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DESIGNERS' OWN HOMES







LEFT: Architect Steven Ehrlich and his wife, Nancy Griffin, sit on a glass-and-steel tension bridge that spans the living area in their Venice, California, residence. Ehrlich designed the house, sited on a long, narrow corner lot, to maximize volume, light and privacy.

FAR LEFT: A window wall in the living area slides open, exposing the space to the garden and to the sculptural trunks of an Aleppo pine tree. Near a Woods Davy painting in the bookshelf are two Boomerang chairs by Richard Neutra; the 2004 diptych on the wall is by Ed Moses.

Steven Ehrlich

EXPLORING PRIVACY AND COMMUNITY
AT HOME IN VENICE BEACH

Text by Peter Haldeman/Photography by Erhard Pfeiffer

This house is very much about transformation." With that, Steven Ehrlich slides a pair of 16-foot glass doors into a wall of his residence in Venice, California, and a statuesque Aleppo pine turns into a piece of living room sculpture. The architect crosses the space to open another pair of sliders: A fountain splashing into the lap pool just outside fills the living area with the sound of water. Above the pool, a steel framework supports orange and yellow fabric shades that glide up, down and sideways to enlarge the metamorphic possibilities. "This is one of my favorite spots," Ehrlich confides. "I'll turn on the spa, maybe have a glass of wine, and I'll just kind of create this tent with the shades. I'll feel like I'm transported to another place." Even without the wine and the bubbling water, the effect isn't half bad.

The haven Ehrlich has created for himself descends from a whole line of indoor-outdoor California architecture spawned by Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra. But it has more personal origins as well. Raised in Radburn, New Jersey, America's first planned community, Ehrlich spent six years working in Morocco and Nigeria after architecture school. "Because of living in Africa," he says, "I have a strong affinity for courtyard housing, for housing close to the ground and for being part of a community." His interest in community has informed public projects ranging from libraries to recreation centers; the architect's light-on-the-land sensibility distinguishes his residential commissions, whether beach lofts or canyon aeries.

A few years ago Ehrlich met Nancy Griffin, a writer who is now his second



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wife. At the time, Griffin was living in a bungalow in Venice, where Ehrlich had first put down roots after returning to this country from Africa. He rediscovered the area’s edgy vitality and sense of community and spent a year looking for a property on which to build a house for himself, Griffin and his three daughters, who are grown but visit frequently. Ehrlich settled on a narrow but relatively generous corner lot in a dense neighborhood of bungalows. He produces some sketches showing pairings of geometric forms: “I knew it would ultimately be two buildings with a courtyard in the middle,” he explains.

In addition to breaking up the double-story residence into two volumes (the smaller structure contains a studio and guest quarters), the architect mitigated its

scale by building around the site’s three mature trees and by designing it in layers. “It was important to scale the house back from the street,” says Ehrlich. “This is a neighborhood that’s in transition from smaller single-story homes.” The outermost layer would be the wall running along the sidewalk, an enclosure that alternates the textures of concrete masonry, translucent glass and Trex (a compound of recycled plastic bags and sawdust usually used for decking). The next stratum is the seven-legged steel frame that projects from the house to suspend the sunshades. A wide band of steel wraps around the house’s inner sheath of Trex siding, which itself is layered at the top.

One enters through a gate of Trex and walks past the pool to the front door,

which is canopied by a seven-and-a-half-foot-high balcony. After that compressed entrance, the main living space, with its double-height ceilings and three walls of glass, may give some visitors the impression that they’ve walked right back outside. Living, dining and reading areas seamlessly flow together as well as outward—to the pine-shaded garden on one side, the lap pool on another and the courtyard on a third. The fourth side is a long wall clad in concrete masonry—a material, like the laminated glass of the doors and the steel on some of the walls, that “extrudes” outside.

Walnut *tansu* stairs built by Ehrlich’s son-in-law, David Albert, lead to the mezzanine level. There, a pair of “sleep-
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OPPOSITE: A fireplace and the suspended bridge separate the living and dining areas. Ehrlich points out the space’s “circulation system—up the *tansu* stair, across the floating bridge and up the floating walnut stair.” Beyond are the courtyard and the architect’s studio.

“I delayed every decision until the last minute and designed as I went,” says Ehrlich. “It allowed me to absorb the place and figure out things as they evolved.” ABOVE: The master bedroom and balcony. Guest rooms are in the separate structure, right, that also houses the studio.



Patinated-steel panels sheathe the house; rustproof, waxed steel was used on some interior surfaces, including a freestanding wall in the living area. **RIGHT:** As seen from the courtyard, in the dining area, a 1987 work by Ed Moses hangs on the masonry wall—"the structural and primal element anchoring the building on the east," Ehrlich says.





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ing pods” accommodate the architect’s daughters when they visit. “They can close their pods if they want privacy,” says Ehrlich. “Or, if they want to be a little more connected...” He nudges open a horizontal window in one of the modest, nestlike rooms, and the entire living area pops into view. One of the pods opens to an outdoor deck that can also be accessed by a glass bridge spanning the living space at mezzanine level.

“I’m fascinated with counterpointing a kind of primal, elemental feeling against a light, futuristic, technical experience,” says the architect, coaxing a wary guest across the suddenly fragile-looking bridge. “We’re on what is basically glass suspended on steel cables, but it’s played off a concrete wall that looks like it could have been here for 500 years.” At the end of the bridge, a flight of riserless walnut stairs leads to the master bedroom and Griffin’s study. Doors of frosted glass animate natural light in the manner of shoji screens; another terrace connecting bedroom and study lends the sense of a tree house.

The first floor of the smaller building functions as Ehrlich’s own home studio, currently a showcase for his collection of African baskets. Upstairs, a guest suite serves visiting friends as well as the architect’s “California bouillabaisse family.” He says, “The house works very well for the two of us or for 50.”

The living area is growing dark, and Ehrlich flicks on the pool lights and the spotlights above the large canvases from

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artist friends whose Venice lofts he has built: Ed Moses, Guy Dill, John Okulick. The only sound from outside is the splashing fountain, but a set of headlights occasionally pierces the translucent wall. “Privacy and community,” the architect emphasizes. “Here, we’re inside the compound, but I love to see people walking by. I really believe that we all want to be part of a community. In Africa, you would go outside and hear drumming circles.” Ehrlich grins. “Actually, you can probably hear drumming circles here.” □