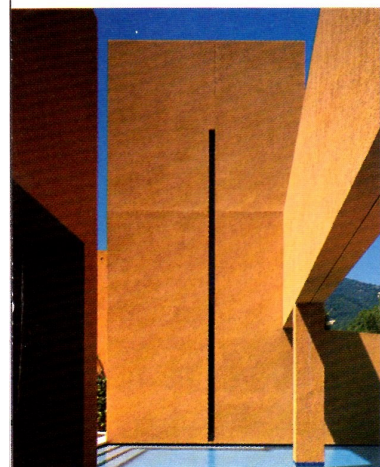


San Francisco is a city blessed with extraordinary natural beauty, but like many people so endowed, it seems determined to prove to the world that its beauty is more than skin-deep. For beyond its embarrassment of physical riches, San Francisco is also lucky enough to have a group of art-loving citizens who are very rich, very generous and benefactors of the city's Museum of Modern Art. Among them are brothers Peter Haas and Walter Haas Jr., scions of the Levi Strauss blue-jean fortune, and their wives Evie and Mimi; Don Fisher, founder of The Gap, and his wife Doris; Charles and Helen Schwab (he started the national discount-brokerage firm); Phyllis C. Wattis, San Francisco's arts matriarch; and the Koret and Swig foundations.

But among the most admirable of them all are John and Frances Bowes, the museum's only husband-and-wife trustee team. When SFMOMA celebrates the opening on January 18 of its spectacular new \$60 million building, designed by the inter-

nationally acclaimed Swiss architect Mario Botta, the Boweses' sizable contribution will be acknowledged with the dedication to them of the museum's galleries for architecture and design, long-held interests of the couple. The

Above: The house, sited on a ridge above a swath of lavender bushes, faces east and south. Left: Sunlight enters the forty-eight-foot-tall entry tower through a slitlike window, creating a bright, shifting column inside.



Boweses stand out among this group of high-profile patrons, who together epitomize a new, more active breed of philanthropists. Reaching maturity during the art explosion of the Sixties, they have lived with—and often in—works of art that continue to shape and challenge their outlook on the world and their role in it.

The Boweses brought their three daughters up in one of the historic gems of San Francisco architecture, Bernard Maybeck's Goslinsky house of 1909. They still own a 1961 residence at Sausalito, north of the city, by the Bay Area master William Wurster. And they've just completed a magnificent new house in the Sonoma Valley designed by the Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta. It is unquestionably one of his best houses yet, approaching the serenity and timelessness found in the work of Mexico's greatest architect and Legorreta's idol, the late Luis Barragán.

Casa Bowes (as the couple call the Sonoma house) and the glorious 400 acres of former ranchland it's built on set them back almost \$6 million, according to a family friend. But, like several other SFMOMA board members, the 66-year-old John Bowes has prospered mightily in recent years. With his longtime business partner John Rosekrans (husband of Dodie, San Francisco's most irrepressible socialite), Bowes last June sold their Kransco Group, America's largest privately owned toy company, to Mattel for \$260 million. That's a lot of Frisbees—the best-known item in the Kransco line.

Bowes isn't ready for retirement, though. "We just bought Yakima, the largest brand of sports racks for the tops of cars," he explains over drinks with Frances, 61, on their sun-washed Sonoma terrace. "We're going to buy two or three specialized sporting-goods companies, put them together and build an enterprise



that's smaller than Kransco but one that's profitable and growing."

The couple have clearly spared little expense at the exquisitely crafted Casa Bowes, a villagelike group of cubic stucco pavilions joined by spacious corridors and entered through a forty-eight-foot-high tower. The terra-cotta-colored house has inspired more gossip in San Francisco society than almost any other subject lately, not all of it positive. "It looks like the tomb of a Bulgarian dictator," sniffs one recent guest. And though he's never been there, another local observer remarks, "I hear the living room is so big it has its own weather patterns."

That's an exaggeration, of course, but Casa Bowes is built on such a capacious scale that it makes even the most expansive California houses look a bit puny. Brilliantly sited on a ridge facing east across the Sonoma Valley, it rides high above live-oak trees that screen roads and other buildings from view. Like the Boweses' city home, a Russian Hill house remodeled into a neo-moderne showplace, Casa Bowes was conceived partly in terms of accommodating the owners' large-scale contemporary art collection. The ceilings are sixteen feet high, rising to twenty-two feet in the barrel-vaulted corridors. And yet the imposing structure has a personal air, the result of unusually knowledgeable patrons involving themselves in the design process. Architect and clients worked through many versions of the house's massing until a pleasing composition was achieved; for example, the Boweses suggested to Legorreta that he rotate the scheme 180 degrees so that their bedroom, rather than the dining room, could catch the morning sun. He happily obliged.

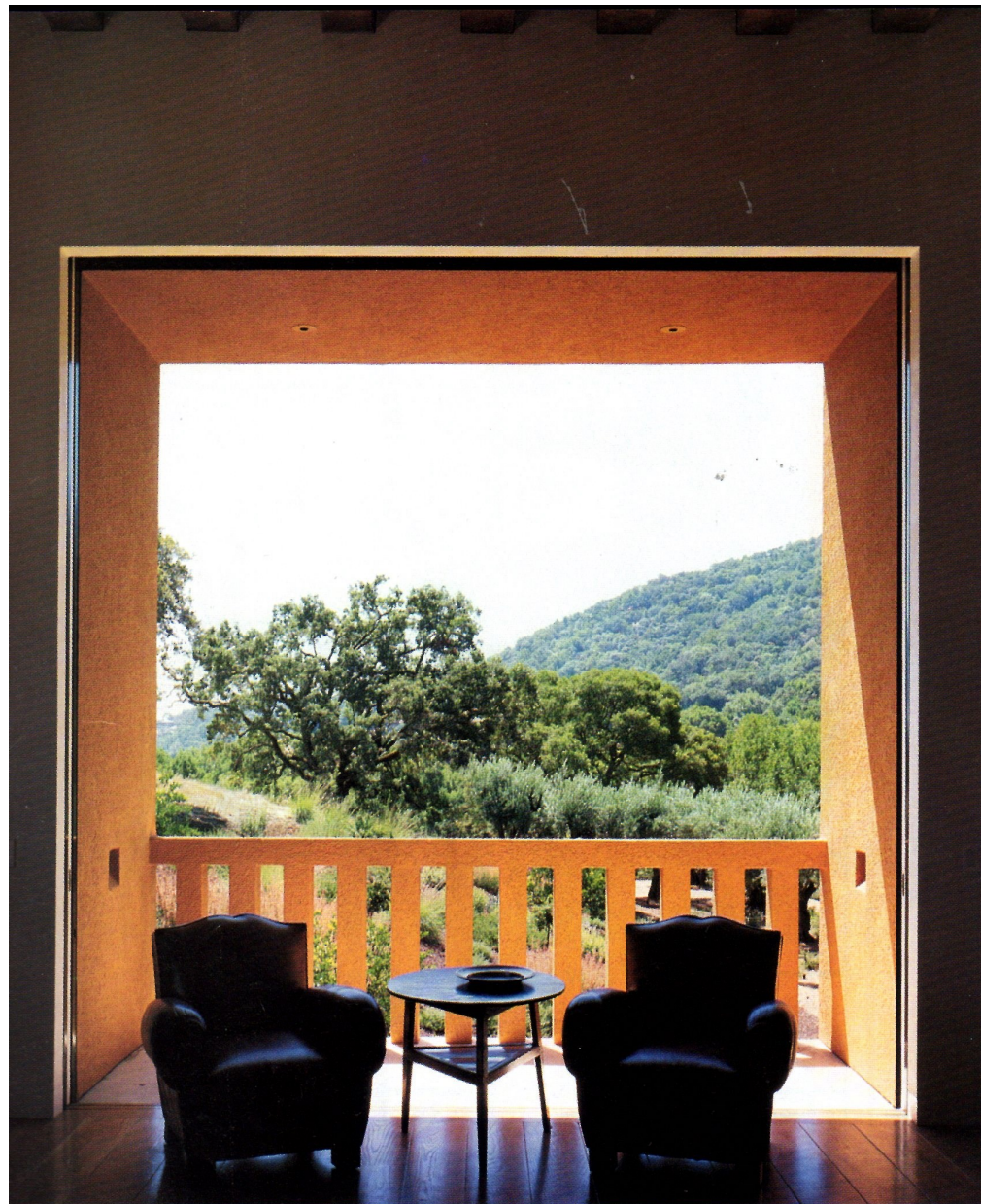
The 63-year-old Legorreta cares deeply about his residential projects, though he's built few houses in America. He is best

Everything about Casa Bowes is generously proportioned, from the gnarled 120-year-old olive trees moved to the property by landscape architect Roger Warner (above) to the living room sofas, which measure almost fifteen feet in length (below). The interiors are the work of Chessy Rayner of the New York firm MAC II; San Francisco furniture designer Ivy Rosequist also lent a hand.



Architect Ricardo Legorreta designed vast, naturally lit corridors between living areas to display the Boweses' contemporary art collection. Opposite: Walls and stairs of hand-troweled stucco glow beneath a skylight. Right: Grandson Thomas Marano eyes a piece from the collection.





Windows and entryways frame striking vistas—sometimes reinforcing the distinction between indoors and outdoors (as in the library, left), sometimes negating it (as in a hallway, right). Below: The blue-walled entry hall.

France, but hell, they've done it better than anyone else will ever do it, so why bother?"

"It's just what Michael Taylor always used to tell me," says Frances with the impish smile that signals her delight in being provocative: "The worst bitches get the best houses."

Frances' impulsive directness, energy and determination to be the best are well balanced by her husband's more thoroughly considered approach to life. Together the Boweses keep up an amiable Pat-and-Mike repartee, interrupting each other, trying to finish each other's sentences, rushing headlong in their obvious enjoyment of themselves as a couple.

For example, they're united in feeling that supporters of SFMOMA have been as generous to the museum—at least in proportion to their own resources—as they themselves have been. But doing less is frowned upon. Frances: "The feeling is that there *are* people who haven't given that much. . . ." John: "With a proven ability. . . ." Frances: "Who use the museum. . . ." John: "So they're going to have to dig down a little deeper. . . ." Frances: "And ante it up."

Then they discuss their favorite way of buying art. John: "Frances loves the auctions." Frances: "I *adore* them." John: "She wouldn't miss them." Frances: "Well, the auctions tell you what's going on." John: "No, it isn't that at all. It's just the excitement. You like the human equation you

find at the auctions—people and money and art. You get a kick out of it." Frances: "I love it."

John goes on to report that things can sometimes get a little out of hand. "One night at Sotheby's two or three years ago," he recalls with a broad smile, "Frances really liked one particular painting. I went up to a certain amount on it, stopped bidding, put the paddle down and relaxed. With that, Frances grabbed the paddle out of my hand, hit me over the head with it, knocked my glasses off and kept the paddle up until she got it. It's now in there over the fireplace." (The hauntingly beautiful painting, that is, not the paddle.)

Those who know the couple well can see beyond the surface splendor of their surroundings to the very human husband and wife whose houses are always also homes. For all its spatial grandeur, Casa Bowes has a welcoming, comfortable feeling that for Frances evokes the inviting atmosphere of her grandfather's old summer house at Lake Tahoe. Both the New York decorator Chessey Rayner of MAC II and the San Francisco designer ▶ 250

known here for the Camino Real Hotel in Mexico City and for his public works in the Sunbelt states and Latin America—such as Solana, a mixed-use development in Westlake, Texas; a renovation of Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles; and the new Roman Catholic cathedral in Managua, Nicaragua. Though the Boweses could have chosen from a number of talented Bay Area architects, they were determined to work with someone who knew how to build in a warm climate and was also of unimpeachable international stature.

The couple have been able to get exactly what they want not only through collaboration but also by knowing how to avoid what they can't attain, no matter how much it costs. "There's no sense in chasing what Jacob Rothschild has," says John matter-of-factly, "because you're never going to get it. Sure, you can copy a grand house in England or a château in

For all its spatial grandeur, Casa Bowes is welcoming.

