

Photography by **Brandon Harman**

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BOLD AND

Designers Omar Nobil and Erika Stahlman imagine a Brutalist and sustainable off-grid desert lifestyle — wardrobe and wheels included.

BEAUTIFUL



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During her design-school days in San Francisco, Erika Stahlman would pass by the big Brutalist wedge of the Hyatt Regency that slouches toward the Embarcadero and tell herself it was reviled for no good reason: “I loved it and thought, ‘Sorry nobody else likes it.’”

Stahlman, who turns 51 in February, is a 1990 graduate of Palm Desert High School, where she was Erika Reynolds, a member of the swim and dance teams and, in her senior year, a class ambassador. “I was known for being Erika, for sure,” she reflected on the Sunday afternoon in November when we met her and her fiancée, Omar Nobil Ahmad, at a sunny vacation rental in Pioneertown. Ahmad is a lanky 44-year-old Londoner whose professional name is Omar Nobil. His first job in fashion design was at Abercrombie & Fitch, and later he joined Banana Republic and attained the rank of vice president of women’s design. He left the company in 2021 and founded Unincorporated Associates with Stahlman. It’s their own multidisciplinary design firm, and they have big plans for the desert.

After our interview, the couple would do a photo shoot on the site of their first proposed project, and the next day drive cross-country with their dogs, Winston, a labradoodle, and Charlotte, a Great Dane. Nobil had just signed on as creative director at Design Within Reach, a division of MillerKnoll, and the destination was a new home in Connecticut.

Stahlman and Nobil would be leaving their hearts amid 3.04 acres of creosote scrubland lying alee of the Bartlett Mountains, the low range that runs into Joshua Tree. As of Aug. 6, 2021, Lot 23 in Hidden Paradise Ranchos, an unincorporated part of San Bernardino County, was deemed to Unincorporated Project No. 1 LLC after an earlier sale agreement for \$85,000. Since locking down

this unimproved property on dusty Benji Avenue, Stahlman has worked furiously to design a self-sustaining, 3,200-square-foot main dwelling with a separate garage and guesthouse — an exercise in Brutalist style.

“I don’t find ‘Brutalist’ to be a bad word,” Stahlman says. “I’m a minimalist. I believe in pure form and very little decoration. There’s a strong geometric vocabulary, and that’s what drives my design.”

How an interior design graduate of FIDM San Francisco became an architect is a long story, punctuated with stops in Los Angeles and New York before she established her

own studio, completing projects as far away as Beijing. Yet, as she explained, she used to spend childhood summers sketching houses and drafting floor plans. “My mom, Cher Reynolds, would feed me as many architecture and interior design plans and books as possible.”

Stahlman thereby developed her taste for simplicity. The new project, called U’A-3209 after a mashup of the grid coordinates, conceives a blending of cylindrical and trapezoidal shapes of poured concrete. In the plans, which Stahlman says are all but contractor-ready, the three-story cylinder



The curvaceous concrete architecture pairs with custom-designed clothing and a tricked-out vintage Land Rover Series III.





The geometric shapes of the structure accentuate the organic colors and contours of the natural landscape.

rises as high as 33 feet on the closed east side; on the west, it stares through massive glass panels at the bouldered 350-foot slope below the mountain ridge. The west face of the house brings to mind Kim Jong-un wearing sunglasses, but that’s not to say it’s ugly.

“Some of my favorite architects are Brutalist,” she continues. “I find beauty in Brutalism. It’s simplistic; there’s a real appreciation for nature and organic shapes while you’re doing these geometric shapes. I.M. Pei and Oscar Niemeyer have done the most brilliant work over the last few decades, and I’m honored to be put in that category.”

The slick publicity campaign undertaken by Nobil for U’A-3209 scored coverage last

April in *The Wall Street Journal*, which put the price at \$12 million. While a seven-figure amount is likely (and a “sound investment,” he says), they have backed off fixing the purchase price and terms of sale. Instead, they’ll execute the project on a pay-to-play basis: The buyer will partner with Unincorporated Associates to finance the construction, and variability in price will depend on which contractor they select. Five are under consideration, Stahlman says.

“Three of them are local, and two are out of town. The reason that we consider the people from out of town is, they’re very comfortable executing fine concrete work, and they’ve done the top projects on

the West Coast and are excited to work on [our] project. There’s one company that’s in the Bay Area that does beautiful off-grid houses, and they’re very adapted to off-grid technology.”

As of this writing, there was no MLS listing. Keith Markovitz of TTK Represents and Compass leads a newly formed super-sales team that includes Clayton Baldwin of Kinetic Properties and Aaron Kirman of AKG and Christie’s International Real Estate.

Stahlman expressed hope of a buyer who can commit to the idea of living with architecture. (This may even be an essential commitment as the built-ins will be of

formed concrete, too, although at least the pool deck’s custom-made wood chaises and umbrella detach from their anchor points.) Markovitz says he has observed a “diverse and interesting group of people” — mostly creatives — who are increasingly fascinated with the desert. “[Some are] engaged with what the future of architecture looks like, especially in the California desert. I think the imagery of this project specifically pushes the boundaries of what we always hoped we would see in the desert.”

There have been notable precursors in the desert architectural quest, and Nobil thinks of the organically styled Kellogg House, nine miles away, when he says, “Inspiration is just

people trying to do something that hasn’t been done before. It was very important for us to do a future-facing project.”

His part is what puts U’A-3209 over the top. While it may not be the only solar-powered, semi-subterranean, dry-septic UFO station on the planet, it could at the buyer’s discretion be the first one served up with a custom clothing collection of Nobil’s design and a tricked-out vintage Land Rover.

The collection will consist of not only 21 outfits created and made for the buyer but also, the prospectus says, “a selection of recreational wear in multiple sizes for their house guests.” (The trapezoidal part of the compound incorporates guest quarters with

two bedrooms and a three-car garage with two charging stations.) The basic, gender-neutral clothing designs already exist and will be adapted to the buyer’s personal styles and preferences. Most of the pieces will be made in “a luxury production house in the U.S.,” but certain tailored garments will come from Kathryn Sargent Bespoke in London. Materials will be organic cotton and linen, recycled cashmere, and responsibly gathered wool.

Benji Avenue fills in with sand and an ordinary vehicle could mire down on a rainy day, so the Land Rover is proposed as an included U’A-3209 feature. Produced between 1971 and 1985, the Land Rover

Nobil and Stahlman have plans for another off-the-grid dwelling in nearby Pioneertown as well as a bungalow encampment in Wonder Valley.

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Series III has an iconic, boxy appearance that includes the spare tire mounted on the hood. Its four-wheel-drive system is almost invincible. Black Bridge Motors, a restoration and modification shop in Norwalk, Connecticut, would remove the internal-combustion power train, and on a new chassis, it would install the components for battery-electric drive. The vehicle’s range is claimed to be 300 miles. Calculations show that’s good for three round trips to Costco, in Palm Desert, where the homeowner could stock up on the 36-packs of macarons that would undoubtedly be their primary means of sustenance.

Unincorporated Associates also owns 7 acres on two parcels in Gamma Gulch, which extends north from Pipes Canyon Road in the Pioneertown area. Stahlman has drafted preliminary plans for U’A-2411, another off-grid dwelling. Encompassing 3,600 square feet and a 900-square-foot studio, it’s more of a “recreational cabin,” she says, and would include an electric buggy of their original design.

A third project called Sky Pavilion would go on a spread of more than 80 acres that are available in Wonder Valley, the vast tract of “jackrabbit ranch” homesteads east of Twentynine Palms. The vision is for eight artist-in-residence bungalows, each with studio and living space; a “founders’ residence” that could be used for fundraisers and gatherings; and the eponymous pavilion that looks about right for summer solstice observances and any return lecture appearance by Aristotle.

Stahlman is also eyeing the open lot next to the Dinah Shore Estate in Palm Springs and drawing a house to go there. The idea is to incorporate all of the above from the High Desert and “reinventing that Palm Springs lifestyle that I grew up watching and loving and reinvigorating it in a modern way.” It would have sounded funny, even sacrilegious, to hear this said if her tone wasn’t so full of conviction when she spoke of the Annenbergs, the Hopes, of “big, beautiful parties, huge entries, sculptures,” and of “taking all these things I love about Palm Springs and turning it into a Brutalist sculpture, a Brutalist home.”

Had Unincorporated Associates purchased the lot? “No,” she says, “it would be in partnership with the buyer.”