

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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THERE ARE CANYONS close to the heart of Los Angeles where nature asserts its authority, destructive and benign. You risk brushfires and mudslides by living there, but the serenity and natural beauty are ample compensation. A young couple decided they needed more room and a greener setting in which to raise a family, and found a hidden valley to build in. He is an Oscar-winning screenwriter who wanted an oasis where he could work and escape the stress of story conferences. Both admired the clean lines and free flow of space in the classic modernist houses of Los Angeles and looked for an architect who could put a fresh spin on that tradition on the site they provided.

She interviewed Steven Ehrlich, who gave them a brief tour of a few of his projects, showed slides of some others and said, "This is the kind of house I build. If you like it, I'm your man; if not, you shouldn't hire me." The couple were impressed by his integrity. Other candidates had offered a menu of Tudor, Spanish, Postmodern or any other style they wanted.

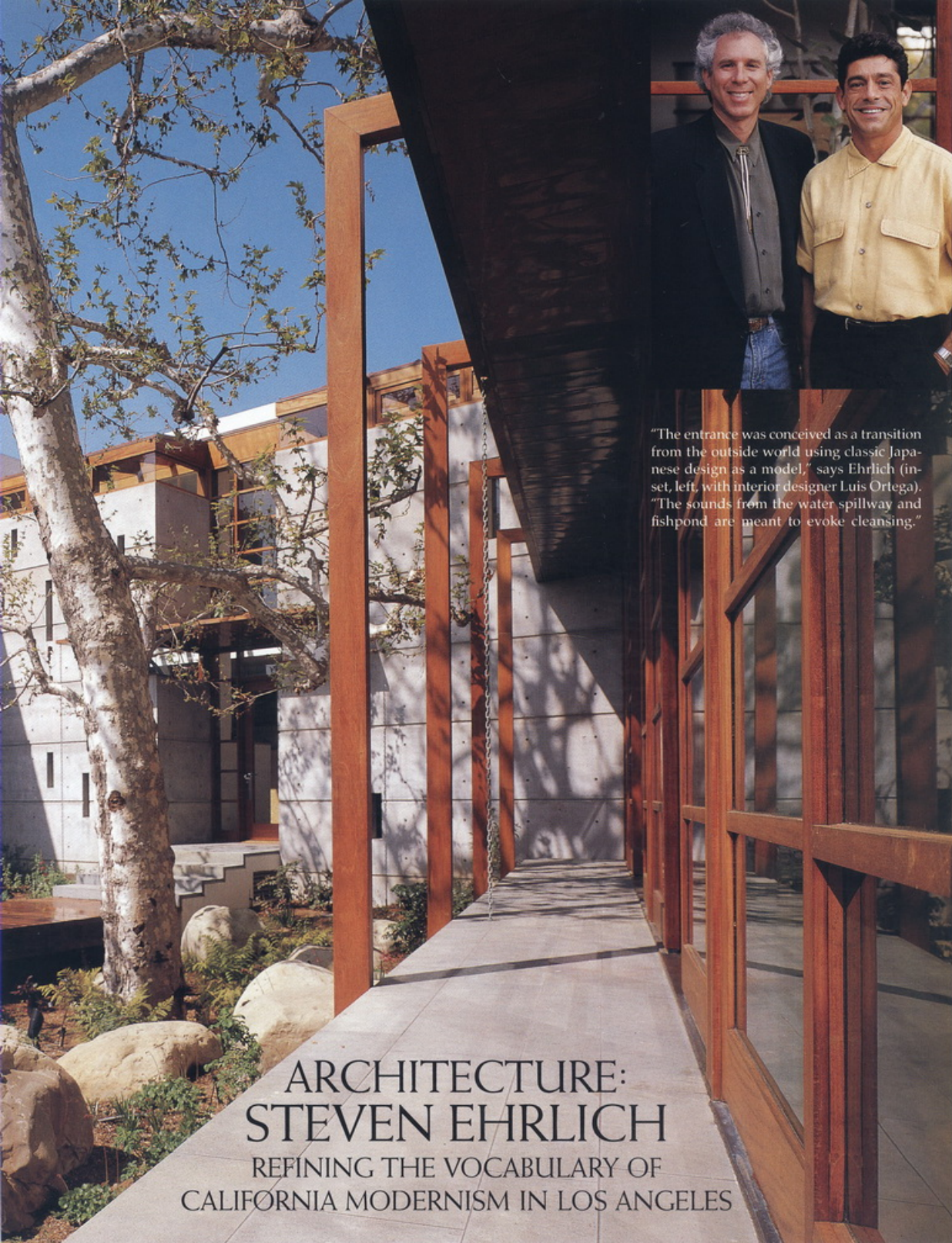
They eventually agreed on the essentials of the house: two-story wings containing family rooms below and bedrooms above, linked by a double-height living room and an upper-level bridge. "I'm used to designing houses on tight hillside lots," says Ehrlich. "I drew on that experience to locate the house in the neck of the canyon, and once I realized that the garage should be buried to minimize the presence of cars on the landscape, the basic plan emerged.

"In architecture, you try to find a sense of order from what the clients and the site tell you," Ehrlich contin-

"As you walk over the footbridge into the central entrance volume, the two flanking loggias are like open arms," says a screenwriter of the concrete-and-plaster-clad Los Angeles residence designed for his family by architect Steven Ehrlich. Forming the loggias, mahogany posts support copper-faced canopies outside the dining room to the left and the library to the right. The house, nestled in a narrow canyon, was configured to accommodate the existing trees on the site.







"The entrance was conceived as a transition from the outside world using classic Japanese design as a model," says Ehrlich (inset, left, with interior designer Luis Ortega). "The sounds from the water spillway and fishpond are meant to evoke cleansing."

# ARCHITECTURE: STEVEN EHRLICH

REFINING THE VOCABULARY OF  
CALIFORNIA MODERNISM IN LOS ANGELES

INTERIOR DESIGN BY LUIS ORTEGA

TEXT BY MICHAEL WEBB

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARY E. NICHOLS







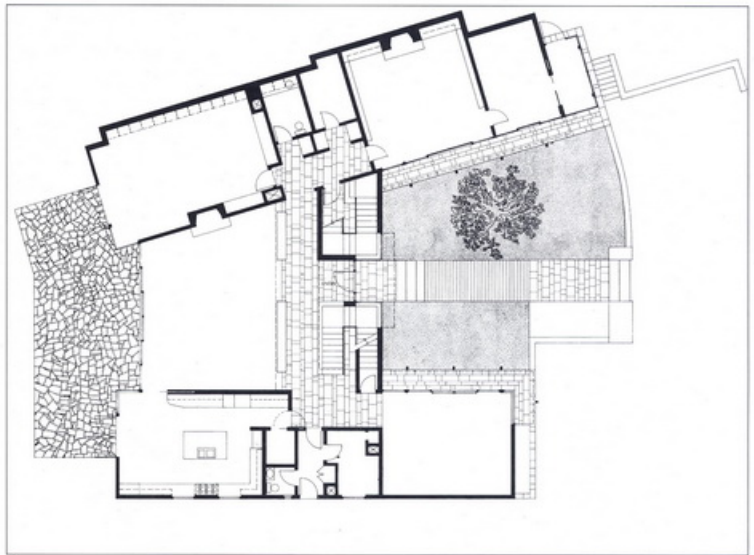
## The architect fused crisp geometry with warmth and refinement of detail.

ues, "and when you've discovered it you can expand on it." As the design evolved, the architect came up with ways to improve on the symmetry of the original concept. He rotated the east wing ten degrees outward to align it with the slope, imparting a dynamism to the forecourt and the interior. His hillside houses had exploited shifts of level to dramatic effect, resulting in a series of open, interlocking volumes. In this house, on a level site and larger scale, Ehrlich fused the crisp geometry for which he is known with warmth and refinement of detail.

Like his other work, it is a personal statement and a subtle distillation of classic modernism. Mitered-glass corner windows pay tribute to Frank Lloyd Wright's Freeman House and to the residences of Rudolph Schin-

dler. Another transplant, Richard Neutra, pioneered sliding glass window walls that permit a free flow of space between house and garden. Each of these designers came to Los Angeles to create a new architecture as appropriate to the climate and topography of southern California as Mediterranean villas and Spanish haciendas.

Ehrlich was born in New York City and educated in upstate New York. He acquired a love of earth-rooted architecture during his Peace Corps years in and around the Sahara and is now enriching a regional American vernacular. "I try to balance reason and intuition in my work and draw on the experience of places I've seen and practiced in around the world," he says. "There's something of Africa in all my buildings—a closeness to the land, an earthiness of materials."



LEFT: A floating bridge spanning the width of the entrance gallery and connecting the two upper wings is punctuated with inset light cavities. Ehrlich created the mahogany-and-white-birch cabinets to act as walls in screening off the living room and to display a collection of California pottery. ABOVE: The first-floor plan illustrates the two stair towers that define the entrance passage.









Another influence is Japan ("always in my consciousness"), the country whose design tradition helped to shape Wright's architecture. That tradition shows in Ehrlich's integration of house and landscape, the bold use of wood and grooved concrete, and the insistent horizontality of glazing bars and steel balustrades that complement the lofty volumes.

All these qualities delighted the clients, who now confess that while they were asking for a peaceful environment, they secretly wanted a house that would also have a sense of grandeur and surprise. The entrance court imparts the stillness and mystery of a Zen temple, especially at night, when lamps suspended in the trees cast shadow patterns of foliage across the path and wooden footbridge. In summer the windows to the dining room and library on either side of the entrance court may be slid back like shoji screens, admitting the soothing murmur of the spillway. To either side of the entrance gallery, staircases, one enclosed, one open, lead up to the bedrooms and the bridge that cuts across the central void. Taut ribbons of silvery steel form the balustrades and play off the mahogany floors and sleek maple cabinets. The eye is drawn up and out through the great window of this central space. "We were initially convinced that the eighteen-foot ceiling would be intimidatingly high," remarks the wife, "but Steven rightly insisted, and we love looking down to the living room from the bridge, especially on nights when the moon shines straight through the house."

Interior designer Luis Ortega was recruited early and worked closely with the architect and owners, selecting materials and furnishings to en-

The fireplace in the living room, formed by panels of polished and sandblasted granite set off by a thin bronze mantel, is "a delicate balance of asymmetrical elements," Ehrlich says. Above it hangs Takako Yamaguchi's 1987 oil-and-bronze-leaf-on-paper, *Untitled #2*; to the right are a 19th-century Chinese opium bed and chow table. The Art Déco-style chairs and ottomans are from Donghia.





Robert Capa Photographs  
Georgia O'Keeffe  
JULIANE MITCHELL 1988-1988





OPPOSITE: Barriers "all but disappear," says Ehrlich, when the mahogany-and-glass doors of the living room slide in back of the horizontal-mullioned windows to make a 16-foot-wide opening. At the rear of the house, landscape designer Robert Cornell reestablished California native plants that had been crowded out by invasive species. "They're not as showy as the non-natives," he says, "but they attract butterflies and hummingbirds and have their own quiet beauty." ABOVE: Ehrlich structured part of the display cabinet, whose opposite side delineates the southern half of the entrance gallery, in an inverted L shape, a form repeated throughout the house. "At night the glass glows like a translucent Oriental lantern," says the screenwriter. Beatrice Wood ceramic bowls rest on a low table.









LEFT: Japanese antiques in the dining room provide “a perfect counterbalance to the architecture,” notes Ehrlich. The two 19th-century Japanese *tansu* “were the starting point—what set the rationale for the other spaces,” Ortega explains. On the step chest is a collection of Roseville vases; atop the pantry storage chest are two 19th-century Japanese baskets. Ortega fashioned the dining table of *tamu*—Japanese ash—copper and ebonized ash. ABOVE: In the master bedroom, the French-limestone fireplace with a eucalyptus cabinet was designed by Ortega, as were the silk-covered chair, ottoman and window seat. “It all had to be very restrained,” he says. “It had to contribute to the calm.”

hance the simplicity of the structure. “There weren’t a lot of ways you could go with this,” he says. “The powerful architecture—the purity of it—pretty much ruled out all but one approach.” His sensitivity to the design shows in the mix of Oriental antiques and comfortable modern pieces in the living and dining rooms. Project architect Jim Schmidt and senior designer Melvin Bernstein of Ehrlich’s office also played important

roles in striking a balance between effect and functionality.

The house quietly commands a certain authority in its canyon setting—a worthy heir of local architectural treasures. The landscape has begun to take shape, softening and anchoring the sharp-edged rectilinearity of the bold forms. “Serenity was the order of the day for us,” says the husband. “We had no idea it could be delivered in such an exquisite package.” □

“I try to balance reason and intuition and draw on the experience of places I’ve seen.”