

Custom Home

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Fitting In

New houses that make good neighbors



Portfolio

Filling In

There's nothing like the patina of an established, well-kept urban or close-in suburban neighborhood. The sense of community, convenient location, and often strong architectural character of these areas has made them some of the most desirable places in the country to live. But the homes in such neighborhoods can lack the amenities, layouts, and square footage today's buyers want. The solutions—tearing down an existing house and building a new one in its place, or remodeling extensively—each require a formidable balance of design ingenuity and construction etiquette. Otherwise, out-of-place houses and angry neighbors ensue. On the following pages, you'll find projects that both satisfy their owners' programs and maintain—or even enhance—the streetscape. ■

It takes finesse and foresight to build an infill custom home.

By Meghan Drueding

Architect Steven Ehrlich's own house gestures to the street with fabric privacy panels and front and side courtyards.



Courtyard Compound

Builder Mark Shramek has learned a thing or two about constructing houses in tightly knit communities. He frequently works in Venice and Long Beach, Calif., both Los Angeles-area towns with small lots and close-together houses. "Like anything else, it's all technique," he says. "I introduce myself to the neighbors sooner rather than later, and give them my cell phone number. I say if there's a problem to give me a call. One of my biggest rules is, I don't let any [of my subcontractors] work on Saturday or Sunday." The no-weekends rule reduces noise complaints. So does holding planning meetings in the early morning and saving louder activities for later in the day. Parking is the other major issue Shramek faces, but his initial effort to contact the neighbors sometimes helps. "I even get people offering me a place to park next door," he says. ■ He needed all his communication skills when building architect Steven Ehrlich's own house on a Venice corner lot formerly occupied by a duplex. "It's a tight lot," Shramek says. "But it's one of the better ones, because you have access on three sides." Ehrlich and project manager Mathew Chaney divided the building into two pieces—a 3,000-square-foot main house and a 1,500-square-foot guest house, all on a .1-acre site. The strategy generates a courtyard, but it also breaks down the project's massing, bringing it more into scale with Venice's eclectic mix of bungalows and Craftsman houses. A 6-foot-tall perimeter wall of Trex, concrete block,

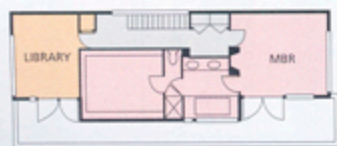
By separating the project into a main house (left) and garage/guest house (this page, rear) Ehrlich created an outdoor room that acts as an extension of both spaces.





JULIUS SHULMAN AND JUERGEN NOGA

Third Floor



Second Floor



First Floor



0 2 4



neighbor. "We see over the roof of their house, into the bamboo," says Ehrlich. "Our house is oriented toward the other three sides." Massive pivoting and sliding glass doors on the east, west, and south facades ensure a constant influx of fresh air and natural illumination. ■ Though Venice is more relaxed than many communities in terms of stylistic imperatives, Ehrlich did have to comply with strict setbacks and height guidelines. He dealt with them gladly for the chance to live in a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly area. He and his family can (and do) walk to nearby coffee shops and restaurants. They know many of their neighbors, including sculptor Woods Davy, who created the granite hardscape in the family courtyard between the main

and translucent LUMAsite, the same materials that make up much of the house, gives it some needed separation from the street. Large, brightly colored fabric shades running along a two-story steel frame can be used to close off another outdoor room encompassing the entry and lap pool. By designing this impermanent, flexible means of increasing his privacy, Ehrlich sent the message that he wanted to take part in the neighborhood, not seal himself off from it. ■ The second floor of the house steps back from the street, providing space for a terrace while further minimizing the building's size. And a front courtyard hosts a long-standing Aleppo pine tree, one of three important trees Ehrlich preserved. "We got support at the local hearing [on the house]," he says. "I think people appreciated the effort to save the trees. We also planted new trees—landscaping always softens the transition from public to private." He handled the issue of privacy from his one-story next-door neighbor by making the wall on that side of the house mostly solid. Its concrete block is finished with plaster upstairs and left exposed downstairs, with rough grouting that recalls the mud construction Ehrlich saw years ago in Africa. The wall, which faces north, contains no windows below the roofline of the

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Existing trees, new landscaping, and a perimeter wall all enhance this urban home's sense of privacy.



house and guesthouse, and landscape designer Jay Griffith, also a key player on the project. "I'm a big believer in infill housing because it's a way to invigorate the existing community," Ehrlich says. "It's actually a sustainable strategy—a way of living that doesn't rely on long stretches of transportation. I didn't want to have to get in the car every time I wanted to go somewhere." —M.D.

Project Credits: Builder: Shramek Building Co., Huntington Beach, Calif.; Architect: Steven Ehrlich Architects, Culver City, Calif.; Landscape designer: Jay Griffith, Venice, Calif.; Living space: 4,500 square feet; Site: .1 acre; Construction cost: Withheld; Photographer: Erhard Pfeiffer (except where noted). ■ Resources: Bathroom plumbing fittings/fixtures: GS, Circle 415 and Toto, Circle 416; Brick/masonry products: Orco Custom Block, Circle 417; Dishwashers: Sub-Zero, Circle 418 and Wolf, Circle 419; Doors/windows: American Glazing, Circle 420; Exterior siding: Corten Steel, Circle 421 and Trex, Circle 422; Hardware: FSB, Circle 423; HVAC: Rusher Air, Circle 424; Kitchen plumbing fittings: KWC, Circle 425.