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## Ancient Meets Modern in a California Home

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Photo by Grey Crawford.

# ANCIENT MEETS MODERN

## An Architect's California Home

By Andrea Truppin

Some of the most interesting experiments in regionally-based design have come out of Southern California, where early 20th-century architects, such as Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, and later John Lautner, Pierre Koenig and Ray Kappe, married new technologies and materials with a sensitivity to the local climate and landscape to achieve a deeper connection between the natural and built environments. But the ideas of these architects, among the first modern efforts towards what today would be called "green" or sustainable design, were shelved in the latter years of the century

as cheap energy obviated the economic benefits of natural cooling, small living spaces and local materials. Today, with green design increasing exponentially as the effects of environmental degradation become ever more apparent, it is enlightening to look at the work of contemporary architects who started thinking about sustainability long before its recent mainstreaming.

One such architect is Steven Ehrlich of Los Angeles, who claims influences as diverse as the "clean lines and simplicity" of Schindler, Lautner and Kappe to the indigenous architecture he

**Above** Architect Steven Ehrlich's home in Venice, California, brings together diverse influences from African vernacular architecture and traditional Japanese design to 20th-century California modernism.

**Opposite** The ground floor of the two-story house is essentially one enormous space, open at both ends to the outside. Sixteen-foot-high glass doors disappear into wall pockets, joining the living area to the courtyard outside, which is shaded by a 60-year-old Aleppo pine tree. The two lounge chairs at left are reproductions of Richard Neutra's 1942 *Boomerang* chairs.





Photo by Erhard Pfeiffer.

**Above** The house is set back in three tiers from the street to temper its scale to the neighborhood context of one-story bungalows. Between the white translucent panels that front the property and the ground floor, sheathed in naturally rusting steel, is a long, narrow courtyard with a lap pool. The mezzanine and second floor are set behind decks; another outdoor courtyard joins the house to the garage/guest house to the right.

**Opposite, top** The view from the stairs of the guesthouse across the courtyard shows the dining area, right, topped by the master bedroom, and the deck flanking the mezzanine bedrooms.

**Opposite, bottom** Pivoting glass doors open the courtyard to the dining area and adjoining open kitchen.

encountered as a young man in the late 1960s and early 1970s while working in Morocco and Nigeria.

In Africa, he was struck by how “architecture without architects,” his term for vernacular design, offered effective and simple solutions to regional climatic and cultural conditions using local materials and simple technologies, whether large roofs for rain collection in arid climates, thick mud walls with cross ventilation for severe heat or open-air interior courtyards. He was astonished, he writes in his 2006 book *Steven Ehrlich Architects: Multicultural Modernism* (a term he coined), to learn that, hidden behind walls in the densely populated medinas of Morocco, urban dwellers “enjoyed private, interior courtyards, with sunlight, fresh air, trees, fountains, and gardens.” This discovery, in particular, had a profound impact on his own approach; throughout his career, he has sought design solutions that offer the same “soothing and harmonizing” qualities of the dappled foliage, sounds of nature and pools of water he found in those North African courtyards.

His own home in Venice, California, completed in 2004, is a laboratory for ideas about space, materials, technology and climate that he has been developing for many years through his Los Angeles firm, Ehrlich Architects. Venice is a bustling town, full of shops and restaurants, with a fair amount of foot traffic. Located on a corner lot, close to a busy street, the house balances privacy with outdoor living, while avoiding imposing an impenetrable façade. Translucent fiberglass and acrylic panels along the southwest street-side property line screen the outdoor living areas as well as the ground floor interior of the house, which is set back behind a long, narrow lap pool. Out of concern for the scale of the neighborhood’s

one-story bungalows, a mezzanine and the second floor of the house step back even farther, with bedrooms and a study fronted by narrow roof decks.

The floor plan was driven by the creation of three exterior courtyards, each situated to catch the shade of an existing tree, with the main house and a separate structure housing the guest house, studio and garage, nestled in the remaining space. The main living area is a dramatic 56-foot-long volume, flowing unimpeded between two vast, perfect squares, 16 feet wide and 16 feet high. At one end, full-height glass doors disappear into pockets in the wall to open up the living area to the mottled sun and shade of a massive Aleppo pine in the front courtyard; at the other end, the dining area flows out to a palm-shaded courtyard between the two buildings through glass doors that pivot from the center. A second Aleppo pine on the sidewalk, just outside the translucent screen, partially shades the long pool court. Half of the glass wall along the pool slides open as well.

These large and variously situated openings allow the house to be cooled by ocean breezes, while heat dissipates towards the extremely high ceiling. Working in tandem with the cross ventilation, a steel frame projecting out from the long southwest façade is outfitted with retractable canvas shades that can be adjusted at the push of a button to screen the afternoon sun from the pool court and the interior.

The house’s materials, left in their raw state, were chosen to weather naturally and gracefully. The exterior contrasts COR-TEN steel, which rusts to a deep orange, with Trex decking, made from recycled and reclaimed plastic and wood. Inside, the polished concrete floor, colored with iron oxide, is another cooling element (radiant gas

Photo by Erhard Pfeiffer.



Photo by Julius Shulman and Juergen Nogai.





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Photo by Grey Crawford.



Photo by Grey Crawford

**Opposite, top and bottom** Accessing the master bedroom and study entails mounting the wooden stairs, crossing the glass bridge and climbing a second set of stairs, a trajectory that provides the inhabitants with dramatic views of the space. The house's atmosphere mutates throughout the day as changing light enters through its multiple and variously sized exposures.

**Above** The ground floor of the house is one vast open space, with discrete functional areas suggested through sculptural objects, such as the Japanese-inspired storage staircase and the H-shaped columnar structure, clad in steel-troweled burnished plaster, that supports a mezzanine sleeping pod.

**Below** One of two sleeping pods on the mezzanine, with sliding *shoji*-inspired windows that overlook the ground floor living area.

heating under the floor warms the house in the winter); the long wall at the rear is constructed of bead-blasted cement block containing pumice, which has high insulating properties.

A transparent glass bridge, suspended from almost invisible steel cables, hovers in the upper reaches of the airy volume, appearing all the more ethereal set against the hefty materials; the bridge, which one must cross to reach the master bedroom from a mezzanine, provides an exhilarating experience of weightlessness to the house's occupants and allows them to observe the space from a different vantage point. "Walking across is a marvelous experience that we have at least two times day," comments the architect.

Ehrlich used furniture, rugs and freestanding structures that double as sculptural objects to differentiate discrete functional areas within the large space. A staircase of American walnut, leading to two sleeping alcoves on the mezzanine (designed for visits by Ehrlich's three grown daughters), was inspired by Japanese *kaidan tansu* or step cabinets, with deep display cubbies on one side and closed cupboards on the other. The mezzanine's supporting columns and the low



Photo by Grey Crawford



Photo by Grey Crawford.

**Above and opposite** The energy-efficient canvas shades, which descend or retract at the push of a button, block the sun when necessary on the southwest façade and can even enclose the entire pool court in a tent-like structure.

**Below** The house, open on three sides, is at once monumental and buoyant, the indoors and outdoors merged.

ceiling of its underbelly delineate a cozy lounge area tucked to the side of the immense space. Thanks to the variety of such implied “rooms,” the house can feel intimate with only two people — Ehrlich lives there with his wife, Nancy Griffin, a movie executive — but it can also accommodate site-specific dance performances with 100 guests.

Like earlier regional modernists, such as Vladimir Ossipoff in Hawaii or Paul Rudolph in Florida, Ehrlich draws on both ancient knowledge and new technologies to get closer to nature. Mutable in response to changing conditions outside, the house brings to mind Le Corbusier’s famous dictum that a house is a machine for living. Doors can enclose or vanish. The shades, which run over the top as well as down the front of the frame, can form a tent-like enclosure, not only mitigating sunlight, but redefining the exterior space of the pool courtyard. Billowing in the breeze, they bring a kinetic energy to the solid forms. Like a rock cave, the shadowy interior can approach to the very edge of a blinding explosion of sunlight and heat, but remain coolly unconcerned.

“Nothing makes me quite as happy as opening and closing doors and tuning the house up as the sun and weather change,” says Ehrlich. “It’s like an instrument.” There’s a definition of a sustainable environment, perhaps: responsive and perfectable, by hand. ■



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Photo by Julius Shulman and Juergen Niggel