

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

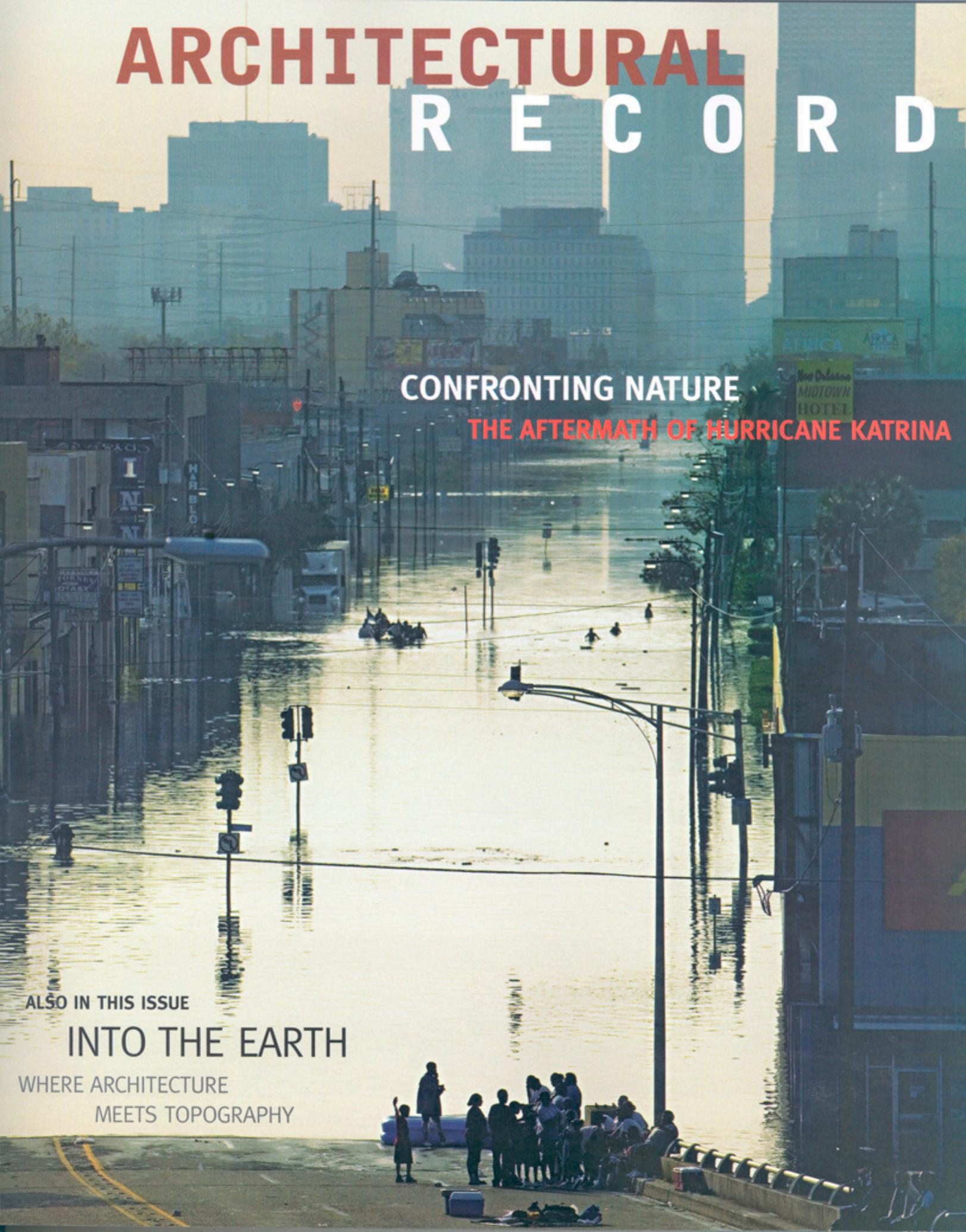
CONFRONTING NATURE

THE AFTERMATH OF HURRICANE KATRINA

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

INTO THE EARTH

WHERE ARCHITECTURE
MEETS TOPOGRAPHY





Sited on a long, narrow corner lot, the two-and-a-half-story house features a steel-framed canopy supporting orange and yellow sun-

shades (opposite). One elevation of the house boasts a long glass wall running parallel to a lap pool, inviting the outside in (this page).



Steven Ehrlich combines primitive and Modern aesthetics at his 700 Palms Residence

By Joseph Giovannini

Venice, California, has been described as a state of mind, a beach community in which artists and architects have been comfortable stretching their artistic limits since World War II, when it became home to the Beat Generation, and then the cradle of the Light and Space art movement. But at this point in Los Angeles history, Venice has also come to represent a major real estate phenomenon that is convulsing the old pattern of suburban development. As properties are sold at major prices, new owners are enlarging existing structures or building new ones at a much bigger scale, reflecting the increase in underlying property values. Inflationary values are producing steroidal results.

Steven Ehrlich, who first bought and remodeled a Craftsman-style house here decades ago, before a long interlude living in Santa Monica, returned to familiar but changed territory when he bought a corner lot to build a new home for himself. He was susceptible to the usual real estate pressures, but was also thinking large to accommodate his wife, Nancy Griffin, and family. The house had to be generous and hospitable enough to entice three grown children back for visits.

Pushing the envelope is a metaphor for most architects. But for Ehrlich, it meant building the house not only out to the lot line, but also establishing the height limit across the site. He erected translucent walls at the edges of the property to claim its entirety as a private outdoor precinct, and then extruded the lot line up with a structural cage that establishes the envelope of the site in three dimensions. Rather than simply designing in terms of square footage and plan, he thought in terms of volume and section. By conceiving the house as filling the full site and thinking spatially at the outset, Ehrlich vastly increased the apparent territory of occupation of the postage-stamp lot, which measures 132 by 43 feet.

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The architect, however, never proposed a mindless McMansion, or even a Modernist McMansion, that would reside as an object isolated in the space of thin, yard-line setbacks. Instead, he explored an approach that would illustrate the traditional California inside-outside relationship of the house to the yard. In a pavilion at the back of the lot, he nestled a studio and guest apartment, separated by a courtyard, bounded at the near end by the main structure, a steel, glass, and block armature that held bedroom pods for his daughters and the master bedroom suite on the top floor.

Ehrlich articulated each element of the program so they do not congeal in a single block, but form a highly porous structure of glassy solids set in voids that blur the boundaries between inside and out, up and down. The volume is large but not monolithic and imposing. What truly makes the house porous, however, is the range of opportunities for opening and closing the volumes to the outside, and even to other parts of the interior. Richard Neutra would be transfixed with envy at the size and quantity of doors and window walls that slide or pivot open, some of them two and a half stories tall.

Within the steel structural frame on the front facade, Ehrlich stretched a mobile sunscreen of fabric that, at the touch of a button, moves to open the house to views of the sky, or closes to protect it from

Project: 700 Palms Residence, Venice, Calif.

Architect: Steven Ehrlich Architects—Steven Ehrlich, FAIA, principal/project architect; Mathew Chaney, job captain; Thomas Zahlten, AIA, Yoshiaki Irie, Michael Pardek, Steffen Doelger, Nicole Pflug, Martin

Ven-Bentum, Manuel Manuelian, Aroonrat Lertnimitr, project team

Consultants: Parker Resnick (structural); Doug Taber (mechanical); Jay Griffith (landscape); Woods Davey (site sculpture)

General contractor: Mark Shramek Construction

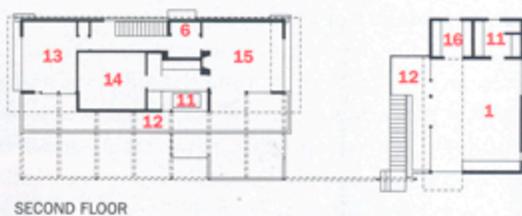


the sun. At the ground level, a long glass wall parallel to a lap pool slides back, bringing the element of water visually into the house. When the front and rear window walls open, the living space—both inside and out—flows in one continuous sweep, perfect for casual parties with large numbers of ambling guests. “I was interested in transformation,” says Ehrlich. By simply moving glass partitions, large and small, he can merge and separate space in a variety of combinations. The house becomes participatory, an environment to be shaped and reshaped according to weather, degrees of privacy, and simple fancy. It invites its occupants into the everyday making of space.

In addition to the California indoor-outdoor theme, Ehrlich imported another cultural element. Early in his career, he spent six years in Morocco and Nigeria, where he was impressed by courtyard houses that create a sense of community within outdoor precincts. Here in Venice, the architect infused the house with memories of African vernacular architecture by claiming the entire yard as a living precinct, and within it, creating outdoor courts, front and back, that break the yard into intimate places inflected with unique character. The pool area is athletic and sunny; the front yard, with its huge tree, is a contemplative corner of nature. The back court, with its raised, heated seating plinth opposite a barbecue, is the festive social hub. The main indoor space, two stories tall, is a savannah of living, with a long dining table and generous seating, perfect for grazing *en famille* or alone with a book and some wine.

An Aleppo pine tree grows outside the 16-foot sliding doors of the living room, providing a dramatic centerpiece for the room.

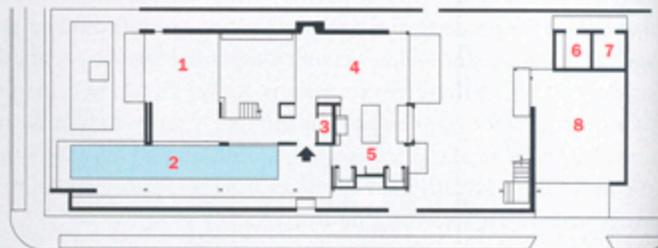
1. Living room
2. Pool
3. Powder room
4. Dining room
5. Kitchen
6. Laundry
7. Storage
8. Garage
9. Bridge
10. Bedroom
11. Bathroom
12. Deck
13. Library
14. Closet
15. Master bedroom
16. Kitchenette



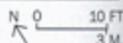
SECOND FLOOR



MEZZANINE FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR





Everywhere, the architect materialized his idea of an expanded and accommodating envelope with a collage of steel, block, glass, and metal that turns the structure into a spatial quilt. "There's no paint in the house," says Ehrlich, referring to a palette whose colors and textures are integral. Concrete materials are at the service of an abstract, Mondrianesque composition in three dimensions, giving the design body and inflecting its Modernist aesthetic with fundamental, even primitive, sensibilities.

In this design for a house of his own, Ehrlich intentionally spliced together cultures and invented a hybrid that is both contextual by California traditions and international in a sense never even suspected by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock when they coined that famous term for a style in 1931. A building need not be white to be abstract. ■

A glass-and-steel suspended bridge spans the space above the living/dining room. A Japanese-style tansu stair with storage below leads to it. The bridge, in turn, leads to a floating stair to the upstairs.

Sources

Glazing: American Glazing
Awnings: Alpha Productions
Photovoltaics: Solar.com
Siding: Trex
Concrete block: Orco
Stucco: Flexirock
Exterior panels: Lumisite
Appliances: Sub-Zero/Wolf

Fixtures: GS; Toto

Track lighting: LSI

Custom interiors: David Albert
 (tansu stair, sofa, coffee table, and cabinets)

For more information on this project, go to Residential at www.archrecord.com.

