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OCEAN'S ELEVEN

Views to the horizon

The Pacific Ocean is visible from almost every living space in this Laguna Beach, Calif., home, thanks to the clever use of open courtyards by architects Steven Ehrlich and Takashi Yanai.

AN 11-FOOT HEIGHT
RESTRICTION TURNS
INTO AN UNEXPECTED
TRIUMPH FOR THIS
STYLISH BEACHFRONT
HOME IN SOUTHERN
CALIFORNIA AND ITS
AWARD-WINNING
ARCHITECTS

words by
J. Michael Welton

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Roger Davies and Miranda Brackett



seemed the perfect oceanfront property – an elevated half-acre lot nestled at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac and overlooking the beautiful and exclusive Laguna Beach in Southern California.

The land offered panoramic and breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean on what's often described as the French Riviera of the West Coast. But still, there was a significant limitation, and one that owners Sarah and Thom McElroy hadn't anticipated.

"The McElroys didn't realize it had an 11-foot height restriction," says Takashi Yanai, a partner at Ehrlich Architects, the Los Angeles-based design company working on the McElroys' new home. "We were all kind of stunned, but we managed to turn it into a virtue."

Turning design challenges into award-winning homes – the American Institute of Architects honored Ehrlich Architects with its prestigious 2015 National Architecture Firm Award in May – is all in a day's work for this cutting-edge company.

Yanai and the firm's founding partner, Steven Ehrlich, looked long and hard at the McElroys' Laguna Beach site and then to their clients' lifestyle for a design solution, asking detailed questions of both.

They started with the topography, which actually wasn't too difficult. "That was kind of a one-liner," says Yanai. "It's all about the view."

The architects took full advantage of the height restriction with a long, low house mass that rises precisely to 11 feet above ground level. A subterranean garage is used for storage, gym workouts and equipment while the living areas above frame dramatic ocean views.

The Pacific's long horizon line is visible from almost every interior space thanks to the architects' clever use of courtyards. "A big move was to create a second outdoor courtyard in the back of the house," says Yanai. "So the three bedrooms to the rear have views through the courtyard and living space to the ocean beyond."

If their response to the site was a winner, the architects' reading of their clients was more complex. Ehrlich and Yanai worked closely with the McElroys to understand how the couple and their children lived, looking for ways their lifestyle might be enhanced by the site and structure.

They started with a dinner in Newport Beach, Calif., with the clients and architect William Krisel, the mid-century modern master who'd designed the McElroys' home in Palm Springs, Calif. Dinner was followed by a showing of a documentary on Krisel's work at the Newport Beach Film Festival.

Later, Ehrlich and Yanai visited the McElroys at their Palm Springs home in the Alexander Tract neighborhood, said to be the nation's largest modernist subdivision.

"We wanted the same feel in Laguna Beach," says Sarah



McElroy. "We wanted a mid-century modern but an updated look with large windows, open spaces and a more indoor-outdoor environment. So we invited them to our home in Palm Springs to get an idea of our tastes and style and designs for furniture."

Both Sarah and Thom are retired graphic designers, trained at San Diego State. Sarah worked in advertising agencies and Thom worked first at a skateboarding company, then for his own design firm-turned-agency, which he later sold to advertising giant FCB. Thom was also a founding partner of Volcom Clothing and retired after the company went public in 1995.

These days, he mentors students at San Diego State and

Height of style
Architect Takashi Yanai (top) took full advantage of the height restriction to create a long, low mass house that rises exactly to 11 feet above ground level.





Coastal living
Owners Sarah and Thom McElroy have a lifestyle that embraces the ocean and wanted a home that maximizes their enjoyment of it.



surfs in the Pacific every day from his home – although that’s not exactly a passion shared by his wife. “I tried it once, stood up and lost an earring,” Sarah says. “I’m afraid of the ocean, but I love looking at it.”

She now has plenty of opportunities for that. Because of Southern California’s temperate climate, her home is about being outside almost all the time. A 40-foot span of glass slides away into pockets, opening up the living room, dining room and master suite to the ocean, but also merging outdoor and indoor living and entertaining areas.

“You don’t feel like you’re indoors, but in a huge, covered outdoor space,” Yanai says. “It’s open to the view, the breeze and the fresh air.”

From the street side, the home reveals itself in a cinematic way, approached along a wall of African teak upon 12-foot-long ascending limestone slabs.

Under a covered alcove, a pivoting glass and stainless steel door opens to the foyer and its collection of 10 Andy Warhol silkscreen prints. Among the iconic American portraits, each 38 inches square, are Superman, Mickey Mouse, Howdy Doody and Uncle Sam.

“We told them we wanted to have a Warhol *Myths Suite*,” Sarah adds. “The silkscreens were printed with diamond dust, so they sparkle at night.”

Beyond the Warhols, works by Roy Lichtenstein, Lawrence Schiller, Slim Aarons, Raymond Pettibon, Keith Haring and Shepard Fairey are displayed throughout the living spaces.

The furniture and artworks were all selected personally by the McElroys to provide eye-catching “pops” of color without competing with the ocean.

“What we wanted was a casual, elegant style,” says Sarah. “People think modern architecture is cold and sterile, but this is an inviting and comfortable living space.”

The living area’s main wall is made of split-face Turkish limestone blocks, measuring 12 by 30 inches and stacked floor to ceiling. Floors are marble and bleached white oak, with walnut cabinets and a long fireplace that serves as a centerpiece.

Outside, a deck of African teak surrounds a large swimming pool and an oversize hot tub. “We wanted to have people over and fit at least 10 in the Jacuzzi, so that’s a really fun element,” Sarah adds.

It’s a lifestyle that embraces the ocean, and the McElroys desired an inviting indoor-outdoor environment to maximize it. Their architects understood that and gave them more than they expected.

THE DETAILS
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“The challenge was that 11-foot height limit,” adds Yanai, “but we embraced it with the horizontal. The house captures the ocean views in a way the McElroys didn’t expect. And even though it’s unexpected, the home is a perfect match for the family and the site.” **OIH**

