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Design for Living

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MODERN IMAGINATION

THE WINNERS OF
THE AIA EAST BAY
RESIDENTIAL
DESIGN AWARDS

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— SCULPTING A GARDEN

— THE ART OF GORDON HUETHER

— THE MODERN SENSIBILITY OF ROBERT SWATT

Contemporary Balance

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Architect Steven Ehrlich imbues a traditional Palo Alto neighborhood with an utterly modern aesthetic—very carefully







THE OWNERS OF THIS MODERNIST HOUSE IN PALO ALTO HAD BEEN LIVING IN A TRADITIONAL HOME FOR 15 YEARS, SO WHEN THEY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO CUSTOM-BUILD, THEY KNEW THEY WANTED A MORE CONTEMPORARY STYLE. THEY ALSO KNEW EXACTLY WHAT TYPE OF ARCHITECT THEY WANTED TO WORK WITH. "WE'D ALWAYS ADMIRER 20TH-CENTURY MODERN, AND WE LOOKED AT THE WORK OF MANY ARCHITECTS," ONE OF THE OWNERS SAYS. "WE WANTED SOMEONE ON THE WEST COAST. WE ALSO WANTED A FIRM BIG ENOUGH TO GET THE JOB DONE BUT SMALL ENOUGH TO WORK WITH THE PRINCIPAL. WE MET STEVEN [EHRlich], AND WE IMMEDIATELY HIT IT OFF." THAT COLLABORATION EARNED THE HOUSE A MERIT AWARD FROM THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS, EAST BAY, FOR ITS WELL-PLANNED DESIGN.

"Steven's approach is to start by surveying you to determine functionality," the owner says. "He asks questions like, what you do when you get up in the morning and where do you eat breakfast? When do you entertain? Do you entertain large or small groups?" The couple has an 11-year-old daughter, whom Ehrlich also took into consideration.

"The owners have very sophisticated taste and were very interested in early California modern, so we incorporated different styles," says Ehrlich, FAIA, who worked closely on the home with project architect Takashi Yanai. "We wanted a contextual modern house in a traditional neighborhood, and I wanted to play off that setting. It's a white stucco box, but the wood makes it contextual so it isn't a biomorphic building."

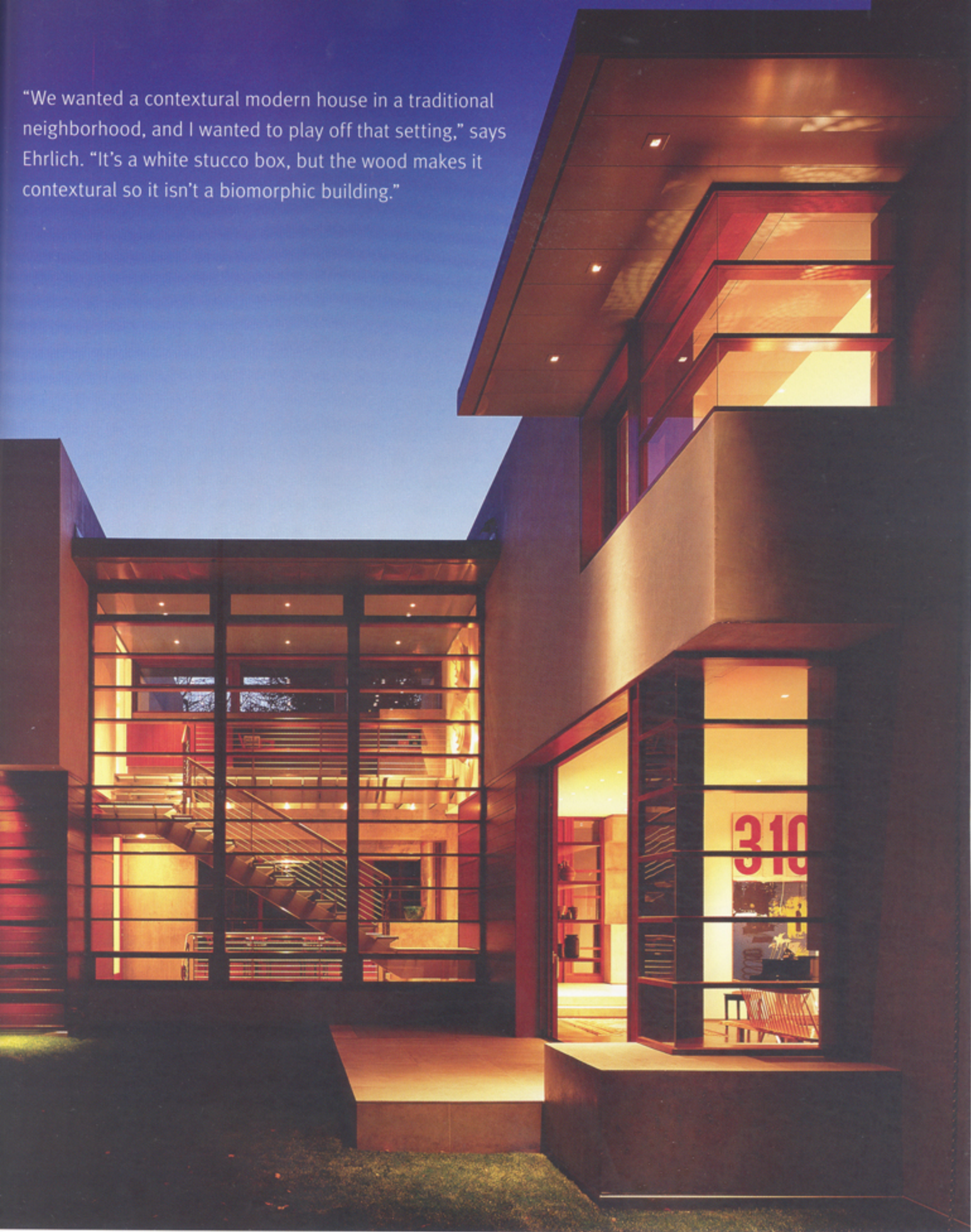
After talking with the family, Ehrlich also learned that the couple needed space for a number of functions. "They wanted a family room, a utility room, and lots of storage space," he says. "Palo Alto has certain size restrictions. We couldn't build an attic, and one way to solve the dilemma was to build a 3,000-square-foot basement, which evolved as we worked. For instance, we realized that by putting the laundry in the basement, it didn't chew up valuable living space. We also added a recreation area, an exercise area, and 600 [additional] feet."

Ehrlich used concrete as a primary material throughout the house, most prominently at the entry, which is flanked by an axial concrete wall that continues inside to become the north-south spine of the house. "It expresses the beauty of concrete, which has a power and primal strength," Ehrlich says. The concrete is 30 inches thick and was cast in place. "When you think of concrete, you think of sidewalks, which are rough," the owner adds. "But cast it this way and the texture is smooth. Once you feel how silky it is, you'll never think of concrete in the same way."

Ehrlich balanced the coolness of the concrete with the warmth of mahogany trim and paneled mahogany walls. Floors are walnut or a soft Portuguese stone. Glass is also key to the design—a glass bridge links second-floor bedrooms, while glass roof extensions form a canopy of shade over the yard. Stairs are stainless steel. Ehrlich also employed Rheinzink, a new silvery material from Germany that doesn't rust but ages to a beautiful patina. "It softly reflects the light but isn't as harsh as stainless steel."



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One of Ehrlich's signature styles—developed from time living in Africa—is maximizing the indoor-outdoor relationship. He carried this connection throughout the house by organizing the main rooms in a pinwheel design, which allows each room to open onto its own private terrace. “The house is very site specific, so you go in and out through the same plane,” the owner says. One courtyard was built around a pair of cedar trees already on the property. “We had no obligation to keep the trees, but it was hard to [think of letting] them go. Now I sit in my office and look out to the terrace, and the trees make the house feel more connected to its surroundings.”

While no single room is the homeowners' favorite, they admit that they spend a lot of time in the family room and kitchen. Since the husband works in high tech, one special touch was dropping the family room ceiling 12 inches and folding it around the fireplace to conceal a state-of-the-art home theater system and speakers. The wife collects ceramics, which led to display niches and curves in the walls. “We worked with an East Coast designer, and he and my wife scoured Boston and New York to find the right mid-century pieces that would work with this design,” the husband says. “No Italian pieces here. This house calls for the clean, minimalist look of Northern Europe.” ★