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leadership
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steven ehrlich
taps top firm with
his easy-living modernism

hall of fame: sarah susanka /
rising star: randy brown

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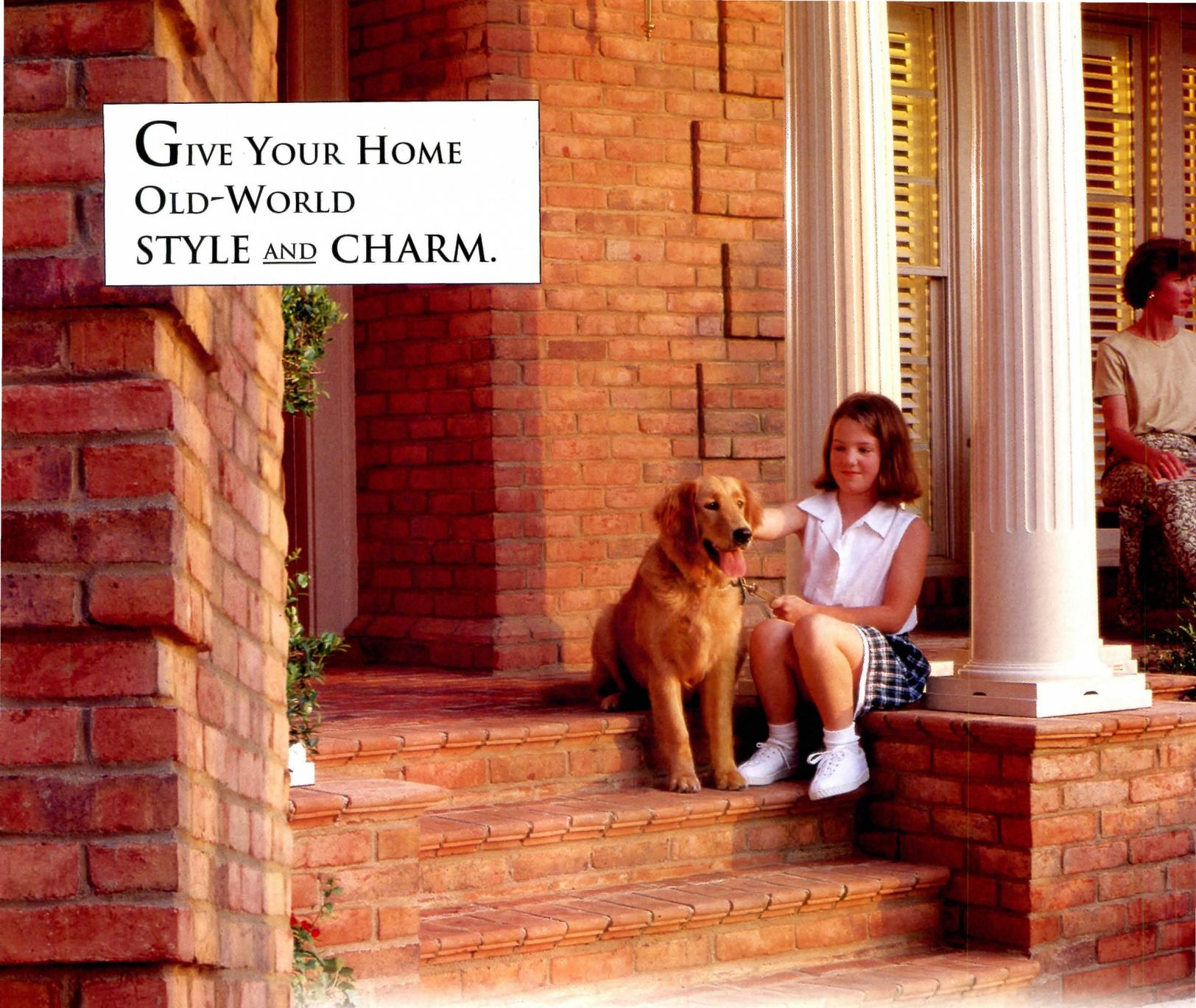
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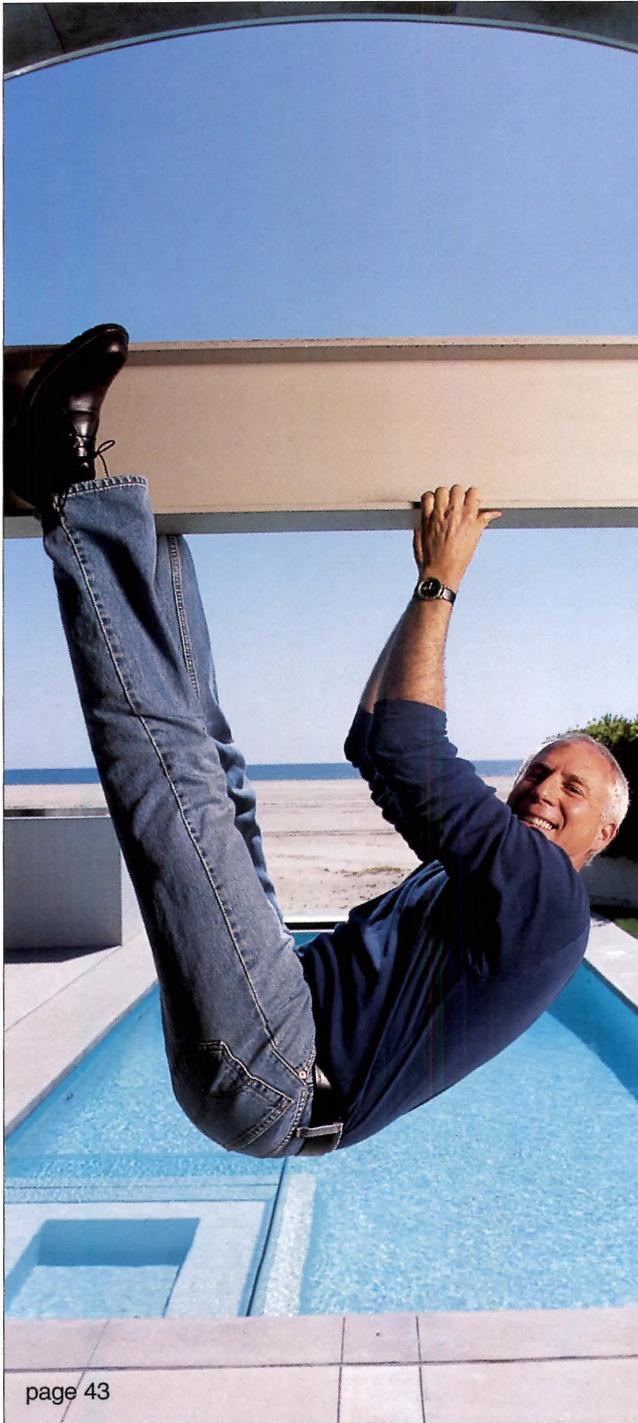
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BORAL BRICKS

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S. Claire Conroy / Editor / 202.736.3312 / cconroy@hanley-wood.com
Judy H. Neighbor / Art Director / 202.736.3331 / jneighbo@hanley-wood.com
Amy Doherty / Acting Managing Editor / 202.736.3442
Meghan Drueding / Senior Editor / 202.736.3344 / mdruedin@hanley-wood.com
Nigel F. Maynard / Senior Editor / 202.736.3438 / nmaynard@hanley-wood.com
Shelley D. Hutchins / Associate Editor / 202.736.3407 / shutchins@hanley-wood.com
Kay Engman / Assistant Art Director
Maria Bishirjian / Senior Graphic Designer
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Contributors

Susan Bradford Barror / Vernon Mays / Cheryl Weber / James Schwartz

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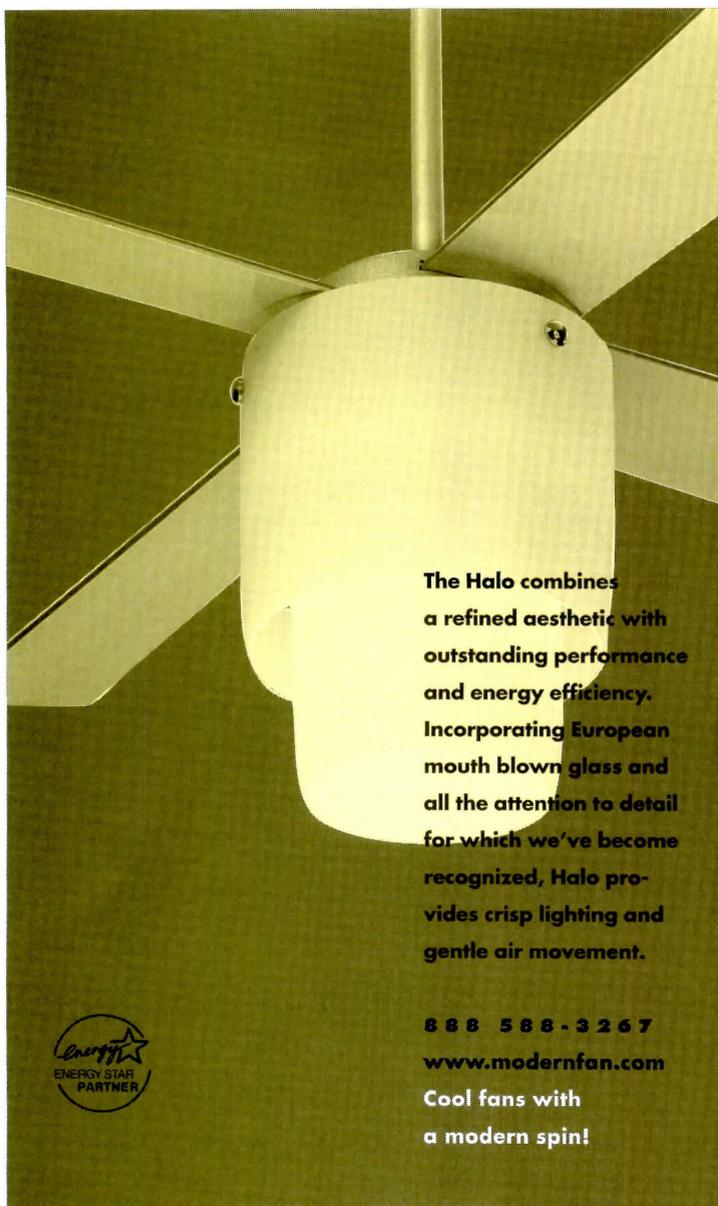
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Editorial and Advertising Offices:
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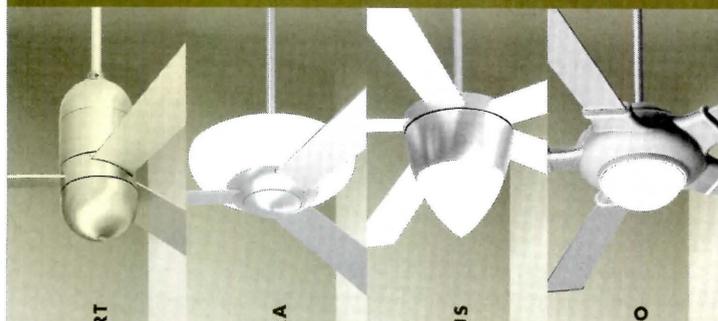
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art or service?

is there such a thing as creative freedom when clients pay the bill?

by s. claire conroy

At last month's AIA National Convention in San Diego, I dropped by a seminar for start-up firms. Most audience members were already earning a living as architects, albeit without their names on the office door. The speaker asked people to jot down their reasons for wanting to embark on such a foolhardy venture. At the top of nearly everyone's list was artistic freedom. They were convinced that autonomy meant unfettered creativity. Veteran proprietors know better, of course.

First of all, there's no such thing as autonomy—unless you're filthy rich and only designing houses for yourself. Architects require clients. Clients have the money. The money is the power. Clients have the power. So it's clients who have complete artistic freedom. If you're a star architect, you might encounter a patron client who gives you the program, the site, the checkbook, and complete liberty to design what you see fit. If you're a beginner, it's more likely you'll find yourself hanging on for dear life, hoping the project retains some semblance of your sensibility by the time

it's done. Then you pray the client will pay you for your work.

I doubt anyone ever goes to architecture school because he wants to learn how to give future clients everything they want, exactly as they want it. I believe most architects pursued the degree because they wanted to give form and substance to their art. Maybe it was already a compromise to choose architecture instead of the purely visual arts. But, you gotta earn a living. And so you find a way to reconcile your art and the realities of the marketplace. That's why I'm a journalist instead of a playwright, my dream when I started college. I'm writing, I'm paid for doing it, and I love the subject matter I cover. Not such a bad deal.

I'm thinking about all of this because there's a minor controversy brewing in my town. A local chef wrote in to a restaurant Web chat, complaining about all the off-the-menu requests she has to deal with from her customers. Apparently, special orders do upset her. She wants her culinary artistry to remain pure—unaltered by substitutions, eliminations, and unsanctioned condiments. "I can only cook what is me and what



Mark Robert Halper

is in my heart and head and palate," she wrote.

Restaurant diners were, to say the least, ballistic in their responses. If she isn't there to please her customers (and to honor dietary restrictions, allergies, and the like), they contended, she should get out of the business. They see her métier exclusively as a service industry. She obviously considers it an art. When she left other chefs' kitchens to start her own restaurant, she did it for the creative freedom. What she encountered was the constant pressure to accommodate, compromise, mollify—and she's exhausted, frustrated, and deeply cranky. If you don't like her food *her* way, she concluded in the Web

chat, there are plenty of other restaurants to try.

Well, gee, I wish her luck. I do think there's room in this world for a few unsullied artistes, but the rest of us have to work with our customers. We start with their needs and desires, and we apply our art and skills to the problem. Maybe our aesthetic survives intact at the end. Or maybe we just take pride and pleasure in solving the problem as artfully as we can. **ra**

Questions or comments? Call me: 202.736.3312; write me: S. Claire Conroy, residential architect, One Thomas Circle, N.W., Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20005; or e-mail me: cconroy@hanley-wood.com.

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acrimonious acronyms

I would like to respond to Rob Thacker's letter to the editor in the March 2003 edition of *residential architect* (page 16) regarding the use of initials after one's name.

I can answer his query on behalf of the American Institute of Building Design (AIBD) and the National Council of Building Designer Certification (NCBDC). Building designers who have been certified by the NCBDC may use the initials AIBD or NCBDC after their names according to the bylaws of these organizations. According to the bylaws of AIBD, "Institute members who are certified by the NCBDC may use CPBD and/or AIBD as part of their title and may be entitled to other privileges as might be provided from time to time by the institute's board of directors."

AIBD is an organization of custom residential building designers who work within the statutes of their states to design residences and light commercial projects (where allowed). The professional membership requirements for joining AIBD are strict. One must show sufficient experience, education, and referrals from within the building industry, as well as

three sets of plans to be reviewed that must meet the association's minimum plan standards.

Certification is available to professional members to further enhance their professionalism through the National Council of Building Designer Certification (NCBDC). Applicants for certification are required to pass a two-day exam, consisting of nine sections ranging from ethics and administrative procedures to engineering and design problem solving.

For more information, visit www.aibd.org or www.ncbdc.com.

*Bobbi Morgan
Executive Director
American Institute of
Building Design (AIBD)
Stratford, Conn.*

loft-lovers' lament

I loved your article ("Where Will the Loft-Lovers Live?" January/February 2003, page 13). As an architectural firm in Manhattan, we have designed many lofts, and—to answer the question posed by your article—we are now designing homes outside the city for those same people.

Based on this experience and many issues that you bring up, we have devel-

oped a theory about what we call the "modern modular." Check out our site: www.modern-modular.com. This proposal is our response to an issue many of us have been contemplating. We have designed them, now we need to build them.

*Joseph Tanney
resolution: 4 architecture
www.re4a.com
New York City*

I just finished reading your From the Editor column "Where Will the Loft-Lovers Live?" and I want to yell, "Hell, yeah!"

Finally someone with a voice has spoken up. I am 27, married, with one young baby. If I see another farmhouse with traditional styling and architecture, I think I'll puke. Why won't builders take the chance and build a house with stylish, modern architecture? I won't buy a house as things sit right now. The Prospect example in Colorado is glorious.

Another point to consider is price. The homes need to be under \$250,000—at least in Ohio, where I live. I could go on and on about this issue, but my point is the same as yours: Wake up, America! Wake up, builders and architects! We don't want the same old

farmhouse s*** you have been building for years.

I know I won't buy it.

*Chris Bishop
by e-mail*

eye contact

Your specs issue (April 2003) cover intrigued me. Especially following on the heels of *The New York Times* article regarding architects and their glasses. But you didn't follow up the cover with a tale about architects' eyeglasses.

I was in Venice on New Year's Day 2002 when I discovered a shop, Ottica Carraro, with great eyewear. I have a fetish for the perfectly round types, old or new. Three months later, I was introduced to Steven Holl, who looked at me and said, "That little shop in Venice was open when you were there; what is its Web site?" Three months ago, I received an e-mail from Jeremiah Eck wanting to know my source for glasses.

So, to all of you architects looking to spec specs for your own image, try www.otticacarraro.it. Or stop off in Venice and find their shop on Calle della Mandola, near the Accademia bridge.

*Dale Mulfinger, FAIA
SALA Architects
Minneapolis*



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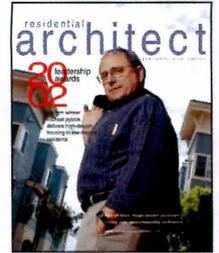
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tips and trends from the world of residential design

baths from the past

trend watchers say Americans are cocooning and spending more time at home, perhaps because of current events or possibly in silent protest of our high-tech, gizmo-laden lifestyle. People, it seems, are nostalgic for a simpler time—and a kinder, gentler building product that reminds them of the days of yore.

“Design goes from one extreme to another,” says Nicole Langel, market analyst for lavatories, bath furniture, and tile at Kohler, Wis.-based Kohler. “The ’80s had streamlined minimalist products and now the move is from transitional toward

traditional design. Because of uncertain times and economic conditions, people are looking for comfort in the familiar.”

Whatever the reason, manufacturers

The K/BIS retro product roundup included (clockwise from right) American Standard’s Enfield Collection, Kohler’s Leighton Ensemble, Grohe’s Victorian-style Seabury, and KWC’s bridge faucet, circa 1922.



are rolling out products to satisfy this perceived yearning. At K/BIS 2003, the annual kitchen and bath industry show, retro ruled. Kohler launched the Leighton Ensemble—a collection of lavatories, a two-piece toilet, and an oval mirror—that takes its cues from 18th-century Georgian design blended with the

manufacturer’s 1930s product styling. The company also expanded its Kathryn suite, which mimics a 1929 Kohler product exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Norcross, Ga.-based KWC Faucets and Piscataway, N.J.-based American Standard dug up the archives as well and have reintroduced products from the Jazz Age.





KWC resurrected the KWC 1922 bridge faucet, and American Standard revamped its Standard Collection—a line of products based on 1922 aesthetics—and the early-20th-century-inspired Enfield Collection. Says Gary Uhl, the company's design director, "By reissuing fixtures from popular eras, American Standard is making it easier for homeowners to accomplish vintage style in their bathrooms."—*nigel f. maynard*

selling indulgences

although well-heeled clients make up only a small portion of the house-buying public, building-product manufacturers still covet their business. In fact, they see limitless potential for growth in this segment, as homeowners seek to personalize their pads with posh products.

Quebec sink-maker Julien is tapping into this zeitgeist with a unique collection of kitchen sinks, featuring hand bent, welded, and polished 16-gauge stainless steel. The island version (right) takes 80 hours to complete and costs a princely \$7,500. The hefty labor costs and exclusive price point are non-issues, says Richard Paradis, sales representative for the company. "Nobody is offering anything like this," he says. "We believe people in the high-end market are willing to pay for this type of quality and workmanship."

Also tiptoeing into the high-end act are Kohler, Wis.-based Kallista, whose full-sized kitchen island with pot rack, Carrara marble

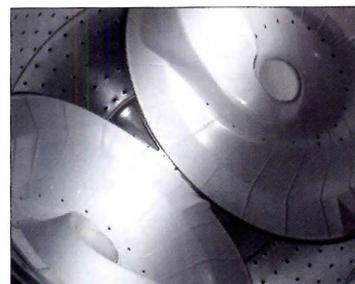


counter, and fireclay undermount sink (top) goes for a red-hot \$15,150 to \$17,822; Walnut Creek, Calif.-based Jacuzzi with its \$29,000 La Scala home-theater and entertainment-system bathtub; and Cherry Hill, N.J.-based Aga Ranges with its new \$7,000 dual-fuel mega-range comprising six burners and four electric ovens.—*n.f.m.*

low water mark

One of the by-products of the housing boom is a draining demand on natural resources—especially water. Some areas already have stringent consumption restrictions in place; others have measures on the table. Fortunately, a new generation of water-sipping appliances and fixtures helps take some of the water pressure off.

Newton, Iowa-based Maytag Appliances has introduced an updated Neptune TL, a high-efficiency top-loading washing machine that uses 50 percent less water than a traditional top-loader. The unit also is easier on clothes, because it uses two washing disks instead of a traditional agitator.



Instead of a traditional agitator, the Neptune TL uses two disks to wash.

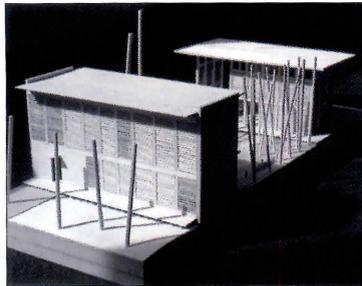
Irvine, Calif.-based Fisher & Paykel makes the IntuitiveEco washing machine, a product the company says offers the ergonomic advantages of a top-loader but the energy and water efficiency associated with a front-loader. An addition to the company's Ecosmart series, the new product has a spin speed of 1,000 revolutions per minute, wringing more water out of clothes and reducing drying time.

Other water-saving products include New York City-based TOTO's Neorest, a tankless toilet with a dual-flush water-saving mode, and Piscataway, N.J.-based American Standard's Champion toilet, which the manufacturer says achieves 40 percent more flushing power from 1.6 gallons than any other product on the market.—*n.f.m.*

calendar

unbuilt architecture design awards 2003

deadline: july 15
boston society of architects



Unbuilt architectural designs of any project type can be submitted by architects, students, or educators anywhere in the world. Award certificates and cash prizes will be provided. Shown: Little Haiti Affordable Infill Housing, by Marilys R. Nepomechie, AIA, Coconut Grove, Fla., a 2002 award winner. Call 617.951.1433, ext. 232, or visit www.architects.org/design_awards_programs.

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categories. This Potomac, Md., home designed by Bruce A. Rich Architects, Rockville, Md., won the 2002 best-of-show prize. For an entry form, call 800.VETTER2 or go to www.vetterwindows.com.



simple + direct

june 2–august 3
the design center at philadelphia university

This exhibition of international furniture design features the work of a range of designers, including Richard Neutra,

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sitting pretty: the history of the toilet

june 7–august 24
peterborough centennial museum & archives, peterborough, ontario



Courtesy Bev Dietrich

Interactive components—a talking toilet seat that takes questions, for instance—plus actual examples trace the development of the toilet from early models like this chariot-shaped Roman latrine to today's more compact and comfy versions. For museum hours, call 705.743.5180 or check out www.pcma.ca.

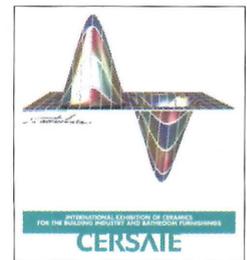
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Light Screens: The Leaded Glass of Frank Lloyd Wright, through July 20, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C., 202.275.1693; **Building Images: Seventy Years of Photography at Hedrich Blessing**, through July 27, National Building Museum, Washington, D.C., 202.272.2448; **National Design Triennial**, through August 31, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York City; 212.849.8400; **Roy/Design Series 1**, through September 7, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 415.357.4000.—*shelley d. hutchins*



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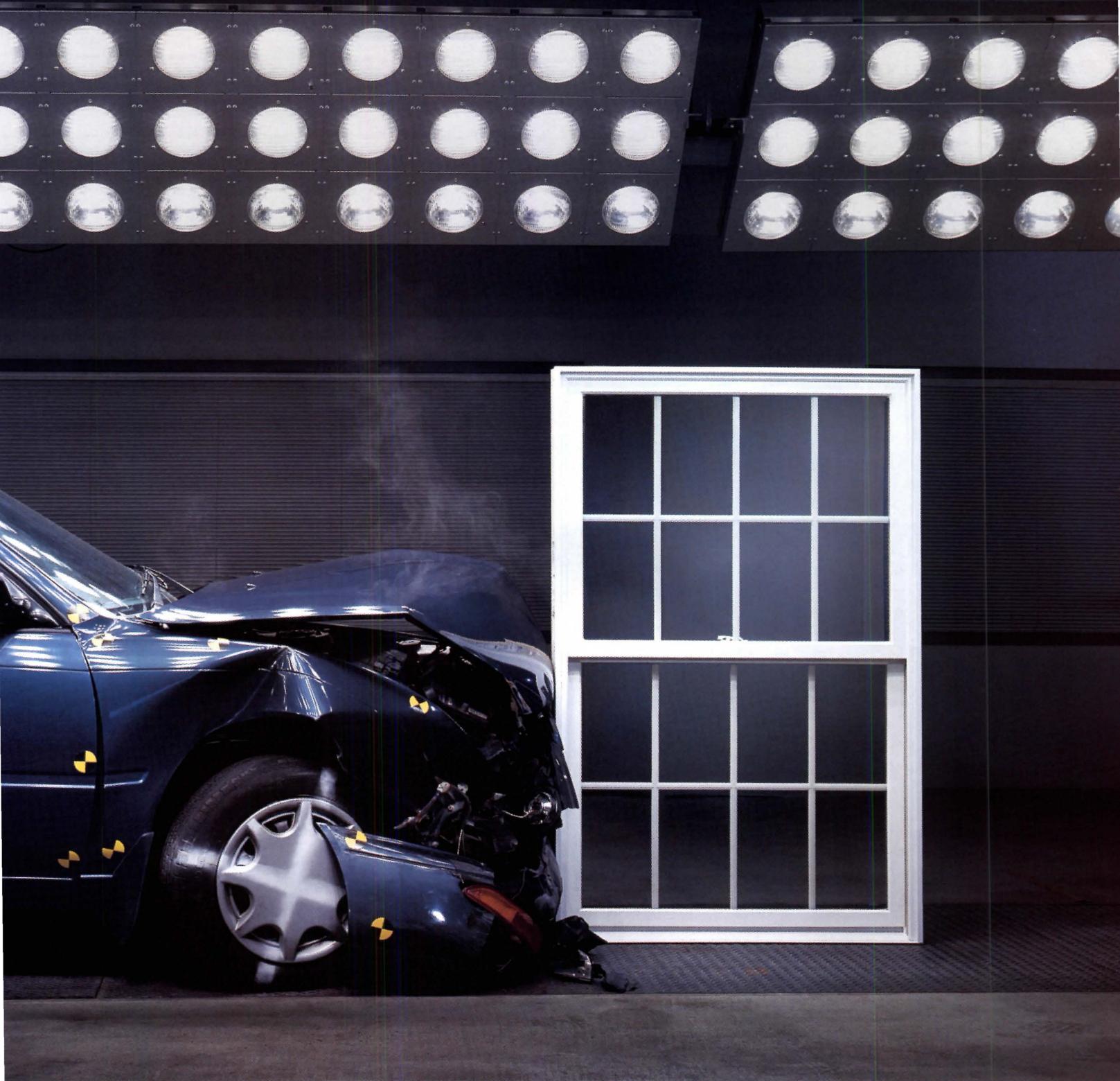
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art in the margins

could time in the sidelines put your heart and art back in the game?

by cheryl weber

As a focused discipline, designing buildings has its virtues. Over the years you perfect the art of sizing up prospective clients, devising schematics quickly, and building a spec library and relationships with contractors. Done well, it's a satisfying way to make a living. But for some architects, not satisfying enough.

For a variety of reasons—as part of a business strategy for a large firm, as a way for sole practitioners to boost their income, or purely for intellectual enjoyment—many architects have well-developed sidelines to their practice. In their mind's eye, drawing, painting, sculpture, graphic design, and industrial design are all part of the creative process. And they've figured out how to get paid to push the limits of their creativity, while keeping up a mainstream practice.

"I've had two jobs all my life," says Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, Boston. For years, he taught design seminars at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Recently, though, he sliced his professional life into thirds when he exchanged his garage for an art studio,



Ann Boyajian

where he paints landscapes. "I was trying to reinvigorate my intuition, because I found that as I got older in the practice I was spending most of my time talking on phones and answering e-mail," Eck says. "It has invigorated my right brain to the point where it's helped my practice more than I would have imag-

ined. When you paint, you make design decisions quickly." Sold independently and in galleries, Eck's paintings are becoming a viable source of income, he says. And he envisions the art evolving as a larger part of his productive life when he eventually lets his partners take on more of Jeremiah Eck Architects.

melting pots

If established sidelines are a welcome exit strategy, they also subsidize the front end of a career. New York City architect-in-training Corvin Matei, who is on his last round of licensing exams, considers his fledgling practice a melting pot. He relishes his artistic inde-

continued on page 26

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Custom Home, less than 2,000 square feet

Frederick Phillips & Associates, Architects	Grand
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Single-Family Production Housing, Attached

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Single-Family Production Housing, Detached

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Renovation

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McInturff Architects	Merit
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Kitchen

Cunningham + Quill Architects	Merit
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Bath

Smyer Architecture	Merit
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Architectural Detail

Sutton Suzuki Architects	Merit
Randy Brown Architects	Merit

Judges' Award

Randy Brown Architects
Wank Adams Slavin Associates

pendence and his work in any given week, which may include interior architectural design, furniture design and manufacturing, and doing models and presentation drawings for other architectural firms, such as James, Harwick + Partners, Dallas. “I think all these things are essential to the education of an architect before you go mainstream,” he says. “I think of these projects as a way of growing from one scale to another, building up a library of knowledge.”

The drawings and model-building represent about 20 percent of Matei’s income. They’re a window into other people’s work, he says, and a way of exploring and thinking about architecture. “After I get licensed I plan to keep doing the same things,” Matei says. “I’ve always thought there was something missing by just doing architecture. You get channeled into one way of thinking, whereas there’s spark and excitement in also doing furniture and graphic design.”

artful diversity

In business by herself for a decade, Seattle architect Anita Lehmann has also parlayed her love of drawing into a substantial source of income. Teaching architectural drawing and design for 10 years at the University of Washington gave her a solid base from which to launch that side of the business. In addition to designing residential remodels,

commercial office space, and restaurant interiors, Lehmann has illustrated high-end marketing pieces for such local firms as GGLO Architects and Planners, and served as a scribe for the city of Seattle on public design charrettes. She has also worked with graphic design firms on projects as diverse as a bottle design for Starbucks and a cash machine for Wells Fargo.

“Some graphic designers don’t think well three-dimensionally,” she says. “I can illustrate all sides of a product, up and down and around. I can design an architectural application, and they’ll put their designs into my drawings.”

Not only does this multidisciplinary approach engage her creative talents more fully than a traditional practice, it also gives her flexibility. Working from an office in her home, where she’s also raising a family, Lehmann is able to mix large- and small-scale projects. “If I wanted to practice architecture I’d have a larger firm, which would mean I’d be out of the house more and working 60 hours a week,” she says. “What I like about the degree in architecture is that you can diversify so much—go into project management, illustration, architectural photography.”

Whether Lehmann is sketching a three-dimensional idea for a Nordstrom store interior or designing a menu board for Seattle’s

continued on page 30

making music

New York City architect Alexander Gorlin, AIA, has designed furniture and lighting fixtures, but had never attempted something as technical as a musical instrument.

Until last year, that is, when he entered the First International Piano Design Competition, sponsored by Maximiliaan’s House of Grand Pianos—and won. The idea

of entering the competition came to him on a trip to the Milan Furniture Fair, where he saw some antique pianos and started sketching them. “The oldest one



Ken Sargeant

was from the 1700s and looked very modern, minimal, and sleek,” Gorlin says. “When this competition was announced I had an idea to apply some of the principles of modern architecture to piano design, to create floating planes and open up the previously solid object to spatial integration.”

For Gorlin, the grand piano was a fun object to play with. As an icon, it has always been viewed as something that couldn’t be improved, he says. “Le Corbusier thought the curve was related to the nature of music, but the casing was always open to interpretation.”

The architect took the theme of black and white keys and added primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—to demarcate the three axes of Cartesian space. “The poet Goethe said architecture is frozen music,” he says. “I inverted that to reflect the idea that the piano is architecture in space.” So far, a single piano has been made. Manufactured in Germany, constructed with a traditional grand-piano cast-iron plate and encased in molded birch and spruce with a lacquer finish, it sports a \$150,000 price tag. What home furnishing object might be next for the architect? “After a piano,” Gorlin says, “what piece of furniture can’t you design?”—c.w.



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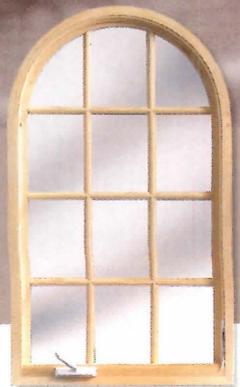


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Best Coffee, she says those facets of her work complement, rather than compete with, architectural design. "The process is the same," she says. "I still use a pencil and electric eraser and draw as many views as I can come up with. You don't have to worry about the roof leaking. But because I'm trained as an architect, I'm thinking about all those elements—scale, aesthetics, and proportion—that are also required on small projects." Lehmann adds, "I'm always careful to call myself an illustrator, not a renderer. I like to let people know that when I'm drawing I'm not

just coloring bricks in, but figuring out how it goes together, what the light quality is, and dealing with architectural details."

negative perceptions

A highly creative, interdisciplinary practice is attractive to many clients. But it can also be perceived negatively, especially if you're virtually on your own. It raises questions of how you will market yourself, and how you'll allay clients' fears that your heart isn't in their project. "It's human nature to pigeonhole and create labels for things to

facilitate an easy understanding of who someone is or what they do," says San Francisco architect Bruce Tomb, whose sideline in sinks goes by the name Infinite Fitting. "As soon as you say you're an architect, people understand. But to also offer up that you're a manufacturer can cut both ways, because people start to think you're distracted from your practice, which of course isn't true."

Before he was an architect, Tomb was an artist whose experimental furniture was exhibited in museums and galleries. Even now, he continues to partici-

pate in the gallery circuit. "The furniture is a wonderful way to explore architectural ideas without a client, and at a scale that I can pay for myself and realize myself out of my own shop," he says. And so his 20-year-old, two-part solo practice seems quite natural. The metal sinks—in white bronze, silicone bronze, brass, and aluminum—evolved out of an art piece he designed in 1985. A year later, as project manager for the interior design firm Clodagh Ross & Williams in New York City, he installed the piece in the

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showroom's water closet. It entranced visitors, and a product line was born.

Tomb's creative life works on a practical level, though not without some drawbacks. Representing about 50 percent of his annual revenues, Infinite Fitting ensures a stable position for his office manager, who also oversees the inventory of 60-some vessels that are stored in the building and sold to wholesalers across the country. On the other hand, he says, the production runs tie up money. And although sink sales even out his architectural commissions, they rarely end up in

his work. "Part of it is the evolution of my own aesthetic, not wanting to be bound by this singular thing—the sink," he says.

synergistic design

Michaela Mahady also assumed two professional identities when she became an architect 17 years ago. As a principal with SALA Architects, Stillwater, Minn., Mahady feels she's been well-paid as an architect, but needs the stimulation of looking at things another way. She and her husband, John Pietras, co-own Pegasus Studio, where

they create glass windows and sculpture. She designs them, he builds them.

Mahady's work involves a whole different set of circumstances from designing architecture. "I like to explore things in an artistic way, not necessarily working with someone else's vision, but responding to my own thoughts," she says. "This isn't just about keeping the water out of something, but making something beautiful and delightful. It keeps my mind alive."

Her mixed-media sculptures and leaded glass panels and windows adorn private residences to churches and public buildings across the country. "We tend to emphasize clear and transparent glass so the outside environment becomes part of what the window is about—not so much a colorful picture as a veil between inside and out that says something about architecture and the environment," she says. And although most of the studio work comes from sources other than SALA, there's a synergism between the two. Her glasswork has led to work for the firm. Private clients occasionally

continued on page 34

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ask for a piece of glass-work, too, and other architects in the firm have incorporated Mahady's art into homes they've designed.

A more fluid kind of synergism is often found in larger firms like GGLO Architects in Seattle. They have the luxury of offering many different design services under one roof, resulting in richer projects visually and additional revenues. Like many other offices of its size, GGLO's divisions include architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture, and interior design. But the firm pushes past even those labels by hiring people with differ-

ent kinds of talents and backgrounds in the arts. "We take an integral approach to design, like being renaissance architects," says principal Bill Gaylord, AIA. "We look for people who go beyond the typical services an architect or interior designer would have, niches that can be used in more creative ways to expand our business and provide a higher level of quality and spirit of life."

creative support

One of GGLO's custom-home commissions included designs for a fountain, sculpture, stationery, cocktail napkins, and six years' worth of

Christmas cards. On mixed-use projects, the firm is likely to design virtually the entire streetscape, including planters, decorative walls, kiosks, and outdoor cafe furniture. At Harbor Properties in Seattle, GGLO worked with the architect of record to design the interiors on two of the buildings. Subsequently, the firm offered a solution for the leasing office's entrance, which was hidden 25 feet off the street between buildings. Staff architect Leah Martin, who has a graphic design background, devised a banner three stories tall that grabs the eye from a distance. In

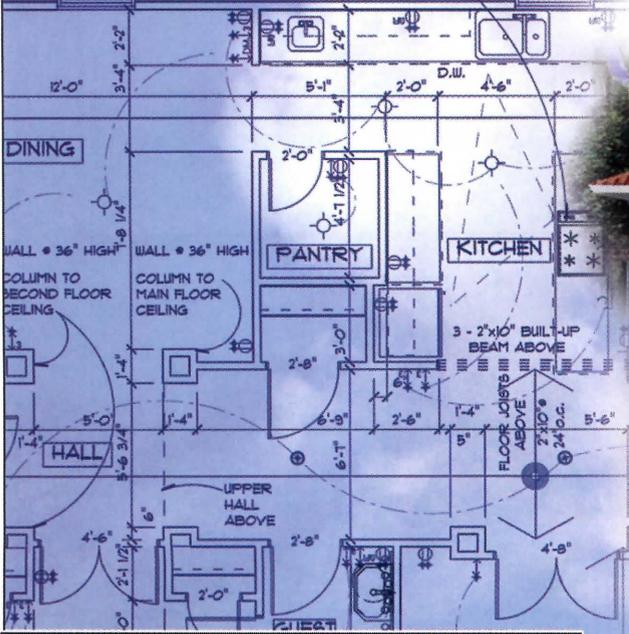
the alleyway, track lighting and a fabric "ceiling" printed with a graphic of the city usher visitors to the office. Through the firm, Martin also creates signage packages for other developers.

Another multitasking GGLO employee is Kristin Ford, an interior designer, artist, and the office librarian, who used to own a special finishes business. She supplied the chalk work for a rolling chalkboard wall that divided a studio apartment into sleeping and living areas. The mural was displayed in a model unit to show how the wall could

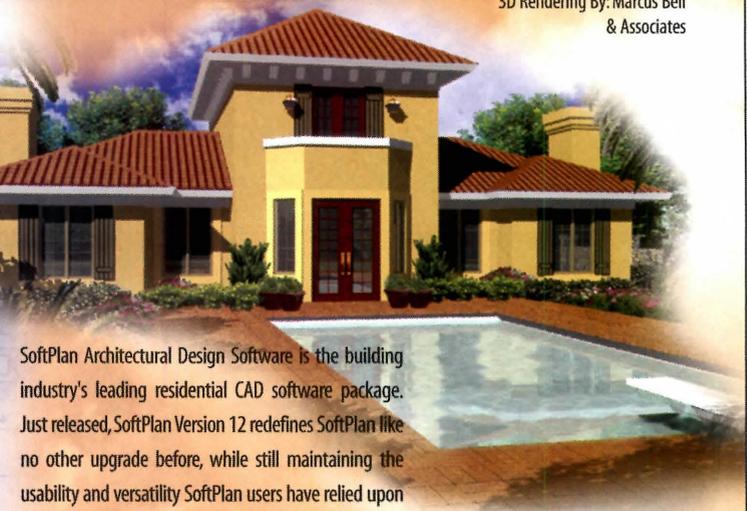
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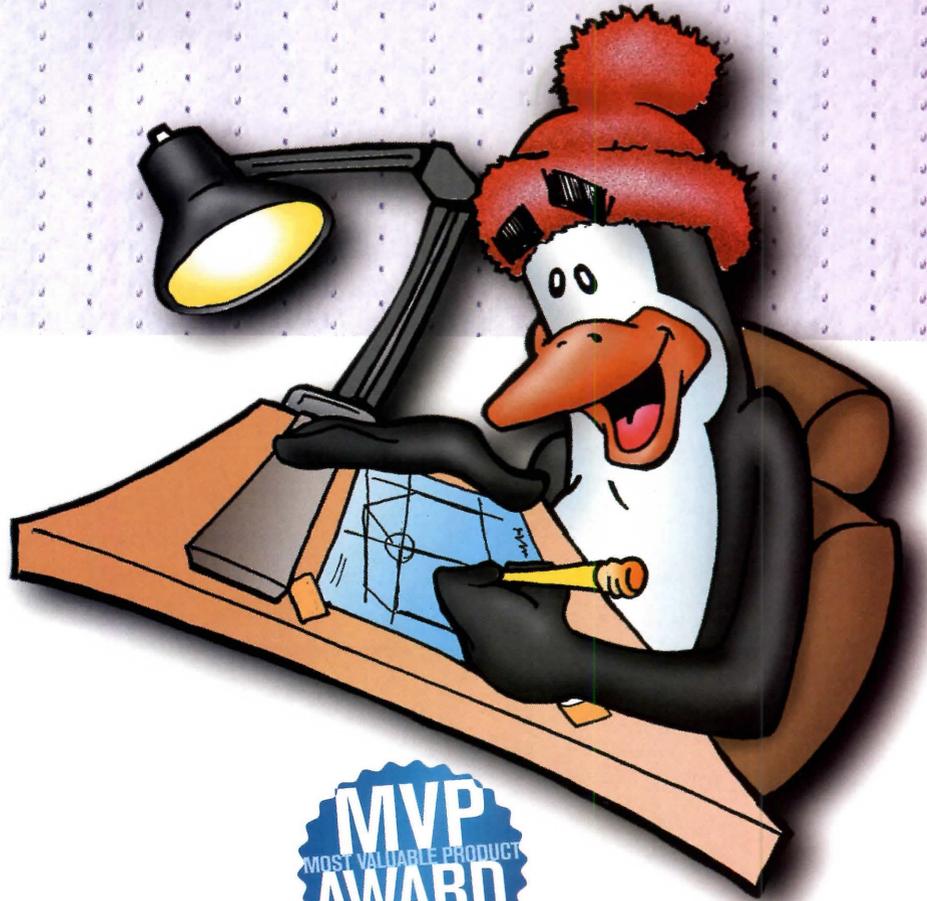
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Gaylord says the firm's breadth of talent adds value and revenues to both single-

family and multifamily work. "It comes into our planning, the way we do renderings for mixed-use developments or town centers," he

says. "It definitely helps us get more multidisciplinary and more creative work."

It creates a lot of fun for the firm, too. Last year

GGLO entered the Bra Show, a fund-raiser conceived by two Seattle sisters to raise breast-cancer awareness.

Artists were invited to submit bra designs for purchase at auctions and for display through fashion shows at local restaurants. GGLO created the Double Mocha Brappuccino Grande, which featured large ceramic cups, cut in half and held together in a wire mesh body. Woven into the bra was a swirling pattern of tiny wires embellished with coffee beans, depicting the aroma of coffee. A multidisciplinary team designed and built the bra, Gaylord says. And Jennifer Stormont, an architect who works in the single-family residential studio, built a showcase for the display at Starbucks, which purchased the piece at one of the auctions.

Author, sculptor, painter, illustrator: Whether pursued as hobbies or as income, the various art forms architects practice are a way to make a personal statement and to bring their professional lives full circle. In addition to taking Fridays off for landscape painting, Eck has just finished writing a book with Taunton Press called *The Distinctive Home: A Vision of Timeless Design*. He hopes its sales will be a source of income for the firm, and a means of marketing. "I spent two-and-a-half years writing the book," he says, and then changes his mind—"20 years, actually." *ra*

Cheryl Weber is a contributing writer in Severna Park, Md.



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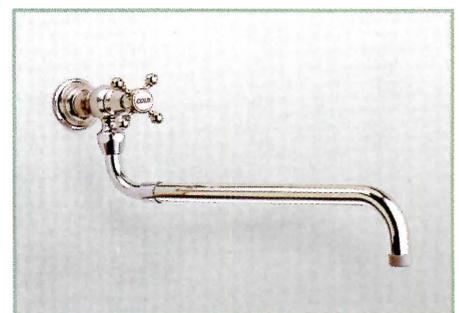


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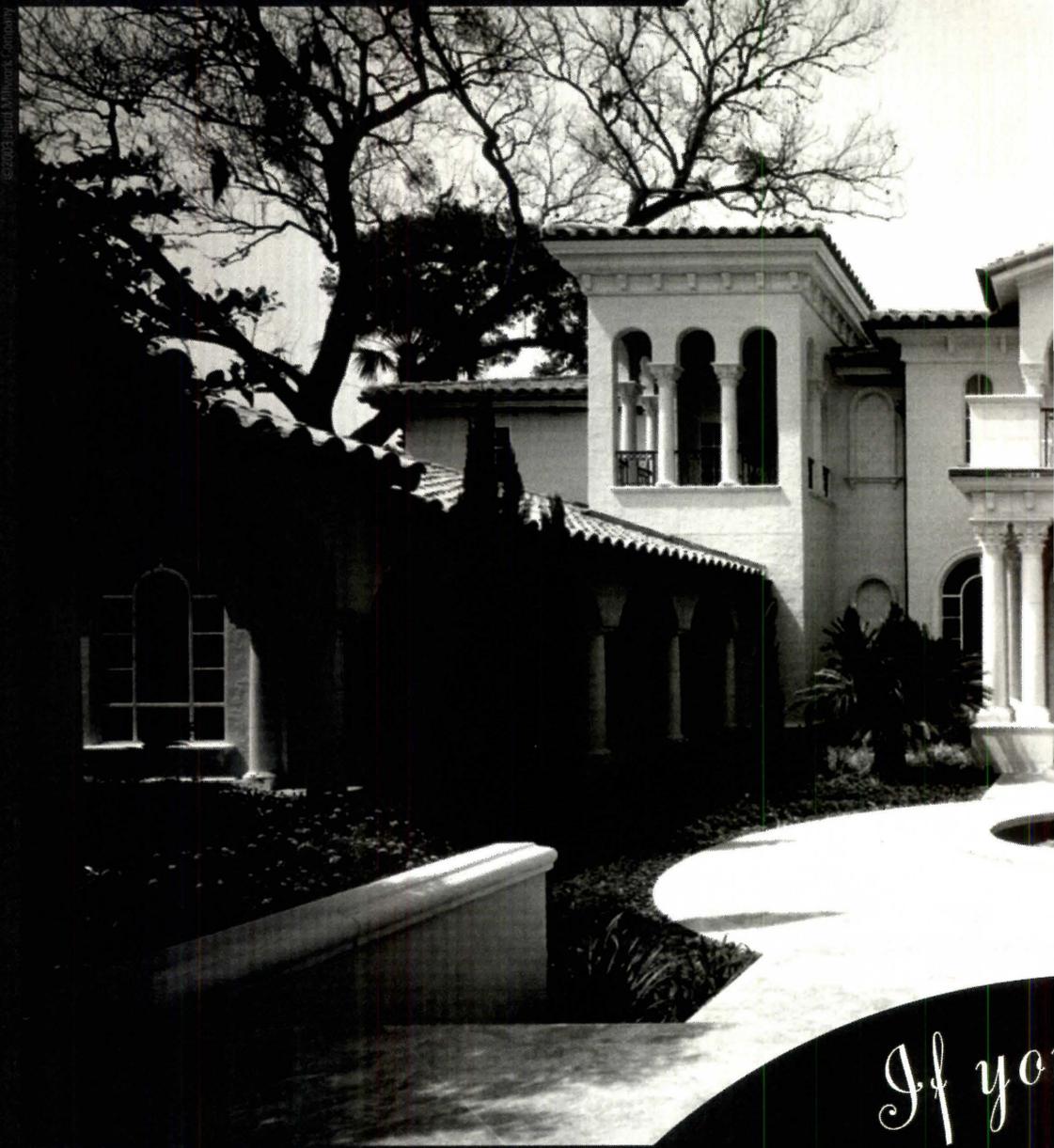
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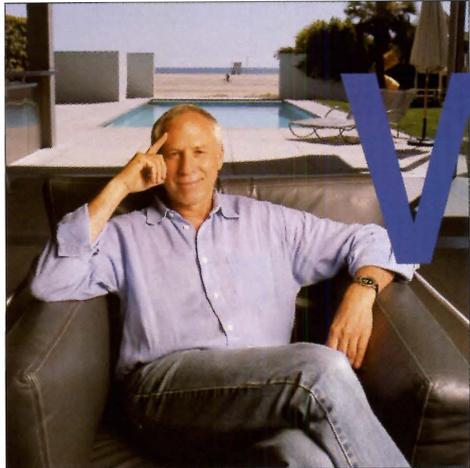
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practices Modernism in the Modernists' town—and still manages to stand out for the style and spirit of his work. Raleigh, N.C.–based Sarah Susanka, who brought affordable custom homes to middle-class Minnesotans, stands the paradigm on its head and now teaches the masses the importance of good design. After school in Los Angeles, Omaha, Neb., native Randy Brown returned home to design the kinds of buildings he couldn't find in his own back yard.

These are our editors' choice winners. Turn the page and see if they'd earn your vote, too.

Photos by (from top) Danny Turner, John Noltner, and Schlaebitz.com

2 0 0 3 leadership awards

top firm / **steven ehrlich architects**

an urbane los angeles firm strikes the delicate balance
between high design and intrinsic livability.

by meghan drueding



Danny Turner

**steven ehrlich and
james schmidt**
steven ehrlich architects

the trunk of Steven Ehrlich's Audi TT stores a collection of wood and marble samples,

a yoga mat, a bag of watercolor paper and paints, and a pair of sturdy shoes for site visits.

More than just the careless clutter of an on-the-go guy, it's a revealing quintessence of what

Ehrlich and his Culver City, Calif., firm, Steven Ehrlich Architects, care deeply about. They

are at once creative and pragmatic, committed to Southern California's active, outdoor lifestyle,

and dedicated to building living environments that balance serenity with exuberance.

A body of Modern, award-winning residential work proves the firm has got the blend just right. Together, Ehrlich, FAIA, and Jim Schmidt, AIA, head of the 30-person firm's residential studio, are the mixmasters of a striking addition to a 1937 Richard Neutra house, a four-unit town-home project artfully shoehorned into a tight lot, and dozens of finely detailed single-family houses. Also in the portfolio is a burgeoning body of top-notch commercial and institutional projects for noteworthy clients such as DreamWorks SKG, Sony Music, and UCLA. Still, for Ehrlich and his firm, the psychic scale tips in favor of residential architecture. They just can't get enough of housing.

high-wire act

The ongoing challenge and payoff resides in the struggle to harmonize seemingly conflicting components. It's about "balance," says Ehrlich, and it infuses his work on nearly every level.

How, for instance, do you reconcile the dazzles of modern technology with the more rough-hewn appeal of time-honored building practices? This is where the artist must have perfect pitch. And Ehrlich has an uncanny ability to hit the notes beautifully.

Although certainly a New World architect, Ehrlich has a deep appreciation of the ageless ways of building that imbue structures with warmth and humanity. Between architecture school at Rensselaer and establishing his L.A. practice in 1979, he spent six years working in Morocco and Nigeria. The experience of living in Africa instilled in him a love of traditional construction methods. "I'm always fascinated by the purity and directness that indigenous builders build with," he says. Even so, cutting-edge materials and technologies make it easier to accomplish the minimalist effect he and his colleagues strive for. It's such a delicate equilibrium to find.



Ehrlich and Schmidt know how to create a sense of drama. At this 1998 Santa Monica, Calif., addition to a 1937 Richard Neutra beach house, a motorized gate opens to reveal a shimmering stretch of sand and ocean.

Tim Street-Porter

2003 leadership awards

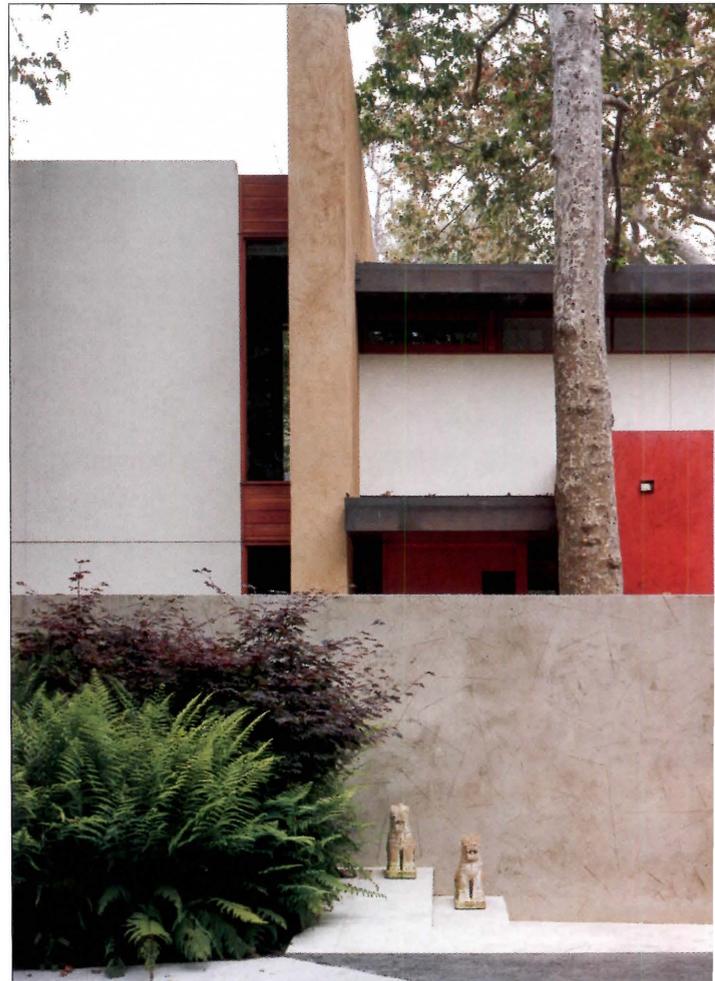
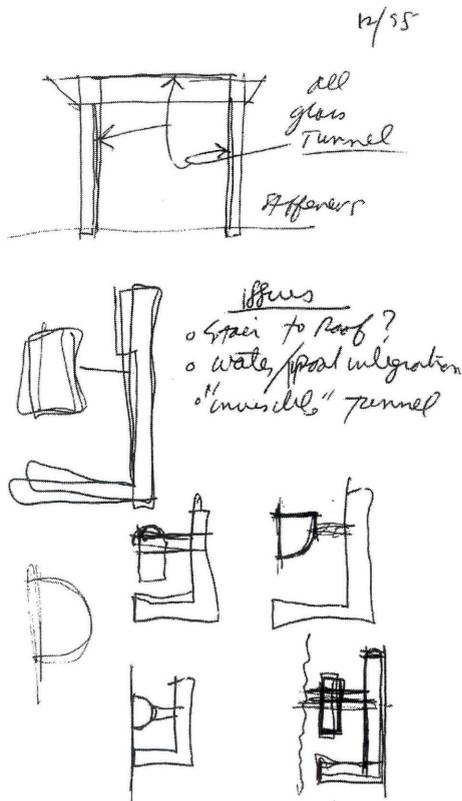


Tim Street-Porter

Privacy and a rapport with nature take equal priority in the firm's houses. The Neutra beach house and its arch-roofed addition turn an invitingly transparent face to their enclosed rear yard (above). The Canyon House in Santa Monica (2000; top right) cascades freely down its sloped back yard while maintaining a more reserved facade (below right).

"i'm always fascinated by the purity and directness that indigenous builders build with."

—steven ehrlich, faia





Thomas Loof



Thomas Loof

Sometimes the answer lies between the lines. In his own house, scheduled for completion this summer, he designed a dramatic 15½-by-60-foot wall of custom concrete block. He left the grout joints between blocks chunky, in keeping with the construction style of the mud huts he saw in Africa. Instead of air conditioning, the house is cooled entirely by low-tech natural breezes. But the 15½-by-7½-foot glass sliding doors that let in those breezes could only be crafted with modern-day technology. The doors are so light a child can push them open or closed, and their slim, custom metal tracks make conventional sliders look prehistorically heavy.

The Neutra addition achieves a different accommodation between old and new. Like any Southern California Modernist, Schmidt reveres Neutra's mid-century architecture. But the addition had to work for a new-millennium family. Rather than trying to replicate and extend the original house, he and Ehrlich took Neutra's vocabulary and spun it in fresh ways. The existing house's curved rear facade reappears in the addition's arched roof. "What Neutra did in plan, we did in section," Schmidt says. "Our arch is a cycloidal arch, inspired by the one in Kahn's Kimbell Museum. It's more elegant and unusual than a true arch." The remodeled kitchen contains decidedly New Age Bulthaup cabinetry, but its laminate counters and linoleum flooring preserve the house's Modern spirit. The architects found other small ways to pay homage to Neutra: The idea for the addition's bath fixtures came from his Lovell Health House in Los Angeles, and the spider-leg detailing on the exterior recalls details he executed during the 1940s and '50s.

The addition's sliding glass walls convey almost total transparency, a strong contrast to the more solid main house. Instead of jamming the new building up against the original, Schmidt and Ehrlich allowed the glass pavilion to breathe, setting it several feet from the main house and connecting the two pieces through a glass passage. "Now you can step back and admire the old building," says Schmidt. "This is what Neutra would have done if he'd had the technology. We stayed within what he was doing, but we did it on today's terms and with today's materials."



Thomas Loof

The firm wields color and texture in ways that warm up Modern interiors. Inside the Canyon House, a distressed stucco wall plays off smooth Brazilian cherry floors and Douglas fir window frames.

sustained interest

Another tightrope the firm tiptoes is over the issue of sustainability. Ehrlich's interest in alternative energy sources goes back to his childhood, when at age 12 he won the New Jersey state science fair with a model for a solar home. These days his own house, in addition to its passive cooling system, has radiant floors, a solar hot-water heater, photovoltaic panels on the garage roof, and siding made of Trex, a recycled-plastic and wood-scrap decking product. Trex and the rusted steel panels that make up the house's skin float a half-inch away from the exterior walls, allowing heat to rise and disperse between the two surfaces before it can enter the home. Most of the interior surfaces are left unfinished, eliminating the need for toxic sealants and paints.

Yet environmental concerns didn't dominate one hundred percent of the time. "I thought of putting photovoltaic panels on the roof of the main house," says Ehrlich, who acts as design principal on every project that comes out of the firm. "If I did that, I would have had to tilt the roof the other way, which would have meant being a bad neighbor; some of the windows would look directly into my neighbor's back

2 0 0 3 leadership awards

porch. Sustainability needs to be integrated with community, privacy, and other issues.” That goes for the firm’s other projects as well. Protecting the environment ranks as a high priority, but it isn’t done at the expense of the design or the clients’ comfort. If placing windows for winter solar gain means giving up a mountain view, the view will win out.

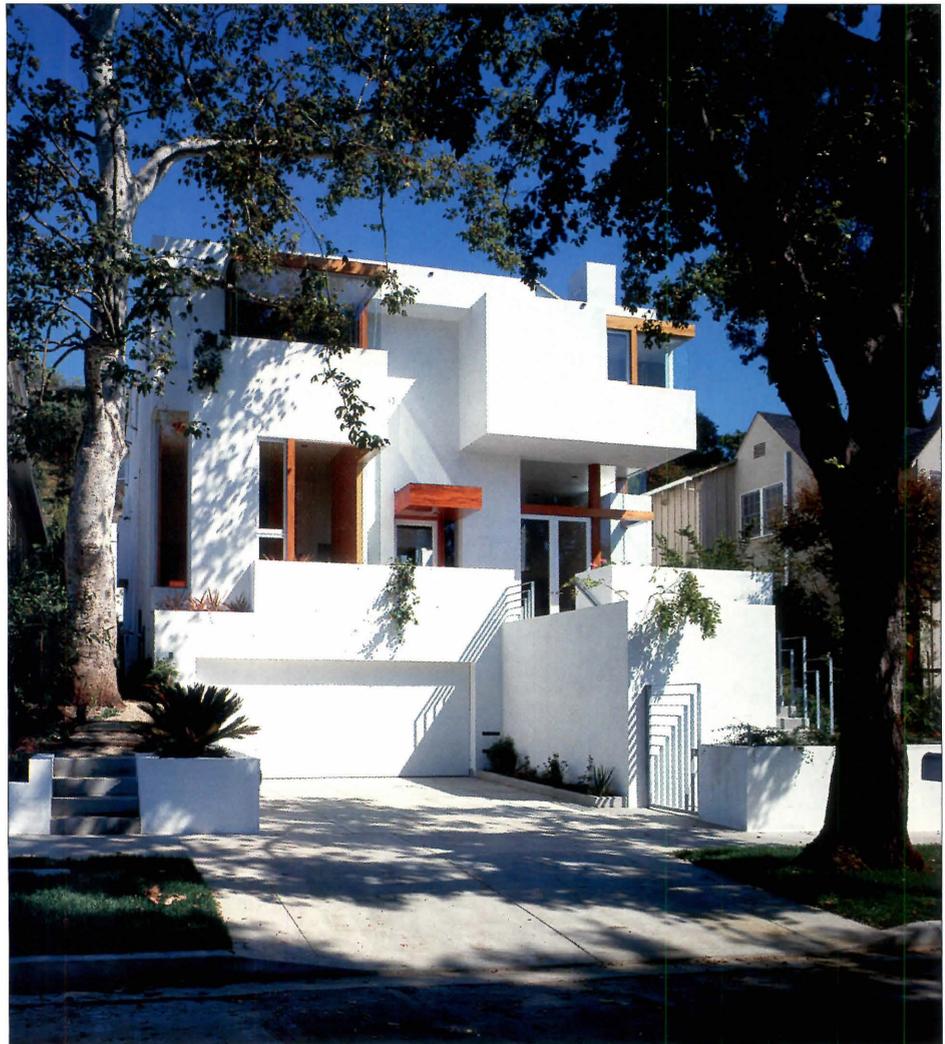
Privacy and sociability represent still more opposing forces in Ehrlich’s quest for balance. “Fundamentally, I’m trying to create serene environments that nourish the soul,” he says. “They connect you with nature and give privacy but allow you to be in touch with the world.” His clients, many of whom work in the entertainment industry, share a need for tranquil, calming spaces that distance them from life’s hectic pace. But the L.A.-area communities in which Ehrlich builds—such as Venice, Santa Monica, and the Hollywood Hills—just don’t have large pieces of land available. So he, Schmidt, and their staff look within the house to carve out oases of privacy and peace.

Such was the case with the Webster Residence in Venice, a 3,500-square-foot house on a 3,600-square-foot lot closely flanked by other homes. The architects cut a courtyard into the middle of the first floor, where it can be seen and accessed from almost every room in the house. In addition to this completely private, lushly landscaped space, the clients have a more social option, a front patio that opens directly onto the street.

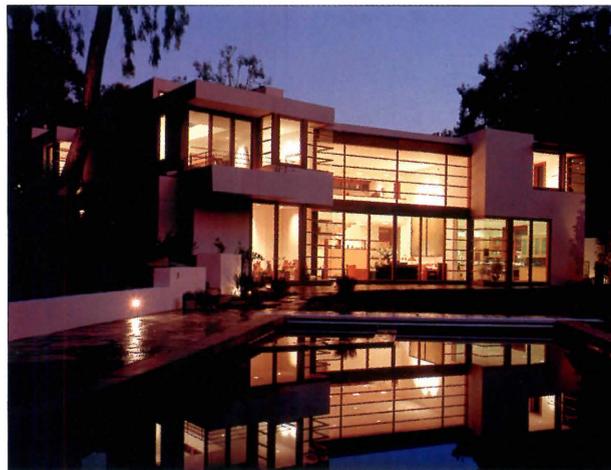
quick-change artistry

Like many Steven Ehrlich Architects projects, the Webster Residence can convert quickly from an indoor to an outdoor oriented space. The glass garage doors that separate the indoor rooms from the patio and courtyard roll up, transforming the house into one big breezeway. The doors are a popular spec in the firm’s residential studio, as are glass pivot doors that nearly disappear when open. Ehrlich’s house takes the concept of metamorphosis even further: Brightly colored sailcloth awnings will hang along its steel exoskeleton, enabling him to engineer dozens of different scenarios with the pull of a cord.

In fact, the notion of change and adaptability applies not only to the firm’s built work but to its basic ethos as well. Even its office building has



Grey Crawford



Tom Bonner

The firm’s houses occupy all kinds of sites, but they always interact with the surrounding community. The Gold-Friedman House in Santa Monica (1991) relates to the street through balconies, protruding volumes, and a path to the sidewalk.

Ehrlich and Schmidt try to preserve existing trees as a way of balancing a site’s natural and built elements. At the Brentwood, Calif., Schulman Residence (1992), old sycamore and coral trees gently graze the concrete and stucco walls.



Another link in the Neutra connection: Ehrlich's first built project in Los Angeles, a 1981 art studio, adjoins a Neutra-designed house. The firm now counts several art studios in its portfolio.

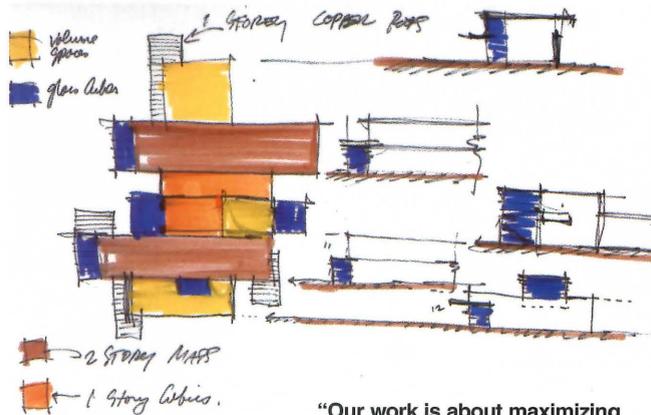
Tim Street-Porter

“fundamentally, i’m trying to create serene environments that nourish the soul.”—steven ehrlich, faia

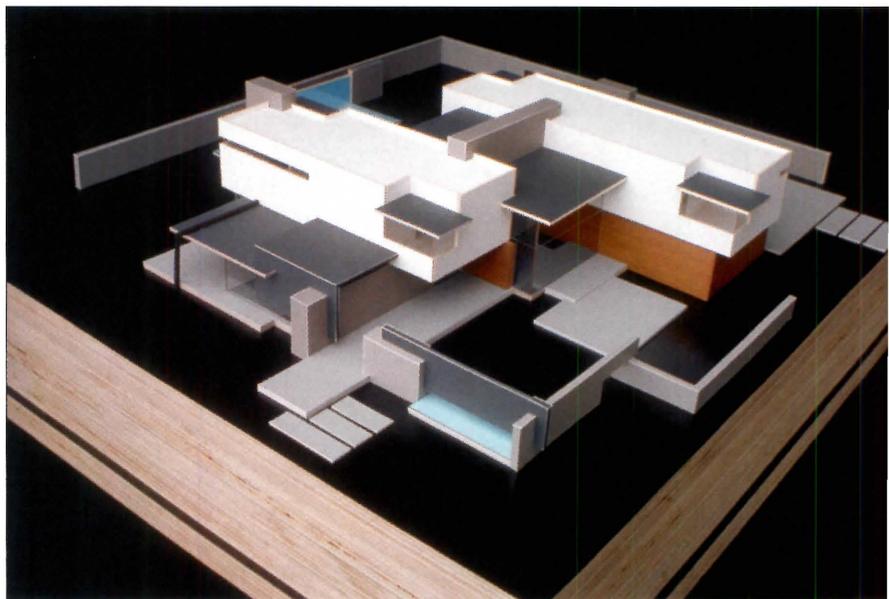


Multi-unit housing has captured Ehrlich's interest. The firm completed work on four attached town houses, the Venice Beach Lofts, in 2002, and hopes to begin designing larger multifamily projects soon.

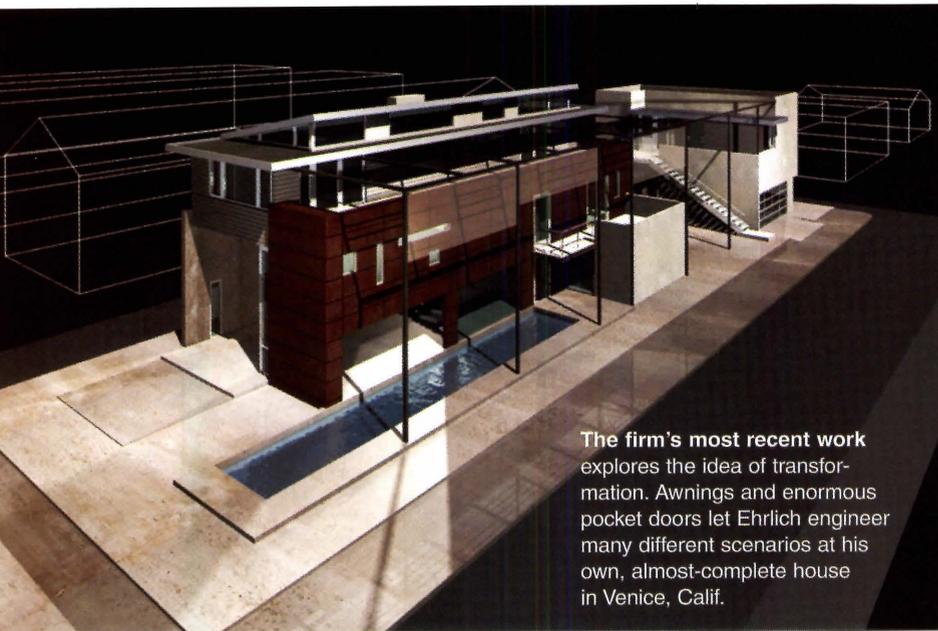
Tim Brown



"Our work is about maximizing the potential of the site," Ehrlich says. He and Schmidt placed this under-construction Palo Alto, Calif., house in the center of its lot to give it four separate yards, rather than a conventional front and back yard.

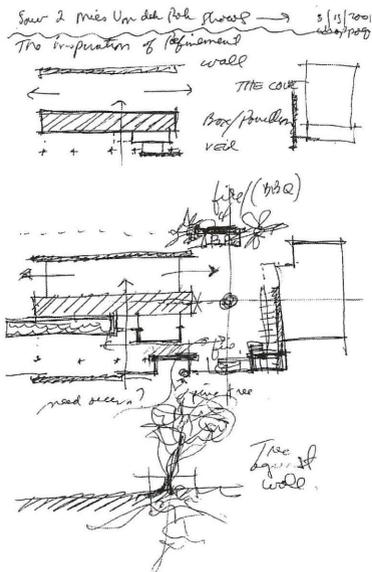


Steven Ehrlich Architects

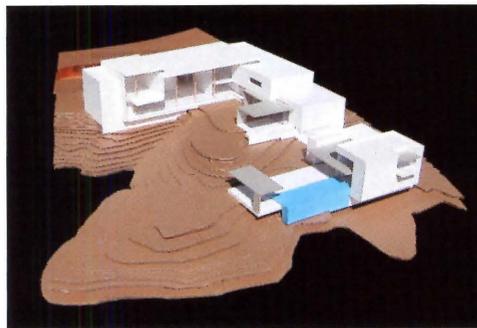


The firm's most recent work explores the idea of transformation. Awnings and enormous pocket doors let Ehrlich engineer many different scenarios at his own, almost-complete house in Venice, Calif.

Craig Shimihara



“doing different types of work gives me the confidence not to have a predetermined approach.”—steven ehrlich, faia



Steven Ehrlich Architects



Tom Bonner

Increasingly far-flung commissions are starting to come Ehrlich and Schmidt's way. The Bayou Residence in Houston (above right) meanders down its sloping site. The roof of a residence in Dubai (right) forms a crescent, a potent Arabic cultural symbol.

undergone remarkable mutations, beginning with its first life in 1917 as a dance hall. “Fatty Arbuckle used to do the swing here,” Ehrlich says. By the time he and partners Schmidt, Cecily Young, AIA, and Thomas Zahlten, AIA, bought the building four years ago, it was a defunct mortuary. The firm renovated the space for the indoor-outdoor connection that’s so important to its work, using those same glass garage doors and a central skylight to bring in light and air. Employees eat lunch outside on a wooden deck strewn with cafe tables and shaded by an old rubber tree. As in Ehrlich’s house, the office building’s new skin is lifted slightly away from the load-bearing walls for passive cooling.

While most of Ehrlich’s work is concentrated in Southern California, he’s proven his ability to succeed in diverse climates and site conditions. “We’re spoiled here in L.A.,” admits Schmidt, referring to the outdoor living possibilities presented by the area’s coastal climate. He and Ehrlich are designing a 35,000-square-foot house in Dubai that blends references to Arabic culture with Western influences and, more practically, shields residents from the oppressive desert heat. They’re also working on a house for two art collectors in Houston that subtly salutes the sculptures of Donald Judd through a series of limestone pillars.

And the firm’s openness to new ideas shows in its recent efforts to win commissions for project types it’s never done before. In 2000 it won an international invited competition to design a 300,000-square-foot biotech research lab in Cambridge, Mass., which is currently nearing completion. Ehrlich hopes to take on more multi-family housing work, too. He, Zahlten, and senior designer George Elian have drawn up a sophisticated prototype for a 91-unit apartment complex that combines Modern design with a pedestrian-friendly site plan.

Schools, libraries, and performing arts centers are just a few of the other project types in which the firm specializes. Many of these efforts have won local or national design prizes, and Steven Ehrlich Architects itself was recently named the AIA California Council’s 2003 firm of the year. For those who wonder how a relatively small practice could excel at larger-scale work and still turn out consistently exquisite houses, Ehrlich has an answer ready. “Each building type informs the next,” he says. “Doing different types of work gives me the confidence not to have a predetermined approach.” **ra**

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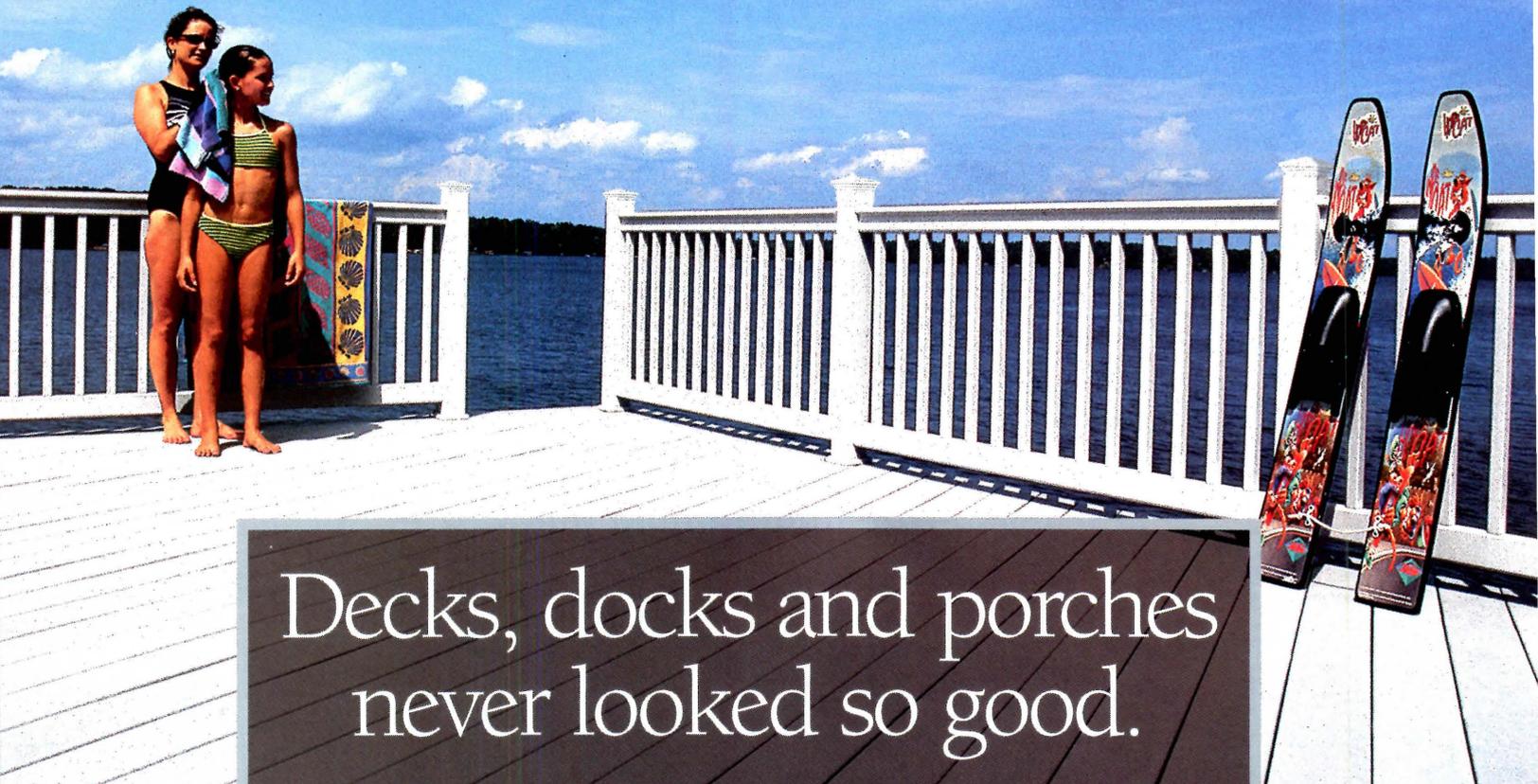
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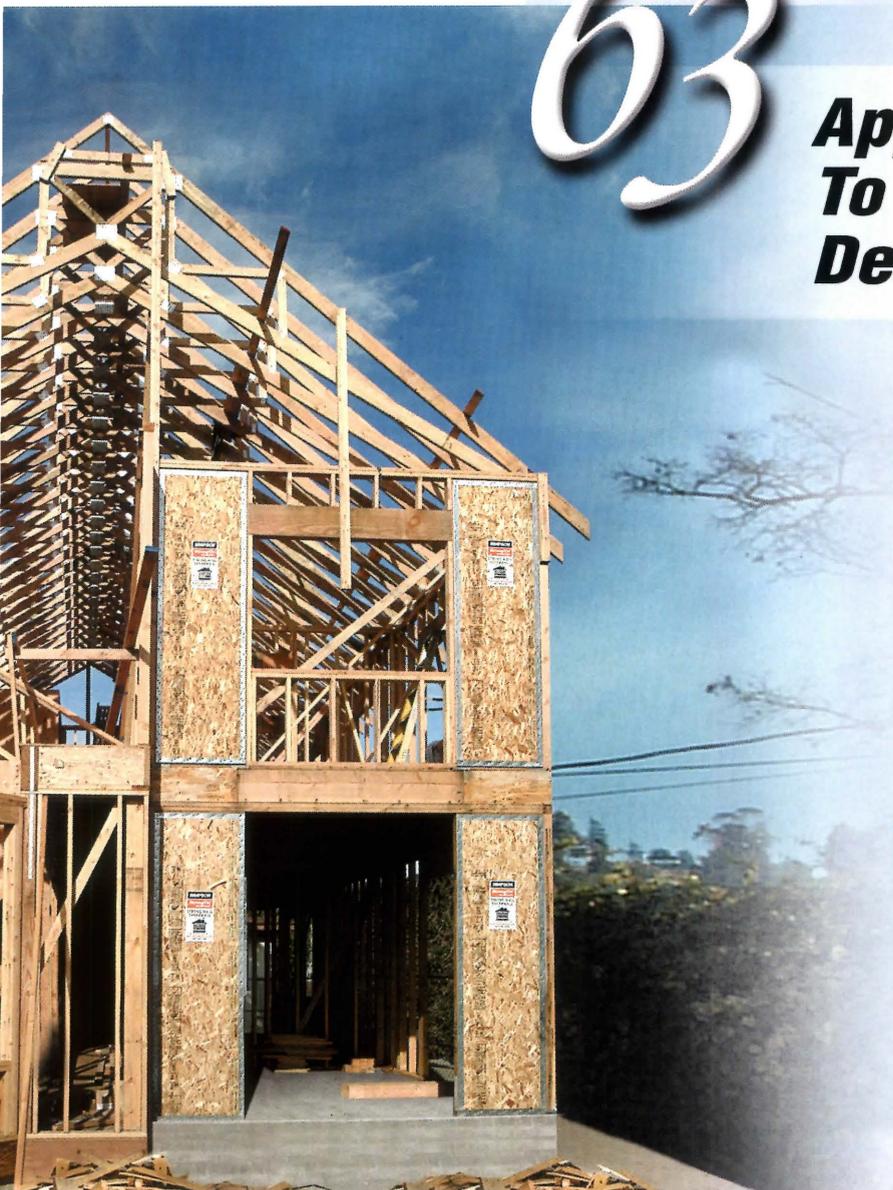
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hall of fame / sarah susanka

a minneapolis architect wrote a book about houses—
and made every residential architect's job a little easier.

by s. claire conroy



John Noltner

sarah susanka
susanka studios

a line of acolytes snakes through the room and spills into a corridor of the Minneapolis

Design Center. Clutching copies of *The Not So Big House* to their chests, the fans are waiting to meet its author. Some have brought the boxed set, including *Creating the Not So Big House* and *Not So Big Solutions for Your Home*, for Sarah Susanka's signature. They're a little timorous awaiting their turn, until they reach her table and encounter her warm greeting.

Then they start their barrage of questions: "How do I make my stair hall feel more welcoming and human in scale?" "Do you still design houses? I'd like to talk to you about a project." "I'm designing a house, and it's already way too big, can you help?" With each, Susanka, AIA, is patient, gracious, helpful. She doesn't disappoint her admirers; she's as approachable and accessible in person as she is in prose.

force for change

She's back in her old hometown, where she made architecture and then made architectural history, appearing at a show devoted to the influence of her *Not So Big House* opus. She's also back to organize her house, the original Not So Big House, which she's just sold. She's moving on, ending this chapter of her career. Almost nothing about her life remains unchanged. She wrote a blockbuster bestseller in a genre that doesn't have bestsellers; she divorced Jim Larson, the architect with whom she designed

and built her Not So Big House; she quit the firm she co-founded 20 years ago; she moved to Raleigh, N.C.; she remarried; and she had breast cancer.

But Susanka is pragmatically zen about all of it. "At one point, when I was feeling overwhelmed and crushed by it all, I asked a friend what I should do. She said, 'Why don't you just do what's in front of you.'" She did; she does. Indeed, she's a bundle of forward-motion energy, with another book in the works, a house or two on the boards, a couple of speaking engagements each month, and a Web site (notsobighouse.com) she funds herself. And then there's her drive to gather and market better-designed house plans for the masses.

Susanka is on a mission to demystify and improve residential architecture. And in teaching the lay public to understand and value well-designed houses, she's also helped them to appreciate the skills of residential architects. "We architects try to explain what we do in



A Blueprint for the Way We Really Live

THE NOT SO BIG HOUSE

Sarah Susanka with Kira Obolensky

Insights and Ideas for the New American Home

CREATING THE NOT SO BIG HOUSE

Sarah Susanka author of the best-selling *The Not So Big House*
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREY CRAWFORD

SARAH SUSANKA'S NOT SO BIG SOLUTION

FOR Your Home

AUTHOR OF THE BEST-SELLING
The Not So Big House and
Creating the Not So Big House

Together, Susanka's three Taunton Press books have sold more than a half-million copies, and they've changed the way the American public thinks about architecture and architects.

Charlie Brown

2003 leadership awards



Grey Crawford

Susanka's first book draws heavily on her own house in St. Paul, Minn., designed with former husband Jim Larson. The hilly site allowed a not-so-big front facade and four levels of view at the rear (opposite, far right).



Christian Korab

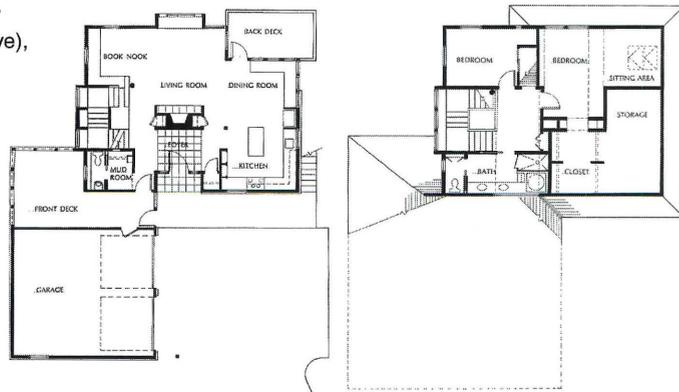
A hardworking floor plan (right) makes the most of square footage. Handcrafted items, like a stained glass panel by former partner Michaela Mahady (above), personalize the space.



Grey Crawford

"it would give wings to the profession if we weren't afraid to be derivative."

—sarah susanka, aia





Diagonal views and open circulation make Susanka's house live larger. The table in the kitchen nook (below left) expands for dinner parties.

Christian Korab



Intimate spaces within the open plan, including a reading nook, a TV niche (above right), and an attic getaway (above center), create character and comfort.

Christian Korab



Christian Korab



Jeff Krueger



Grey Crawford

words—and long words at that—but language is ill-suited to what we do,” she says. “I’m trying to pull away the layers of confusion. The real power comes from being able to reveal what it is you do. Our medium—space and light—is incredibly important, but until we can make it understood, it won’t be valued as it should be.”

Fortunately for residential architects, Susanka has a knack for explaining difficult principles, and for connecting some very important dots—all done in an engaging personal style. “She taught me a lot about bringing one’s ideas to the public,” says Dale Mulfinger, co-founder of her former firm, Mulfinger, Susanka, Mahady & Partners (renamed SALA Architects after her departure). “Sarah always waltzed into the office as a breath of fresh air, smiling and optimistic. She was fair, open, and engaging—and a natural leader.”

not so big notions

It was another MSMP colleague at the time who gave her the kernel for *The Not So Big House*. Robert Gerloff, now out on his own, wrote an article for *Architecture Minnesota* magazine called “Bigger Isn’t (Necessarily) Better,” in which he argued for smaller, more artfully detailed houses. It became a guiding principle for the firm. When Susanka began talking with Taunton Press about writing a book (she’d been writing a regular column for its magazine *Fine Homebuilding* for some time), they suggested one about small houses. “I wasn’t into small houses, but I was into writing

a book,” she recalls. “I knew Robert’s was the nugget I wanted to pursue.”

The other nugget she picked up from an article in *IONS Review*. It concerned sociologist Paul H. Ray’s research into a group he called “Cultural Creatives.” The subculture numbers 50 million in the United States, he claimed in his later book on the subject, “who care deeply about ecology and saving the planet, about relationships, peace, social justice, and about self-actualization, spirituality, and self-expression.” Says Susanka, “One thing he mentioned was that they were looking for a better-designed house. I named my book something that allowed the market to see itself in the title.”

That explains some of the inspiration for the book, but there was a dollop of frustration, too, motivating its author. “I got very sick of sitting on the phone, explaining to clients how to get the most for their money in a custom house,” she says. “I thought there were many people across the country who might benefit from that information.”

not so fast

Susanka has always maintained that *The Not So Big House* was not about small or inexpensive houses. It’s about how to make houses more comfortable and livable. Presuming a fixed budget, the best way to do that, she asserts, is to eliminate wasted space and spend the savings on better-quality materials and detail work. The book, and its successors, is an antidote to McMansion indigestion—

2003 leadership awards

the hollow, empty feeling people get when they blow all their money on bloated, characterless houses. “She was the first one to put into words that we should design small to quality, rather than big Sheetrock containers,” says Wynne Yelland, of Minneapolis-based Locus Architecture, which specializes in designing and building affordable custom houses. “But the book has lots of not-so-big expensive houses.”

Others claim Susanka was not the first to argue for better-designed houses or to explain the importance of intimate, human-scaled spaces within the home. And she would agree: “I’ve always described myself as a child brought up on Christopher Alexander’s *A Pattern Language*. It’s a fundamental text—something we can grow from. It’s a great beginning. But it would give wings to the profession if we weren’t afraid to be derivative.”

Her fans concur. A quote from a reader review on Amazon.com: “These are by far the best books I have seen on this topic ... Susanka is a genius, and like any good genius, she is merely stating the obvious.”

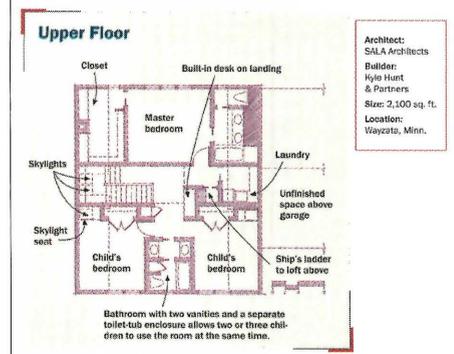
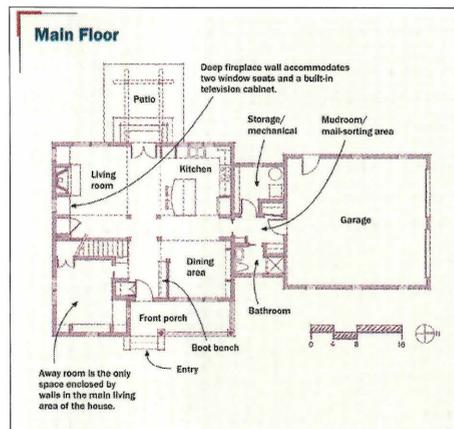
Perhaps. But there’s nothing “mere” about it. “The first book verbalized even more than I understood,” says Susanka. “I had the sense when we were done with the process that it was going to be a big deal.” And it was, because the book elucidated not just the aesthetic and functional benefits of a properly designed house, but also the emotional gratification that comes with it.

For many of her readers, grasping that connection had the power of revelation. (Just wait until they read her forthcoming book, *House Therapy*.) For architects, it ups the ante on what it means to design someone’s house. It’s not simply an aesthetic and programmatic exercise. “What most people are afraid of is that the architect will force something down their throat,” she says. “But you have to understand that you are their servant. You have to enter into it with humility. The only thing you’re doing is making a wonderful place for people to live.”

Thanks to Sarah Susanka, a half-million more people understand that’s no small accomplishment. **ra**



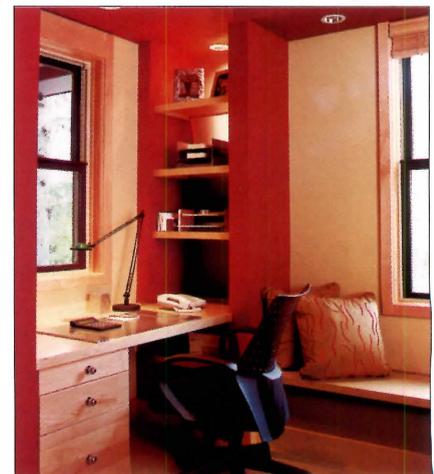
SALA Architects



The Back to Basics house designed by SALA as a *Life* magazine Dream House embodied the firm's less-is-more philosophy.



Grey Crawford



Grey Crawford

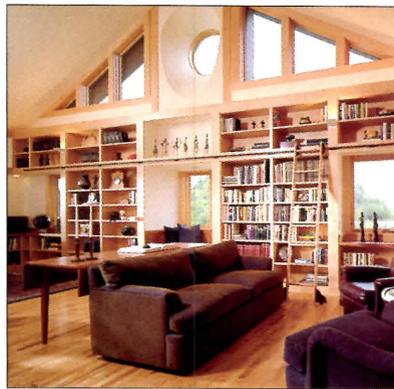


Christian Korab



Christian Korab

Level changes and ceiling soffits (left and above) enliven a budget-conscious house Susanka designed for a Realtor couple.



Karen Melvin

A swankier budget buys custom windows and built-ins, which keep a large room warm and inviting.

“we architects try to explain what we do in words ... but language is ill-suited to what we do.”—sarah susanka, aia

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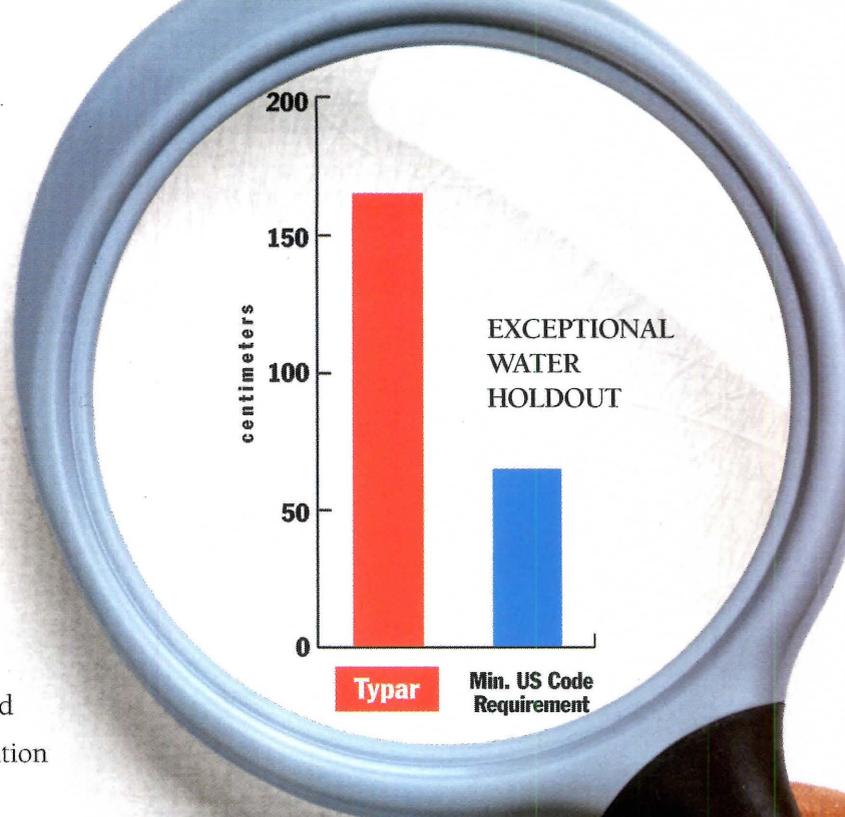
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the nebraska native aims to redirect
the midwest mainstream.

by cheryl weber



randy brown
randy brown architects

Schlaebitz.com

In retrospect, it's not hard to see why architect Randy Brown, AIA, chose a 1970s Montessori school as his first studio-cum-living quarters. The 40-by-40-foot passive-solar structure, with its tall, south-facing windows and concrete floors, was the perfect canvas on which to experiment with movable sunshades, tilted planes, exposed joists and studs, and salvaged light fixtures. Over a period of two years in the mid-1990s, he and his wife, Kim, camped out there. They plotted a collage of flexible live/work spaces, which they built themselves.

Three years ago, the firm and the family outgrew the old school. But its design set a course for the work Brown is known for: adventurous buildings that catch visitors off-guard, but that are unwavering in their respect for the environment, the site, and the diverse needs of their occupants.

Brown practices architecture on his home turf in Omaha, Neb., a sprawling telecommunications capital far removed from its roots in farms and ranches. But the architect still looks for inspiration in Nebraska's rural life—the bold forms of barns, the silos with their rusted joints, and the material textures of corrugated metal and wood on out-buildings. Perhaps it was the pull of the prairie that drew Brown back home after he finished graduate school at UCLA. But he had other reasons for returning, too. "I could have lived in Los Angeles and been one of hundreds of architects who wanted to do Modern architecture," Brown says. "But I knew if I went back to Nebraska I'd be maybe one of two architects in the Midwest who want to push

Modern architecture. I thought it was a great opportunity to see what I could do to bring not just Modern architecture, but design, to the Midwest."

Brown has been sketching houses since he was three years old and living in "a typical suburban house." Even in high school he was most interested in exploring buildings with clean lines and strong volumes. But it was Los Angeles' bright lights that opened his eyes to diversity and expressionist forms of architecture. "UCLA had the who's who of practicing Modern architects coming through to teach studios—Daniel Libeskind, Frank Gehry," Brown says. "In the early 1990s, the big thing was the studio class Richard Meier taught while working on the Getty." He learned the language of architecture from other well-known professors, too, such as Frank Israel, Julie Eizenberg, and Charles Jencks. And touring the houses of Modernist masters like Richard Neutra and R.M. Schindler was, he says, "a life-changing event."

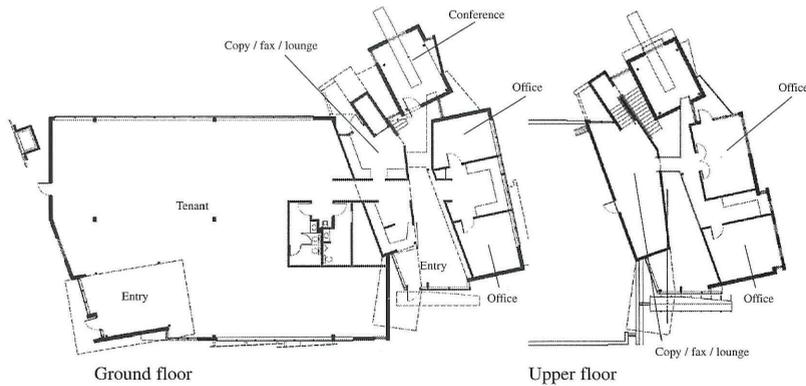
After school, Omaha beckoned. Serendipitous-



The entrance to Brown's office building is illuminated by a glass roof and glazed walls at either end of the building. The "hammerhead" element continues inside as a metal-skinned partition. Facing it is a canted framework of polycarbonate panels.

All photos by Farshid Assassi, except where noted

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Brown designed his office (above) as an antidote to the featureless strip malls and boxlike buildings that characterize suburbia. The skylit spine (right) leads past offices to a rear conference room on the first floor. Spaces bleed into each other vertically and horizontally.



“I’m drawn to new ways of working, new ways of living, new ways of reducing energy costs—always trying to improve on what we’ve done in the past.”—randy brown, aia



At Briar Hills Apartments, Brown composed simple facades using plain materials and fresh, low-cost details. The apartments rent for about \$100 less than similar units in the area.

ly, it was the source of two commissions he couldn't turn down: a design for his father's law office, and a gift store his mother was opening. If that scenario seemed like a safe way to test his skills, it also presented Brown with a large dose of reality. "My parents both wanted me to design these projects in a one-month period," he says. "I did the designs while still living in L.A. and coordinated all the construction." The success of those commissions gave Brown enough momentum to launch his own practice in Omaha in 1993.

live and learn

With its gleaming metal-clad angles and strange asymmetries, Brown's current office building is like nothing Omaha has seen before. He says he had in mind a building that doesn't become any one form, but rather grows out of the irregular geometries of the ravine and creek that run behind it. The southern end of the building twists away from the main mass, and a trapezoid "hammerhead," as the architect calls it, rises out of it. The trapezoid is split east to west with a jagged gash that forms a two-story atrium inside, and windows in the crevices bring in views of the creek. As in every Brown building, the emphasis was on green methods and materials: skylights for passive solar gain, recycled wood floors and walls, and recycled steel.

Inhabiting the space are five employees—three project architects, an interior designer, and a marketing person. Although they work with the latest computer technology, in recent years they've moved almost exclusively to design/build to satisfy Brown's penchant for hands-on design. The project architects collect bids from subs, schedule construction, and watch the job being built. Any given project may find the architects rolling up their sleeves to grade the site and nail up drywall. "We're not afraid to get our hands dirty," Brown says.

The design/build model also attracts young talent. A part-time professor at the University of Nebraska, Brown selects students from colleges all over the Midwest to participate in summer workshops. Two years ago, six of them converged on Brown's own landscape, part of a 1950s farmhouse. They designed and built site-specific observation decks, play structures for Brown's children, and a retaining wall made from recycled limestone stacked in wire cages. "What was drawn in the studio quickly became obsolete, once all of the realities of building and a better understanding of



The Waterford master-planned community features a Modernist clubhouse and pool, currently under construction. Other elements of the plan include bike trails and Main Street-type shops with living space above.

the site were discovered," Brown wrote about the project. "The instruments to design with became shovels, rakes, chain saws, Skil saws, wire cutters, screw guns, radial-arm saws, and sledgehammers."

Happy to be the guinea pig, Brown is perpetually remodeling his house. "A lot of times we invent projects to challenge ourselves," he says. "If we're asking clients to make a leap from where they are, we need to take bigger risks all the time."

creating diversity

For Brown, Modernist design is the most invigorating form of architectural expression there is. And despite his passion for bringing aesthetic diversity to the city and suburbs, he's most intrigued by Modern design as a philosophy and a process. Brown is drawn to the minimalism of buildings having as few parts as possible, trying to create the perfect resolution so that, in the end, everything is tied together and to the land. And he's drawn to the search for the new. "New ways of working, new ways of living, new ways of reducing energy costs—always trying to improve on what we've done in the past," he says.

It hasn't been easy being a reformer. Brown has designed hundreds of remodels and additions for residential and commercial buildings, many of whose renovated interiors are the aesthetic opposite of their staid facades. Despite the firm's more than 60 regional and national design awards, it's hard to find clients who want to do a Modern

2003 leadership awards

home from the ground up. "I'm worried that I've found all the clients in the Midwest," he says.

Middle America is more willing, it seems, to risk doing something different behind closed doors. Part of the problem, too, is that Omaha is a city of subdivisions. No longer a neighborly little town, it's not a sophisticated urban setting, either, the architect has noted. Stringent design standards specify things like 6:12-pitch roofs and shake shingles that cater to traditional builder homes. Currently, Brown's work is 60 percent commercial, 40 percent residential, but his goal is an even split between the two.

into the future

Not that he's sitting around waiting for the perfect clients to come knocking. Brown has become a developer, working to initiate ideas and make them happen. By teaming up with a real estate development office and a law firm—both share space in his building—the architect is helping to create projects for long-term leasing. Three commercial projects are under way, and the group plans to build subdivisions, apartment buildings, and mixed-use developments.

One such project is Waterford, a 440-acre parcel of former farmland on the edge of Omaha. The master plan includes a network of bike trails leading to a central lake, plus a Main Street concept with rows of trees, wide sidewalks, and street-level shops with offices and housing above. Brown fought for these new-town elements—and a Modernist clubhouse—and won, but lost out on his proposal for high density. "I realized I won't achieve everything in just one project," he says, "but clearly we've started the battle for bringing livable communities to the Midwest."

With his first decade of practice behind him, Brown is focusing on the big picture. He's working to create projects in which he can control the details at a higher and higher level, projects so well resolved that everything harmonizes, down to furnishings, lighting, landscape, even signage and letterhead. (Brown has a minor in graphic design.) "It's this total work of art that we're going for now," he says. "We're making everything relate to the big picture, a continuous message projecting to the world." Judging by his well-laid plans, he will likely succeed. **ra**

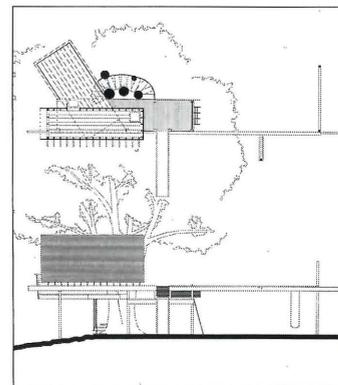
Cheryl Weber is a contributing writer in Severna Park, Md.



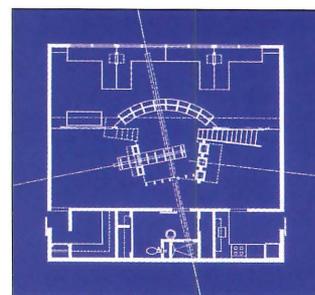
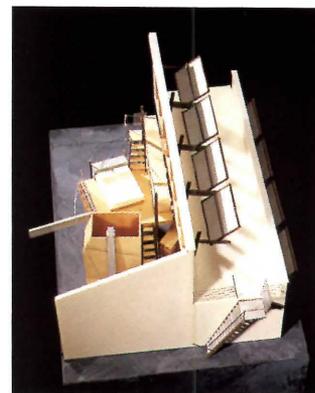
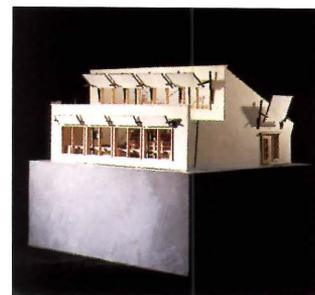
The conventional exterior of this house belies its spare, open interior. In the living room, a floating ceiling, lit from above, pulls the eye to a glass wall and the garden beyond. It also helps conceal a beam that originally divided the space into two rooms.



Randy Brown



Students at one of Brown's annual summer workshops designed and built site-specific play and outdoor structures—such as this modern take on the tree house—at his rural home.



Brown's first office, a former Montessori school, doubled as his residence. The center of the building contains a two-story structure composed of cabinets, closets, and bookcases. It encloses a conference and dining table below and a sleeping loft above.

“clearly we’ve started the battle for bringing livable communities to the midwest.”—randy brown, aia

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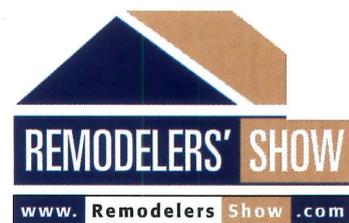
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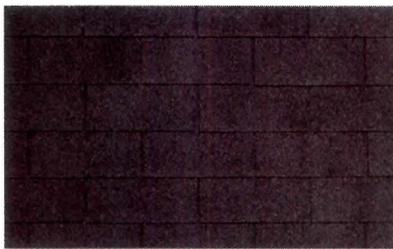


silent spring

Because the production of vinyl tiles releases dioxins into the atmosphere, Walsh steers clear of them. Instead, she uses ECOSurfaces rubber flooring. Made from a combination of recycled tires and post-industrial colored rubber, this resilient, slip-resistant material works well indoors and out. ECOSurfaces comes in 38 colors and three sizes: 18-by-18-inch and 36-by-36-inch tiles, and 4-by-4-foot rolls. Dodge-Regupol, 717.295.3400; www.regupol.com.

shingle-minded

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Greg Staley

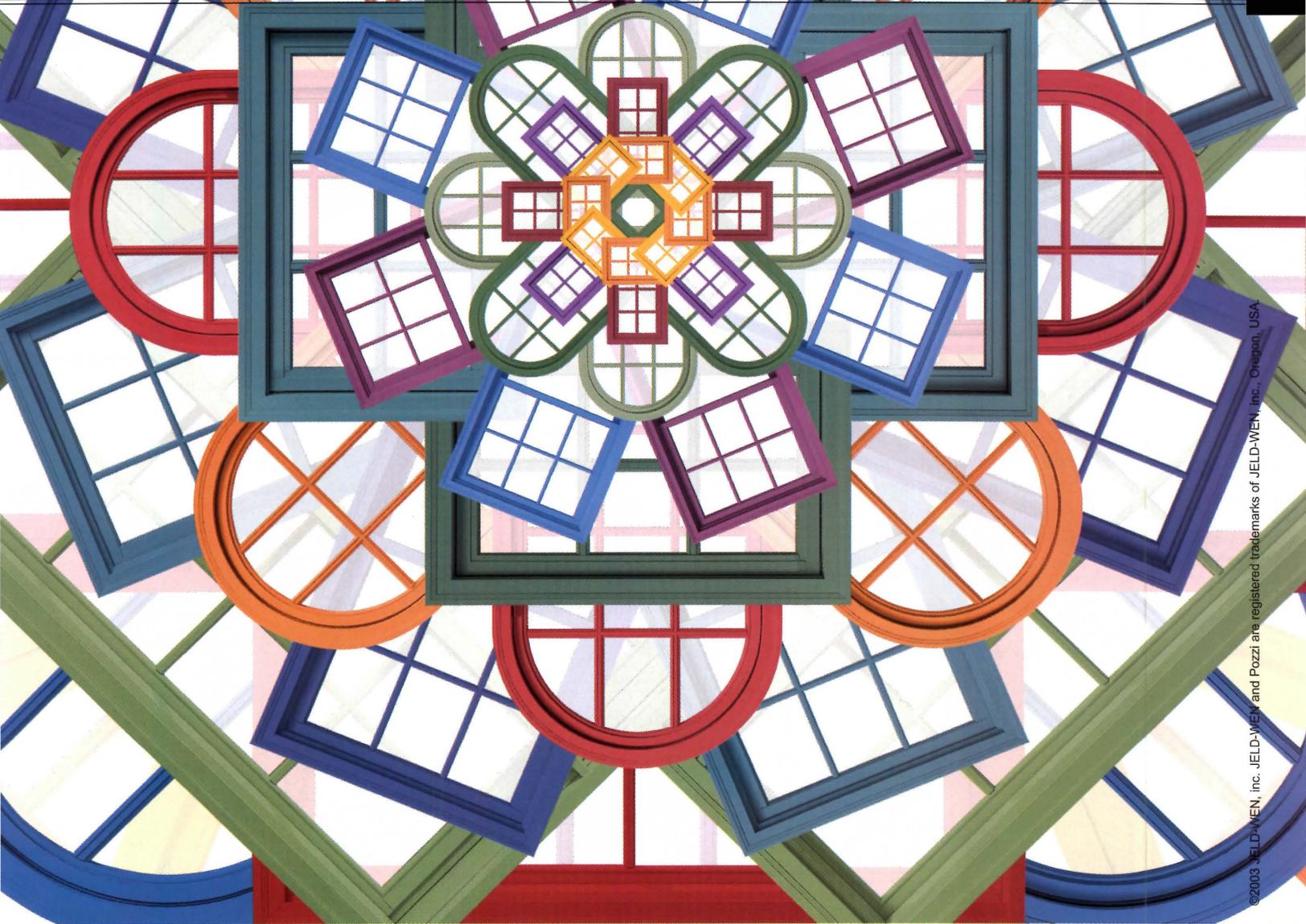
go cart

In Walsh’s hands, the freestanding Värde kitchen cart metamorphoses into a vanity-topped base sink that offers “a unique solution on a budget,” she says. The clear-lacquered solid birch unit features two legs with casters and two legs with adjustable feet, a stainless steel shelf, bars that can be used for towels, and a solid birch butcher-block top. It measures 25⁵/₈ inches deep, 33¹/₈ inches high, and 19⁵/₈ inches wide. Ikea; www.ikea.com.

—nigel f. maynard



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—nigel f. maynard



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casa luis barragán, mexico city, 1947

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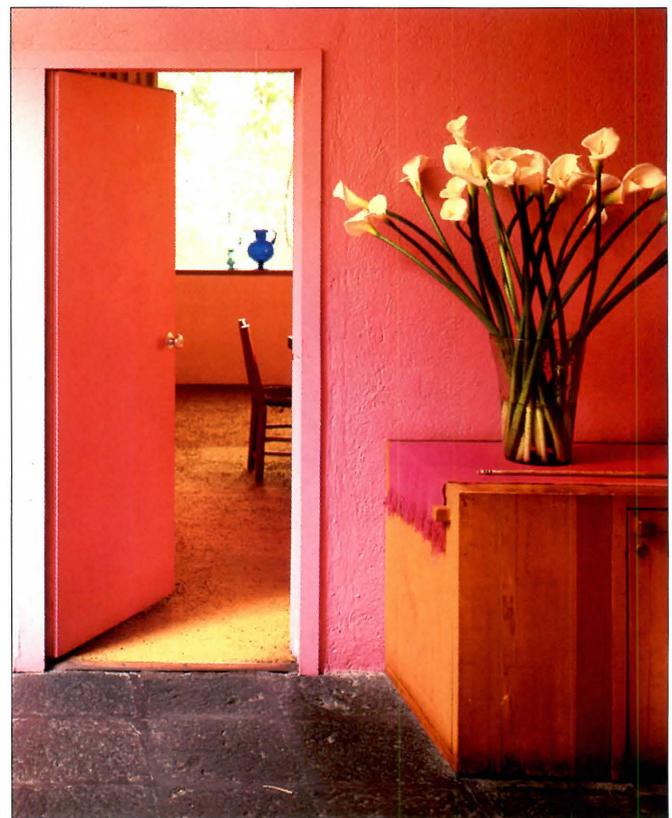
“serenity is the great and true antidote against anguish and fear ... it is the architect’s duty to make of it a permanent guest in the home, no matter how sumptuous or how humble.”

—luis barragán

Luis Barragán believed that a house should serve as a refuge from the outside world, and nowhere is that view expressed more eloquently than in the house he designed for himself in Mexico City. Built in 1947, as Barragán was emerging from his International Style period, the house weaves together Modern minimalism, local architectural influences, and memories of the rural ranch where the self-taught architect grew up.

Its simple facade conceals a private world of light, shadow, and color, intended to evoke an emotional response and foster a feeling of serenity. Barragán balanced the bright hues for which he is known with whitewashed walls and dark wood accents. Functional sculptures such as floating staircases and partial room dividers create a sense of mystery and intrigue. And meticulously planned views out to the garden and sky connect the house with its natural environment.

Barragán died in 1988, but his vision of home as a place for introspection and meditation lives on in the work of admirers like Ricardo Legorreta, Steven Holl, and Tadao Ando. His house has been preserved as a museum; to make an appointment for a tour, call 011.52.55.55.15.4908.—*meghan drueding*



Tim Street-Porter