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innovative HOME

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MODULAR DESIGN REINVENTS THE HOME

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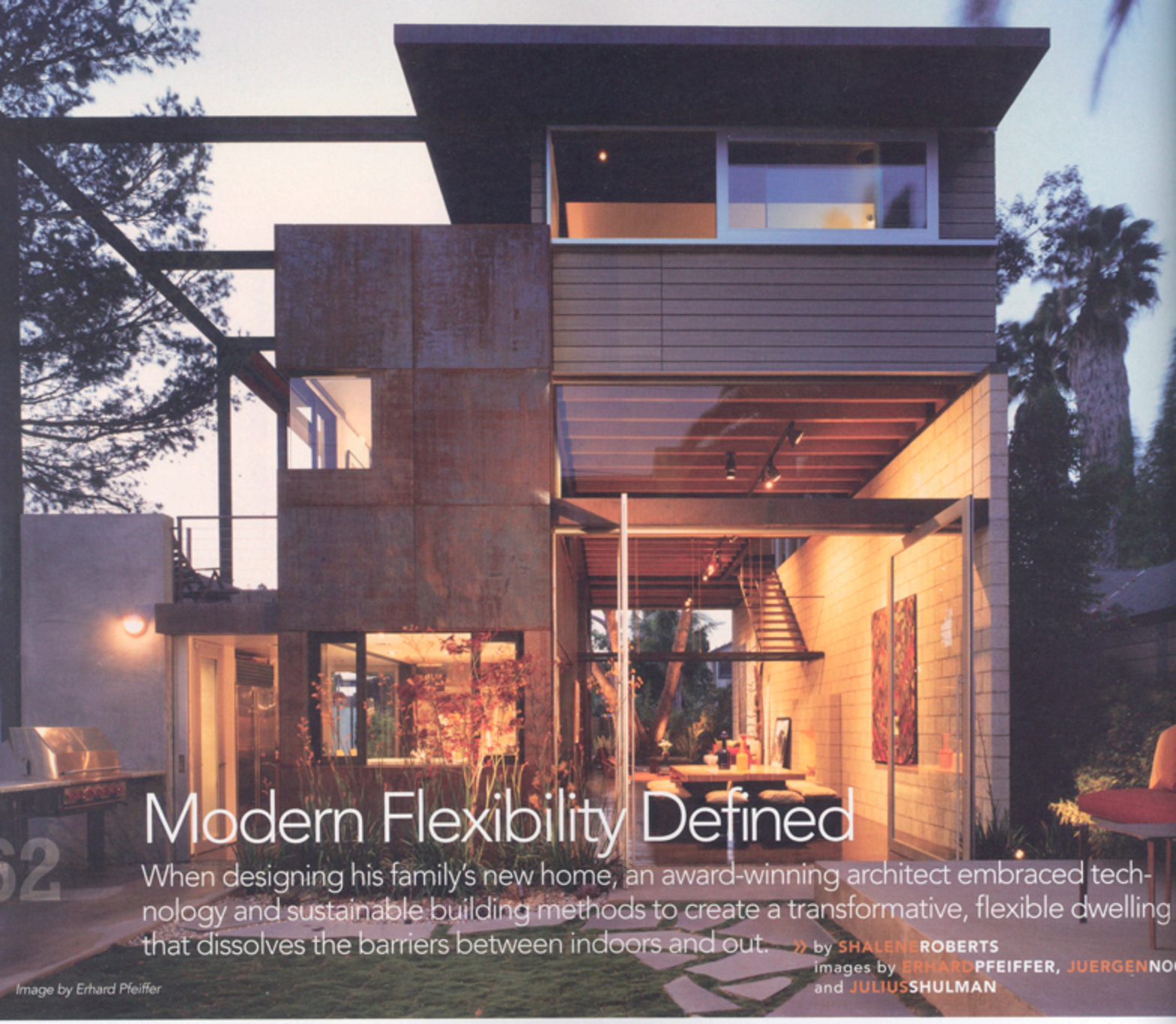

Modern Flexibility Defined

When designing his family's new home, an award-winning architect embraced technology and sustainable building methods to create a transformative, flexible dwelling that dissolves the barriers between indoors and out.

» by SHALENEROBERTS
images by ERHARDPFEIFFER, JUERGENNO and JULIUSSHULMAN

Image by Erhard Pfeiffer

CALIFORNIA-BASED ARCHITECT STEVEN EHRLICH FAIA, DESIGN PRINCIPAL OF STEVEN EHRLICH ARCHITECTS, IS RENOWNED FOR HIS ABILITY TO CREATE DISTINGUISHING DESIGNS THAT FUSE INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY WITH CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SENSITIVITY. A self-professed devotee of sustainable building methods, Ehrlich believes awareness to our surroundings (both cultural and environmental) is vitally important. Since its inception in 1979, Ehrlich's 20-plus-person firm has received more than 70 national, regional and international design awards, several of which have commended the firm's commitment to sustainable design excellence.

Located in Culver City, Calif., the firm seeks to approach the planning and design of all projects with a straightforward methodology focused on function and an architectural expression concerned with users and the community, a vernacular response to local climate and culture, the integration of spontaneous social gatherings, and the power of simple form and spaces. "We understand the importance of people and place and the necessity of expressing the unique characteristics of a community within the context of a functional, well-planned facility," Ehrlich said.

It is no surprise then that when the architect endeavored to design his own residence, he purposed to incorporate these aims into his personal living space. Ehrlich and his wife, Nancy Griffin, an author

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700 PALMS

DESIGN TEAM: Steven Ehrlich Architects
Steven Ehrlich FAIA, lead architect
Matthew Chaney
Thomas Zahlten AIA

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: Parker Resnick

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: Jay Griffith

SITE ARTIST: Woods Davey

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Schramek Construction

TITLE 24: Doug Taber

CUSTOM FURNITURE, CABINETS: David Albert

PHOTOVOLTAICS: Solar Electric Energy Systems

CONSTRUCTION TIMELINE: June 2002 to October 2003

EXTERIOR COMPOSITION: Corten steel, siding, Trex (used horizontally as siding) and Flexirock natural cements

INTERIOR COMPOSITION: Iron oxide impregnated concrete floors, walnut floors, gypsum plaster with carnauba wax coating, custom-blended concrete block

SQUARE FOOTAGE: 3,000 (home); 1,200 (guest house)

COST: Private

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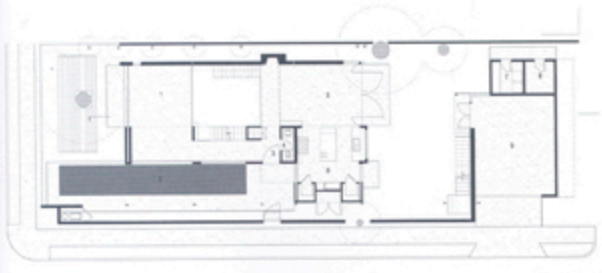

Opposite Page: This interior view showcases the home's flex design and bohemian aesthetic. Image by *Erhard Pfeiffer.* Right: Rusted Corten steel and automatic light scrims contribute to the home's unique design. *Image by Jurgen Nogai and Julius Shulman.*

and journalist, also desired a home that would comfortably accommodate their unique needs, those of three grown children and overnight guests. The specific goals: to create a flexible, organic compound that would adapt as the family's needs changed; to reinforce the concept of urban infill while obtaining privacy within a community context; to maximize volume, light and privacy on the narrow 43-by-132-foot urban lot; to design a sustainable structure that responds with sensitivity to scale and context; to utilize raw materials suitable for the bohemian grittiness of Venice, Calif.; and to dissolve the barriers between the interior and exterior.

"I wanted to create a compound for my family that would have privacy but would also be connected to the vibrant Venice community," Ehrlich said. "I then wanted to create an environment that would be transformative."

After spending one year at the drawing board, the design team began construction on the home in June 2002. Of the many challenges encountered, the narrow site, situated at the corner of a street lined with traditional beach bungalows and palm trees, presented its fair share of obstacles. For one, three 80-year-old trees were rooted on the lot. Rather than removing the two pines and the one palm, Ehrlich and his team worked around the trees and constructed three separate courtyards, each one celebrating one of the three aged trees.

The mere size of the plot also posed additional problems. To maximize space, Ehrlich erected two stories plus a mezzanine level, all constructed around the courtyard. This brought the main home's total square footage to 3,000 and created a multi-use space that merges the temperate outdoor climate with the interior.

The exterior features Corten steel, Flexirock and Trex material. At the street facade, the house is outlined by a steel exoskeleton. Rusted Corten steel outside and carnauba-waxed steel wrap an element of the house that includes a low-ceiling kitchen, entry, ground-level library and two mezzanine-level sleeping pods. Ehrlich incorporated automatic light scrims that roll down and out from the steel exoskeleton to shield the western walls from the harsh heat of the setting sun and to

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"We understand the importance of people and place and the necessity of expressing the unique characteristics of a community within the context of a functional, well-planned facility."

create different spacial environments. The scrims can be conveniently controlled with remote portable switches. The horizontal siding is manufactured by Trex, a sustainable material traditionally used in decking applications that is composed of recycled plastic bags and sawdust. Photovoltaic panels act as an energy source for the home. In the evenings, a shed roof that opens a celerestory to the western sky bathes the top floor in soft moonlight.

Inside the modern dwelling, a 15-and-a-half-foot-high living/dining area opens on three sides to the exteriors. Sliding glass doors allow entrance to the tranquil pool courtyard. The family court situated between the main house and guest house can be accessed via 11-foot pivoting glass doors. The family courtyard is replete with built-in barbecue, radiant heated seating platform and gardens that encourage friendly gatherings. Fifteen-and-a-half-foot-high sliding metal doors provide access to the garden court that celebrates an aged multi-trunk aleppo pine tree.

When the three doors are cast open, they transform the home into a breezy, well-ventilated pavilion, negating the necessity of air-conditioning. When temperatures turn cooler, the concrete slab absorbs the sun's warmth and slowly dispels it into the interiors. Additional heating is provided by Rusher Air radiant heating located in the concrete floor and beneath the walnut floors on the upper level.

The architectural design merges lofty areas with tightly confined spaces. The use of varied materials throughout the home creates contrasting rough and smooth surfaces and adds depth and texture. Iron oxide concrete floors evoke a raw coolness on the lower level, while walnut flooring on the upper level creates a sense of earthy warmth. Gypsom plaster with a wax coating and custom-blended concrete masonry contribute to the overall aesthetic. The result is a dynamic, organic interior.

Spacially, the home "is compressed at the low front entrance of the house and then explodes into the main volume," Ehrlich said. "Stairs lead up to a pair of mezzanine-level sleeping 'pods' with decks; a glass bridge spans the living room and leads to another flight of stairs up to the master bedroom and study."

The kitchen is strongly connected to the main dining space and continues the uninterrupted spacial flow. Two walk-in pantries provide storage solutions for food and dishes, nullifying the need for upper cabinets. The Wolf range/oven is free-floating and flanked by custom steel counters on either side.

Completed in fall 2003, Ehrlich and his family have resided in the home for nearly two and a half years now. In that time, the residence has served the purposes for which it was designed. "It's proven to be a wonderful gathering place," Ehrlich said. We find it intimate when just Nancy and I are at home alone (with their two cats and one dog), or we'll have large dinner parties for 20 people or more. It's just proven to be a wonderful, flexible space that welcomes all." A fitting residence, no doubt, for an architect whose firm strives "to create serene environments that replenish the soul."

Flexibility and transformation are realized through a wood-and-steel frame structure outlined by a steel exoskeleton, from which automatic light scrims roll down. The scrims not only shield the front facade from the western sun, but also form tent-like spaces around the pool.