

SPRING HOME DESIGN

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Multifaceted Modern

A design for the present borrowed from the past



What do you get when you pair an architect who used to be in the Peace Corps and a Silicon Valley tech wizard who has a degree in philosophy? "Multicultural modernism," says Los Angeles architect Steven Ehrlich, who was hired to design a home on a half-acre corner lot in Palo Alto for Asher Waldfogel and his wife, Helyn Maclean. Waldfogel heads PeakStream, a broadband networking hardware company. "Multicultural Modernism" is also the title of Ehrlich's current retrospective show in Palm Springs, where he cites indigenous architecture as inspiration. "I have always been influenced by architecture without architects," he says.

At first glance, the two-level, 8,000-square-foot structure Ehrlich designed in a pinwheel plan does not seem unschooled. The strict hand of the architect is clear in this taut, meticulously detailed house that echoes 1950s homes by Ehrlich's heroes Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler. Two double-story wings are linked by a perpendicular north-to-

south passageway flanked by a 3-foot-thick cast-concrete, north-to-south axial wall that extends on each side beyond the buildings. The public rooms and master suite in the north wing are linked to children's and family rooms in the south wing via glass bridges. On the exterior, the building is fully in context as it uses the kind of wood, concrete, stucco and glass you see in the neighborhood around Stanford University.

The way the wings discreetly separate visitors from family life reflects lessons Ehrlich says he learned in Islamic Morocco, where men and women are often segregated. The plan created four distinct courtyards within the wings of the building. They are either public or private, but their bound-

Above: West-facing walls clad in wood hold up one of the stucco-clad bedroom boxes atop the Palo Alto house by architect Steven Ehrlich. A concrete north-south circulation spine runs through both wings of the two-story house. Right: The west elevation at night.







Above: The east elevation faces the pool. The family room to the left has direct access to the pool. The living room at the right, with Nakashima furniture and other unusual modern collectibles, has doors that pocket away completely to connect the room to the lawn outside. The steel moment frames are reminiscent of buildings by R.M. Schindler.

Left: A view of the family room with Rheinzink metal and plaster ceilings. Rheinzink is also used for parts of the exterior cladding. Shelving inset into the concrete spine, which runs perpendicular to the north and south wings of the building, are used to display a collection of Arts and Crafts ceramics and books.

Right: Another view of the family room looking out at the pool shows a fireplace with a hearth that doubles as a seat. A custom banquette and side tables by Mike Witt are grouped with vintage, Modern leather sofas and ottomans.









aries are indistinct. For instance, the private swimming pool off the kitchen and family room is clearly visible from the formal living area but separated from it by a lawn, because project architect Takashi Yanai wanted to protect Waldfogel and MacLean from the accidental "wet guest." Physically cut off or not, "there is always some link with nature," says Ehrlich, pointing to visual connections that allow most rooms to feel like indoor/outdoor spaces. Wall-size exterior doors slide back into walls, connecting rooms to courtyards. Ehrlich's plaster canopies that hover over living spaces subtly evoke nomadic tent cultures he saw in the sub-Saharan desert and in Nigeria, where he lived for some time. But mostly, Ehrlich views his design as pragmatic. A large window wall flanking a stairway with glass treads brings light to the basement. "It is a sunken light court," he says. "And the pinwheel was also a way to break down the scale of the house."

These ideas don't detract from tough Schindleresque geometries. The richly articulated cast-in-place concrete spine that deflects heat and defines the main circulation path from the outside and through the house is an example that gives this contemporary building a midcentury modernist look. On the other hand, Rheinzink, a naturally weather-

ing metal alloy that clads parts of the building, gives it a handmade air. Doors and windows are also beautifully fashioned of mahogany and even the hand-formed concrete brings a crafted quality that most modernist homes don't have.

It turns out Waldfogel and MacLean are avid collectors of Arts and Crafts ware, particularly ceramics. Their interior designer Mike Witt, wooed from the East Coast where the owners used to live, was selected because he is also a craftsman. "This is his first interior design," says MacLean. Witt helped them to find unusual modernist vintage furniture such as the Edward Wormley sofa in the living room and pieces he designed.

"We live in Silicon Valley and have a house made of sand and glass — silica," says Waldfogel. In the spirit of the place, "we wanted to make something that was going to look forward." But I'm not sure if we have the first house of the 21st century or the last work from the 20th." Perhaps that's not it at all. Somehow the architect has divined their interest in craft and has given the owners a modern house, but one based on Arts and Crafts buildings from the turn of the last century. ♦

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Left: The stairwell doubles as a lightwell; glass bridges connect the two wings. Top: The dining alcove opposite the stairwell overlooks the entry courtyard. Above: The main circulation spine is defined by crafted concrete walls for displaying the owners' Arts and Crafts ware.