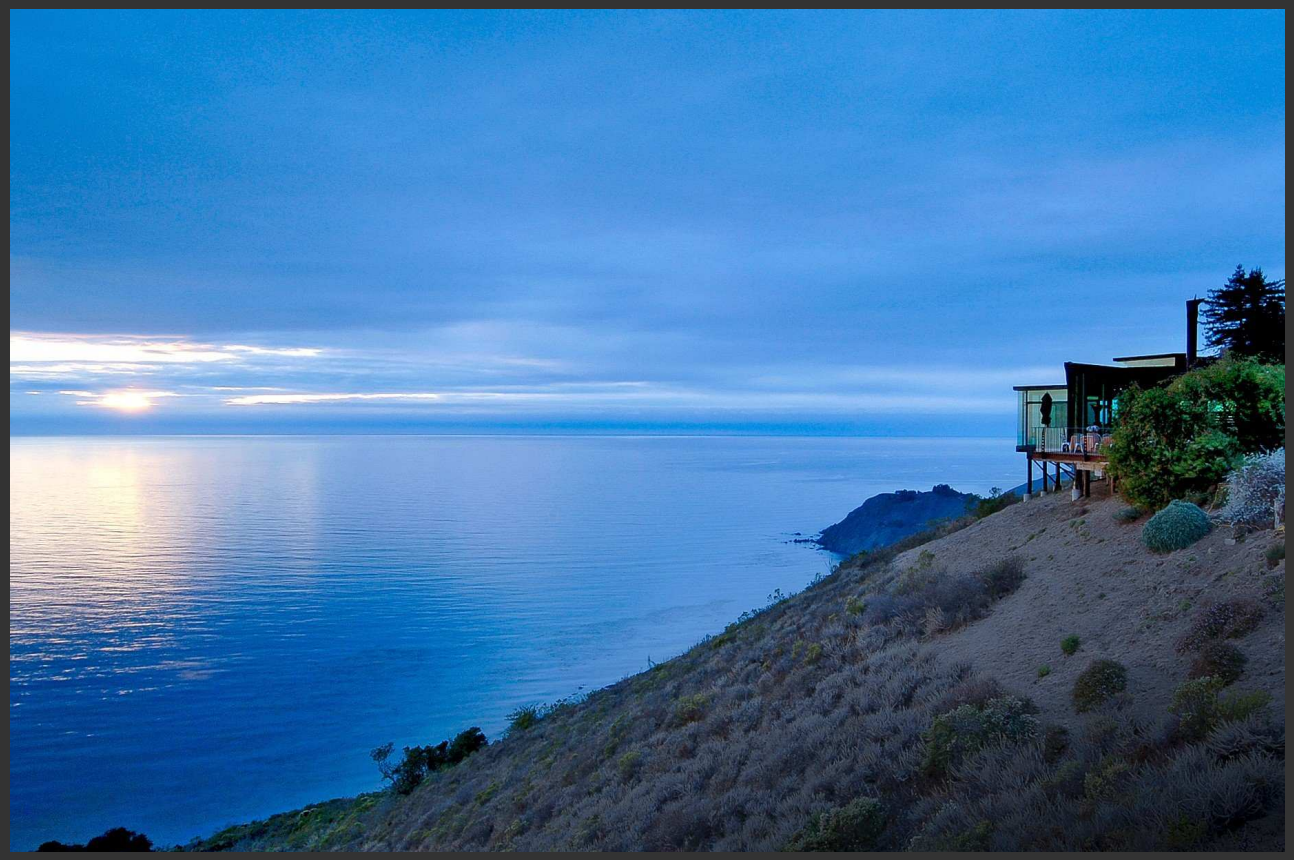
The Hidden Architecture of Big Sur

Text by Lisa Crawford Watson
Photography By Doug Steakley

Introduction By Clint Eastwood



Above:
Sierra Mar (Scharfenberger House)
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Below:
Sierra Mar Restaurant
at Post Ranch Inn
Mickey Muennig, Architect

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Front Cover: Katz House, Mickey Muennig, Architect

"The mother art is architecture.

Without an architecture of our own, we have no soul of our own civilization."

Frank Lloyd Wright

Prologue

People come from all over the world to witness the coastal splendor, feel the spirit, hear the history of Big Sur. The name, itself, sounds grand and has come to mean as much. Rooted in the Spanish phrase, “el sur grande,” which means “the big south,” the coastal region to the south of Carmel remains as rugged and wild, as magnificent in its raw beauty today as it was to those early settlers who never tried to tame it.

Most will admit that Big Sur is less a destination and more a state of mind. What travelers discover as they make their way down the coast is that the secret of getting to Big Sur is knowing you are already there. Big Sur is a conceptual place, a Brigadoon, inhabited by clans united by legend, gathered in homes hidden within the coastal terrain.

“Big Sur is the drive down the California coast from Point Lobos to Nepenthe,” said the late Cole Weston, photographer and son of photography pioneer Edward Weston, and lifelong resident of Big Sur. “Thus, Highway One, with its twin bridges and vistas, turns and grades, is an integral part of today’s Big Sur experience.”

Many people believe the Big Sur region extends another 60 miles to the south, all the way to San Simeon, some 240 miles north of Los Angeles. Others credit only the valley of the Big Sur River. Some assume the place is a national park, a state park or an amusement park. While there are state parks within Big Sur, and there is plenty of opportunity for amusement, Big Sur is a region without boundaries or borders, both physical and psychological.

Highway One, the scar upon the Santa Lucia Mountains, which once rolled down to the sea, began as a wagon road in 1927, running from Monterey to Bixby Creek. It was replaced with a more substantial roadway in 1937, after 15 years of construction and following California voter approval on a 1919 ballot. Man’s intrusion had reduced a three-day trek to one hour.

The scenic beauty of the region, with its wildflower meadows spreading like pointillism across the foothills, its coastal contrasts of terrain as treacherous as it is tremendous is, in the words of landscape painter Frances McComas, “the greatest meeting of land and water in the world.”

Ansel Adams, Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry Miller are alternately credited with calling it the “greatest meeting of land, sea and sky in the world.” Miller only lived in Big Sur for 15 years, but his mark is indelible, and his legendary experiences immortalized in his 1957 book, “Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch,” as well as his eponymous library on the eastern slope of the highway.

Hollywood discovered Big Sur as an early backdrop for dramatic scenes, such as Deep Valley in 1947, From Here to Eternity in 1953, The Sandpiper, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, in 1965, Rex Harrison’s Doctor Doolittle in 1967, Clint Eastwood’s Play Misty for Me in 1971, and Escape to Witch Mountain in 1975. In 1992, the beach scenes for Basic Instinct, with Michael Douglas and Sharon Stone, were filmed at Big Sur’s Garrapata Beach.

Among the more legendary celebrity stories began in 1944, when actor Orson Welles bought a redwood log cabin, built by the Trotter brothers and intended to be his hideaway from Hollywood, with bride Rita Hayworth. But the marriage was brief, and the cabin was purchased by Bill and Lolly Fasset to create Nepenthe, a roadside café with which to secure the livelihoods of generations to come. The restaurant remains the family legacy and one of the most popular and scenic stops in Big Sur.

Big Sur is a willing host to those who visit, and a welcome haven to those who stay, as long as we respect who she is and what she represents.

Lisa Crawford Watson

Introduction

The first thing that strikes you, as you drive the Big Sur coast, is the seemingly impossible natural beauty, the ultimate meeting of land and sea. But if you train your eye or have one of the locals tell you where to look, you also will get to see some of the most intriguing, ingenious architecture in the world. These are homes and structures built with a dual intention: to compare to anything the most discriminating eyes have seen, yet at the same time, to be invisible - to exist under the premise of rarely being seen.

I have been enjoying the rugged perfection of Big Sur since the early 1970s when I bought my first piece of property there. Although I made my home in Carmel, I have always appreciated the care taken by those who crafted their homes in Big Sur.

Those who build in this vast wilderness are hearty souls. In this neck of the woods, property owners and architects many times must go through a web of permitting processes, approvals and a lot of unsolicited opinions. The actual building of these homes isn't easy, either, with no sprawling metropolis or four-lane highway to help get supplies in and out. But, the strong "stay it out." The reward is they get to inhabit and own some of the most conscientious, functional properties in the world.

"The Hidden Architecture of Big Sur" highlights some of the finest of these structures. Beautifully captured by one of our best photographers on the Central Coast, Douglas Steakley, and written by the talented Carmel-based author/journalist Lisa Crawford Watson, this book is sure to appeal to those who dream of being part of Big Sur and to those who are living the dream.

Clint Eastwood

View From Greyrock

LISITNG OF PROPERTIES

MICKEY MUENNIG

Muennig House
Casa Luna (Georis House)
Big Sur House
Post Ranch Inn
Hawthorne Gallery
Terra Mar (Scharfenberger House)
Wittbrodt House
Tuscan Farm House
Katz House

GEORGE BROOK-KOTHLOW

Staude House
Otter Cove (Stemler House)
Hamilton House

CARVER + SCHICKETANZ

Mary Ann Schicketanz
Treadwell House
Rob Carver
Taylor House
Dickstein-English House
Leslie House
Sarin House

DANIEL PIECHOTA

Division Knoll House
Greyrock

MARK MILLS

Widlbird (Owings House)
Vanderveen House

ERIK NIELSEN

Abalone Cove House

WILL SHAW

Pfeiffer Ridge

OTHER HOUSES

Timber Claim (Emile Norman House)

Casa Lauri (Anthony Crane House)

Foreword

This book is long overdue.

In 2005, three of us were commissioned to research, write the text and photograph some of the most stunning properties discreetly tucked away along the Big Sur coast. We spent almost a year contacting and interviewing architects, property managers and builders while making arrangements to visit and document these remote and exceptional properties. We found a publisher who was excited about the project and was ready and willing to publish the book; we hired a graphic designer to lay out a sample chapter, and invited Clint Eastwood to write the introduction. It was then that we learned the person behind the book decided not to proceed with publication for reasons that remain unknown to us. We researched having it published on our own but were threatened with a lawsuit.

It has frustrated and saddened me that the effort we put into this project would remain forever buried in various computer files, so I decided to re-assemble the elements and self-publish the book in this format.

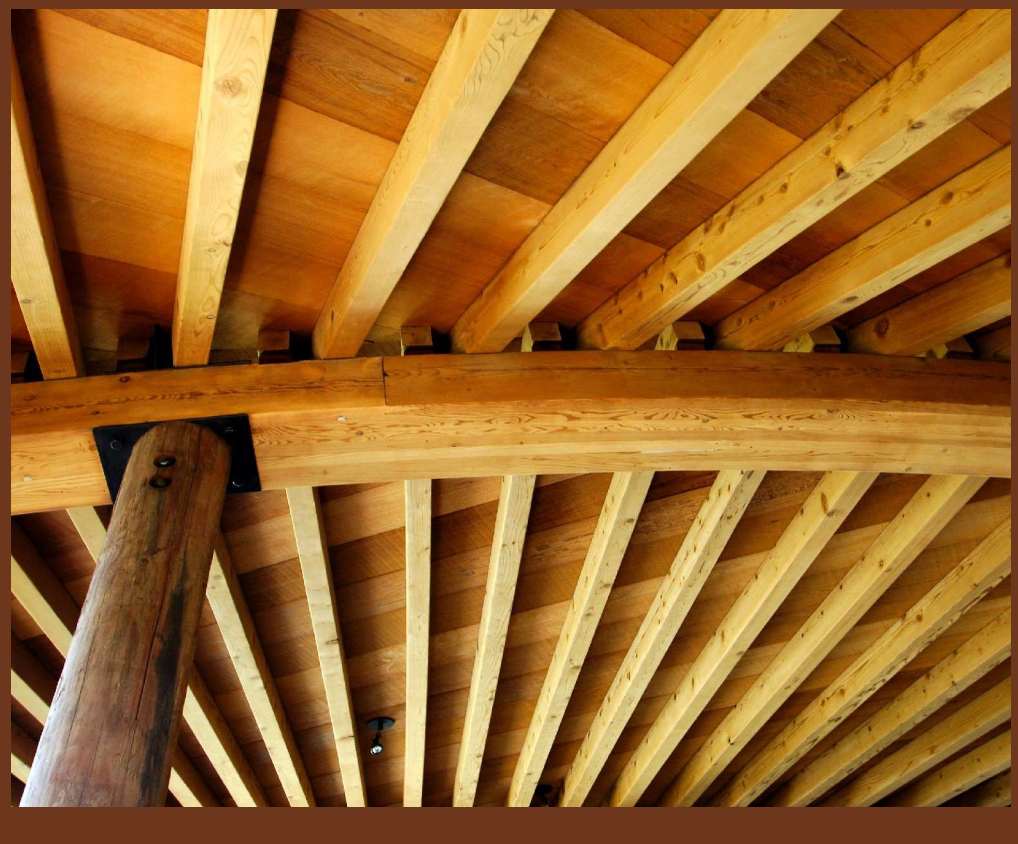
Many changes have transpired to homeowners and houses since our original visits. Several of the houses have been sold, and one has been extensively remodeled. Tony Staude, who was a gracious host to us, passed away shortly after I finished photographing his house, as did Emile Norman and Mark Mills a few years later. Mickey Muennig, an internationally acclaimed architect, has retired and is no longer designing in his unique and captivating style. In some respects, these photographs and text are already historic documents that captured those fleeting moments from just a few years ago.

Many residences quietly hidden in the rugged hills of Big Sur are on private roads and will never be accessible to locals or visitors, and we felt privileged to make them somewhat more visible and public. Several had never been photographed before, while others have appeared in major publications such as "Architectural Digest." Some of the homeowners understandably asked that we keep their location and names confidential, which explains the vague titles or simple captions.

Throughout the Twentieth Century, Big Sur attracted artists such as Robinson Jeffers, Henry Miller, Man Ray, and Jack Kerouac. Perhaps the draw for them was the beauty and ruggedness of the coastline and surrounding hills, which allowed for solace and isolation and provided an environment where they could pursue their artistic talents. But in addition to artists, Big Sur has an impact on many who visit and certainly on those who choose to live there. The very qualities that make it attractive also create a filter -- the isolation and quietness is not for everyone. However, those who seek it out seem to share a trait of confidence in their own taste, both in architecture and art. I soon became aware that every house I photographed was an expression of the owners' personal aesthetic--from large sculptures and paintings to details such as kitchen faucets, each house was unique and thoughtfully designed and decorated.

I sincerely hope you will enjoy this book as much as we enjoyed the numerous trips we made down the coast during the winter and spring of 2005-6 to explore, photograph and document the "Hidden Architecture of Big Sur."

Doug Steakley



Above:
Wittbrodt House

Right:
Katz House

"Architecture is much more than shelter; it bonds a continuous and worldwide mystery to its inhabitants."

--Mickey Muennig

Mickey Muennig strolls the narrow steel grate bridging the main house and its guest cottage, high above the Big Sur coast, his hand never touching the low glass panels standing between him and the ubiquitous blue ocean whose distance seems diminished by its presence.

Once he reaches the observation deck that is the roof of the guest house, he turns and looks out over the ocean.

Muennig's near reverent appreciation for the beauty of the natural landscape, and his commitment to design architecture that functions in harmony with that environment form the basis for his signature style.

"My interest in architectural design is based on my interest in the landscape," said the architect perhaps best known for structures that blend like a chameleon into the setting. "On site, I like to close off the outside world, open my mind and look around for anything that seems to stand out in terms of shape and texture. Then I select pieces of the site to relate the home to the setting. I like to design as if I've never done anything before, making each project unique."

Muennig says his design inspirations derive from living in Big Sur, an equally challenging and charming place to live in terms of terrain, climate and isolation. The Missouri native came out to California on vacation from Colorado in 1971 and, upon visiting Big Sur, found he couldn't leave.

The first house he designed in Big Sur was his own. He planned to construct it quickly and live there about a year while he built his main house, but he lasted 18 years in the 16-foot diameter, solar-heated glass teepee.

"I built the main house on site, underground," he said, "which keeps it a constant temperature of 72 degrees. It's also fireproof and protected from the high winds off the Big Sur coast. I don't like to build on top of a hill; it's a pretty conspicuous place, which makes the architecture too conspicuous."

Muennig, by admission, is a private man. He likes glass; big glass walls, in fact, with no curtains, but he places them on the most remote side of the house, positioned to take advantage of the view, like looking out to the ocean, he says, or maybe a magnificent rock outcropping.

His love and respect for nature came to him like a gift of childhood, as the Joplin, Missouri boy joined his older sister and younger brother in exploring the caves and wooded habitats of home.

A fancy of flight led an 18-year-old Muennig to Georgia Technical College, where he studied aeronautical engineering.

Yet an inadvertent introduction to the architectural department altered his course. He knew, in that moment, he was meant to draw, to design, to learn how to impose structure without disturbing the landscape.

“At Georgia Tech, they knocked my work for being too creative,” he said. “They told me I’d never make it. I told them I was transferring to Oklahoma to study under Bruce Goff. That really got them; he was known, in certain circles, as a great and creative architect. But he also was controversial.”

By comparison, Goff (1904-1982) was fearless, fantastical, flamboyant in his designs. Classically untrained, he was, nevertheless, sufficiently renowned for his proficiency in his craft to become head of the architecture department at the University of Oklahoma.

“Bruce gave me my freedom,” Muennig said. “He encouraged me to be myself, no matter what, and told everybody to do the wildest work we could. He was a living example of that. He taught a course that consisted of music described in architectural terms. Using Stravinsky, he explained the difference between rhythm and cadence, and gave us projects to design expressing rhythm, reflection, counterpoint, articulation; the elements of musical composition.”

Muennig also attributes elements of his style to the teachings of organic expressionist architect Herb Greene, another Goff protégé, who dealt with the issues of uniformity and diversity, and fostered the importance of imagery in architecture.

After graduating from Oklahoma University, Muennig spent several years apprenticing before returning to Joplin and, eventually, Denver, where he spent three years designing buildings, primarily residences. Until that fortuitous vacation to Big Sur.

Building a home in Big Sur is replete with challenges. Monterey County laws prohibit constructing a house on a hill that slopes more than 30 percent, and no building can add its silhouette to the ridge line. Many home sites lie at the end of a 45-minute drive up a dirt road, where electricity may not yet extend.

“This is a remote area,” said Muennig, “wild in its dramatic extremes of drought, flood, forest fire and earthquakes. But it also is spectacularly beautiful. From these conditions, I have defined my palette of materials: concrete, redwood, stone, glass and metal.

“And I have tried, over the years, to let each house express one main idea. When I create a house based on the organic tradition, I find it is always alive and a living tribute to the people for whom it was created.”

Mickey Muennig House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Muennig House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Unless he wants you to see it, there is no house there. Carved into the side of a western-facing slope on 30 acres, the 1,400-square-foot house resides largely underground, where the temperature remains a constant 72 degrees year round.

Accessed along a wide adobe path and through a pair of rimless glass doors that disappear on a pivot, the entry, inspired by a Chinese temple, is a full moon cut-out in a stucco wall. A curtain of water falls into a circular pond between the entry and an atrium, whose banana trees, papayas and vines reference a tropical rain forest.

Where the house juts out from the bank, a sod roof gives way to an expansive steel-framed, paneled skylight undulating across the curvilinear design of the roof. The structure rests on curved, glu-lam support beams and a radial structure of on-edge beams reclaimed from Mendocino bridge timbers. The beams are anchored by redwood poles turned on a lathe and fitted with hand-cut steel plates.

Beneath the skylight, a rectangular adobe patio consumes the center of the garden, where Muennig-designed chairs scatter, and a steel-framed, glass-top table lies anchored to the adobe. Dining is most common at the perimeter of the house, where additional chairs flank a pod-shaped island of end-grain birch over steel.

Beyond the island, the kitchen rims the length of the curved wall, its paneled cabinets a complement to the pattern of parallel beams fanning overhead. The wall is white and unmarred with the exception of an underground solution to the proverbial kitchen window: a half-dome niche whose plants are sky lit. The same exists on the opposite side of the house, where a built-in desk is served by another niche and its subtle lighting, plus a series of simple pendant lights spaced above the two work areas. A blond mahogany Steinway grand holds sheet music by Stravinsky, Schribin and Shostakovich.

The focal point of the circular living space is an alcove in the wall that forms the fireplace, and the couch and chairs gather round. The only areas behind doors are a simple bath and single bedroom accessed through a hallway flanked by a closet on one side and set-in bookshelves on the other. The beams framing the bedroom ceiling, are stepped on a radial access like the aperture of a camera. The room is sparse with an elevated bed built into the frame of the room, against sliding glass doors.

There is no art on the walls, no sculpture on the floor. The house is the sculpture, and the art lies in living there.

Kitchen
Mickey Muennig House

Mickey Muennig House

Casa Luna (Georis House)
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Defining this 3,000-square-foot house by its stucco surface may cause questions about whether it really is a Muennig design. Unless you pay attention to the architecture.

Five hairpin arches emanate from the side wall of the two-car garage, forming a sculptural rose arbor whose foliage, a lush tangle across copper piping, softens the glare of the sun upon a quartzite path to the entrance of the home. At the end of the path, a living room window houses the same shape as the arbor, forming, in essence, the sixth arch.

Just inside the front door, the arches continue as the dramatic entry hall cascades in a stairway of green marble tile from Greece, framed in redwood. Every two arches, bridged by a curved roofline faced in glass, frames a landing, which provides entry to the bedrooms and baths flanking either side of the stairway. Beneath the final arch, a glass door opens to the back yard, its coastal gardens a riot of color against the Pacific blue backdrop.

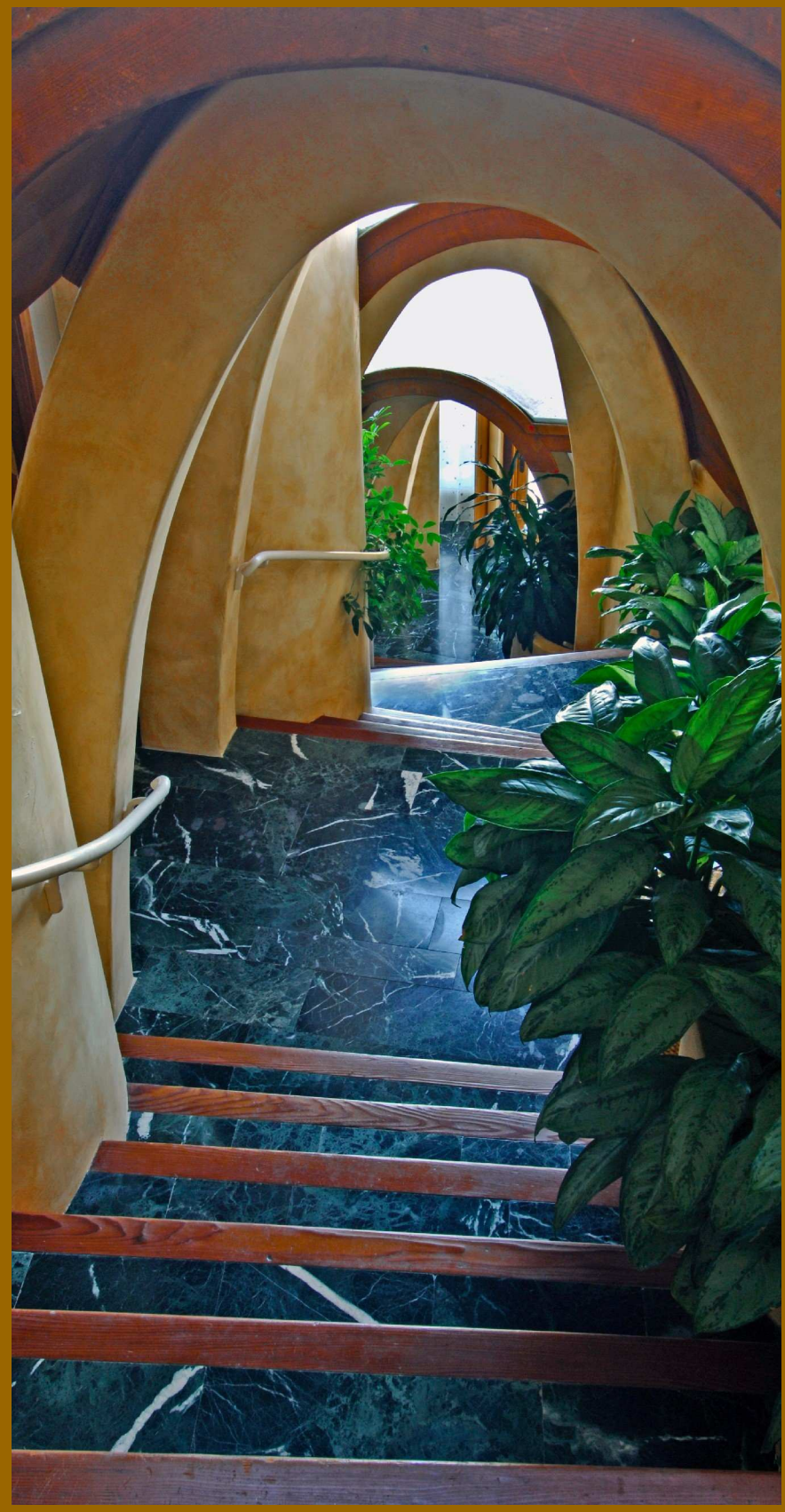
“This is actually very feminine architecture,” said owner Sheila Georis. “We call it ‘Casa Luna’ because it’s like a half moon – a full moon, if you include the gardens. All rooms are very open; we can see the ocean from every one of them. We have almost no art on the walls because the outside is where the art is, in its materials and shapes and colors and textures. The palette is the garden, and this is how we paint.”

Each room opens to an outdoor patio, and each provides a different view of the ocean and the coastal landscape of Big Sur.

The main level of the house features a living room, powder room and kitchen, the latter a study in clean, white efficiency with its laminate cabinets and marble counters. The living room, surfaced in a green marble parquet, boasts the Muennig signature ceiling, with its on-edge beams radiating from a weighty header and supported by a steel truss flanked in glass. The walls are finished in bull-nosed plaster, painted in the warmth and texture of Tuscan tones.

“The original owner was seriously into boats,” said Gastón Georis, “and the house has the sense of a ship frame. The man was also Greek, and the house follows the Greek idea of melting into the hillside.”

Casa Luna (Georis House)
Mickey Muennig, Architect



Casa Luna (Georis House)
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Big Sur House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

It is hard to tell which side of the house is the front or the back and just where in the glass, a front door might open. It doesn't matter. Particularly when, from most angles, the house is nearly invisible, disappearing into the landscape into which it is tucked.

Actually, the side approached by the drive that wraps around the knoll into which the house is built is probably the back, and the southern exposure, a wall of glass panels facing the ocean, is likely the front. Anyone who knows Big Sur would understand that one should never turn his back on the ocean.

Cut into the hillside and further camouflaged by a curvilinear sod cover, the 2,700-square-foot house is defined by a roof whose single arch is bisected by a long, central skylight flanked by two laminated curved beams and framed with 4x4s that span the distance in between.

The rest of the building is, essentially, a rectangular glass box, framed by board-formed cement walls and constructed on a flooring of acid-washed cement. The floor plan is open and spacious, offering a view of Point Sur Lighthouse to the north, and the ocean to the south, its expanse eclipsed by the Santa Lucia Mountains curving round the coast.

The house is anchored at the west end by the master suite, an open space fitted with two curved walls of redwood panels, one housing the closet and the other, the bath. In between lies a cement hearth framed by a rusted steel hood over a two-sided fireplace that opens to the living room.

The kitchen actually is part of the open living space, although defined by a large island whose marble surface is marred only by the presence of a stainless steel sink. The counter rests on a heavy base of epi, a sustainable wood from the jungles of South America, whose rounded edges are hidden kitchen drawers.

Behind the island is a matching built-in counter, its surface similarly uncluttered except by a 5-burner stainless steel stove. All other appliances are discretely housed beneath the counter. The refrigerator, behind its wood façade, further defines the space without intruding upon it.

Beyond the kitchen, on the other side of a cement wall, a short hallway joins two bedrooms, each of which has its own bath and private patio. Privacy is ensured by a large curved wall, which retains the hillside and frames each patio.

Behind the house to the north, an expansive stone foundation houses a cement wall that curves like a nautilus to enclose an outdoor shower. Nearby, a single granite step provides access to a stainless steel hot tub, fitted with a bench of 3/4-inch tempered glass.

On the southern exposure, which Muennig admits is the front of the house, a stairway formed of large sandstone slabs spirals between walls of heaped granite, ending at an open patio. This side of the structure, a wall of pieced glass, houses a glass door considered the entry to the home.

Beneath the house and hidden within the knoll by its sod roof, is a 3-car garage, its three doors formed of industrial steel slats that roll up and, like everything else, disappear.

Big Sur House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Dining and Kitchen Area, Big Sur House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Post Ranch Inn
Mickey Muennig, Architect

If it weren't for the sign, you might miss it, continuing to motor along the highway in search of a break in the bluffs and another glimpse of the ocean. But, just like the community of Big Sur, it is there, if you know where to look.

The beauty of Post Ranch Inn lies within the landscape, nearly 100 acres of rolling terrain dressed in native grasses and stately redwoods climbing up and over the ridge and wandering on down to the craggy coastline that is Big Sur. The mystery of the place lies in its ability to hide like a chameleon in the landscape, vanishing among the texture and colors of the trees. And its allure lies in its heritage, a place built by hearty people with strong hands and close ties, people who dressed up for a picture and down for daily life on the land they loved as much as each other.

Some say the inn began with a handshake and a plan in 1984, but those who know Big Sur understand it started more than a century before. The catalyst was William Brainard Post, who was 18 when he traded the culture of Connecticut for the wilds of the West and settled in the woods of Big Sur.

Two years later, he married Anselma Onesimo, a Costanoan woman with whom he had five children. Post laid claim to 160 acres, becoming one of the first homesteaders in the area, on which he and his sons built a New England-style home. The modest red house, now a registered landmark, remains on Highway One, across from the entrance to Post Ranch Inn.

Over the years, the extended family accumulated 1,500 acres on which they developed the Post Ranch within the wilderness of Big Sur. It is that land, as well as the family heritage descendants Bill and Luci Post sought to preserve when, upon the advice of a family friend, they decided, over a handshake and a shot of Jack Daniels, to create the Post Ranch Inn. Both remain the unofficial greeting of the place.

Once the deal was formally signed to construct the inn, Bill Post got a tractor and excavated the site, himself, before turning over the project to Big Sur architect Mickey Muennig.

Various architects took interest in designing and building the Post Ranch Inn, yet George K. (Mickey) Muennig was chosen, likely for his renowned ability to design and construct a building as if it weren't there.

"It took a little over a year to build the inn," said Muennig, "but it took three years to get the permits for it. Among 100 acres, we built on only 17 of them. But we had a lot of commitments to resolve and uphold with the Coastal Commission – strictly ecological things, like preserving the Indian burial grounds and protecting the red-legged frogs in the pond."

Working from the principles of "organic architecture," adopted from the legendary Bruce Goff at the University of Oklahoma, Muennig designed five different house styles to serve as the 30 guest rooms, each named for early Post family members and their friends.

"It's a history of love and connection with family and friends," wrote inn event planner Soaring Starkey; "a way of life long gone, yet of what we all still have in common – a deep passion for this incredible coast, this world apart. Each room at the inn displays a framed photograph of its namesake, accompanied by an abbreviated family history." These stories and images have been collected into a commemorative book, available at the Inn.

The inn, whose rooms wander among the trees like forts belonging to the Lost Boys of Neverland, is constructed of redwood walls – a farmed, not endangered resource – and raja slate flooring from India. Railings are crafted of rusted wrought iron or Cor-ten steel the color of nearby madrones, and the roofs are a sturdy corrugated steel that disappears into the trees. Bathtubs are functional fiberglass, covered in grout-less tile, and counters are marble or granite. Bedroom surfaces are crafted of African hardwood."The use of wood and stone and iron, all natural things,"

said Starkey, “pays homage to the environment. The rooms were built with a simplicity, a soulfulness of the earth. Everything is designed to continue the eye toward the ocean and direct it to all that is outdoors, all that is natural. My definition of privacy is to live somewhere I don’t have to close the shades.”

Among the five room styles, “Ocean House” is a rectangular shape, cresting the coastline. The roof supports a bed of flowers and native grasses, and inside, the earth load is supported by narrow pine boards “on edge,” and rounded beams, exposed. Apart from the bed, an elevated daybed reclines before a brilliant Pacific blue backdrop, a vantage also available from the tiled bath and the terrace. The room is warmed by a two-sided fireplace that serves both the bedroom and the bath.

“The rooms are pared down to what is soothing,” said Starkey. “They are a testament to Mickey Muennig’s style, and interior designer Janet Freed’s soulful eye. Guests will find no landscape paintings and no TV. Who you’re with and the view are your entertainment.”

“Tree House,” with its Cor-Ten steel frame, is an elevated triangular shape, angled to access the greatest view and the most privacy. Its ceiling is an open pyramid with triangular-shaped windows. “Coast House,” with its curved wood paneling, is a round house, like a cask for wine or water.

“You can see,” said Starkey, “that Mickey was playing with shapes. A master of the illusion of space, he made every room, despite their different configurations, the same square footage.”

“Butterfly House” appears to have wings outstretched. Constructed on the only place on the property without trees, it begins as a flat area that rises upward, creating space for rooms on upper, middle and lower planes. The lower rooms enjoy mountain views from the bedroom and bath, whereas middle and upper rooms experience the coastal reaches. The levels are “stair stepped” to minimize sound and maximize privacy.

“A lot of people thought or assumed I cut down trees to build this place,” said Muennig.“But I didn’t cut one tree down; well, one or two down by the road, but none in the interest of my architecture. It wouldn’t have been right. I kind of like the tree houses best; they are light, up in the air and have a nice view.”

“Mountain House” is a rounded building facing the mountains toward the east, creating a calm, quiet atmosphere. “Mickey sited the rooms, himself,” said Starkey, “seeing what guests would see in 3D and imagining their experiences based on his decisions. He has this keen ability to witness and copy designs from nature.”

The gathering place is “Sierra Mar,” the restaurant named for the family’s earlier café, “Rancho Sierra Mar,” and dedicated to the late Mary Fleenor Post, who ran the place until it closed in 1972.

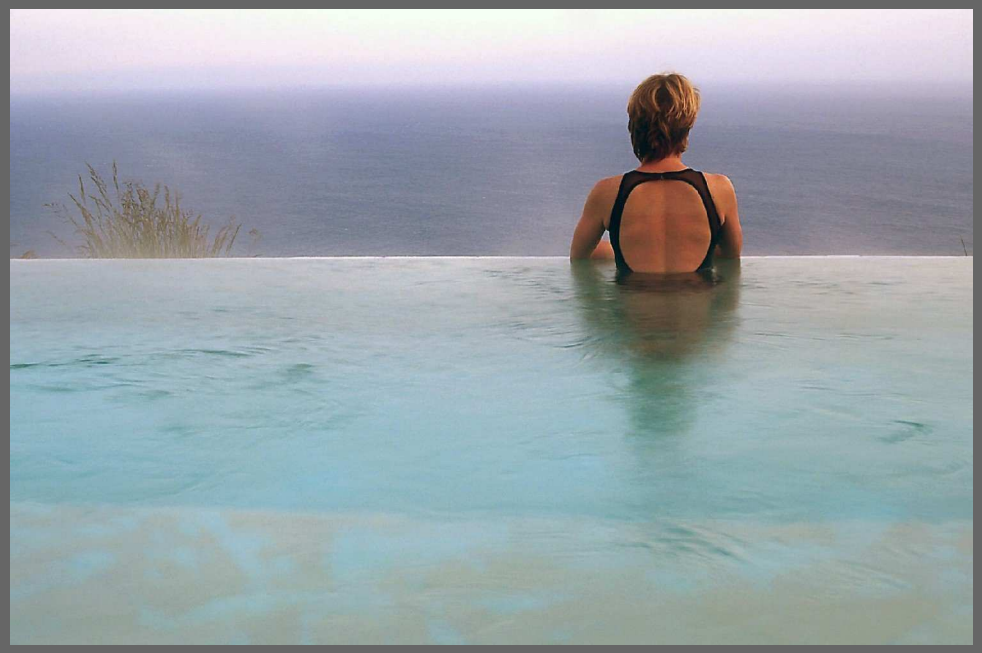
Muennig designed Sierra Mar as a complement to the guest rooms and in keeping with the coastal terrain. The entrance, shaped like an amphitheater, said Starkey, appears like a womb, emerging from the earth. Using the same narrow arched-pine beams as he did in the rooms, Muennig created a rolling roof line and interior ceiling that follows the rise and fall of the mountains.

On the western exposure, the cliff-dweller is flanked in thick glass, which reveals the ocean, looming into view and causing near blinding light on both sunlit and overcast days. The flooring is set in raja slate, and arched doorways and curved walls are surfaced with soft distressed redwood.

Seating is terraced like the flow of a river, enabling diners to enjoy an unobstructed view and each other in a seemingly private setting. By day, the space is open, bright, exposed. As night drops its curtain on the brilliant sea, daylight turns to twinkling evening lights among radial beams, reducing each table setting to its own venue.

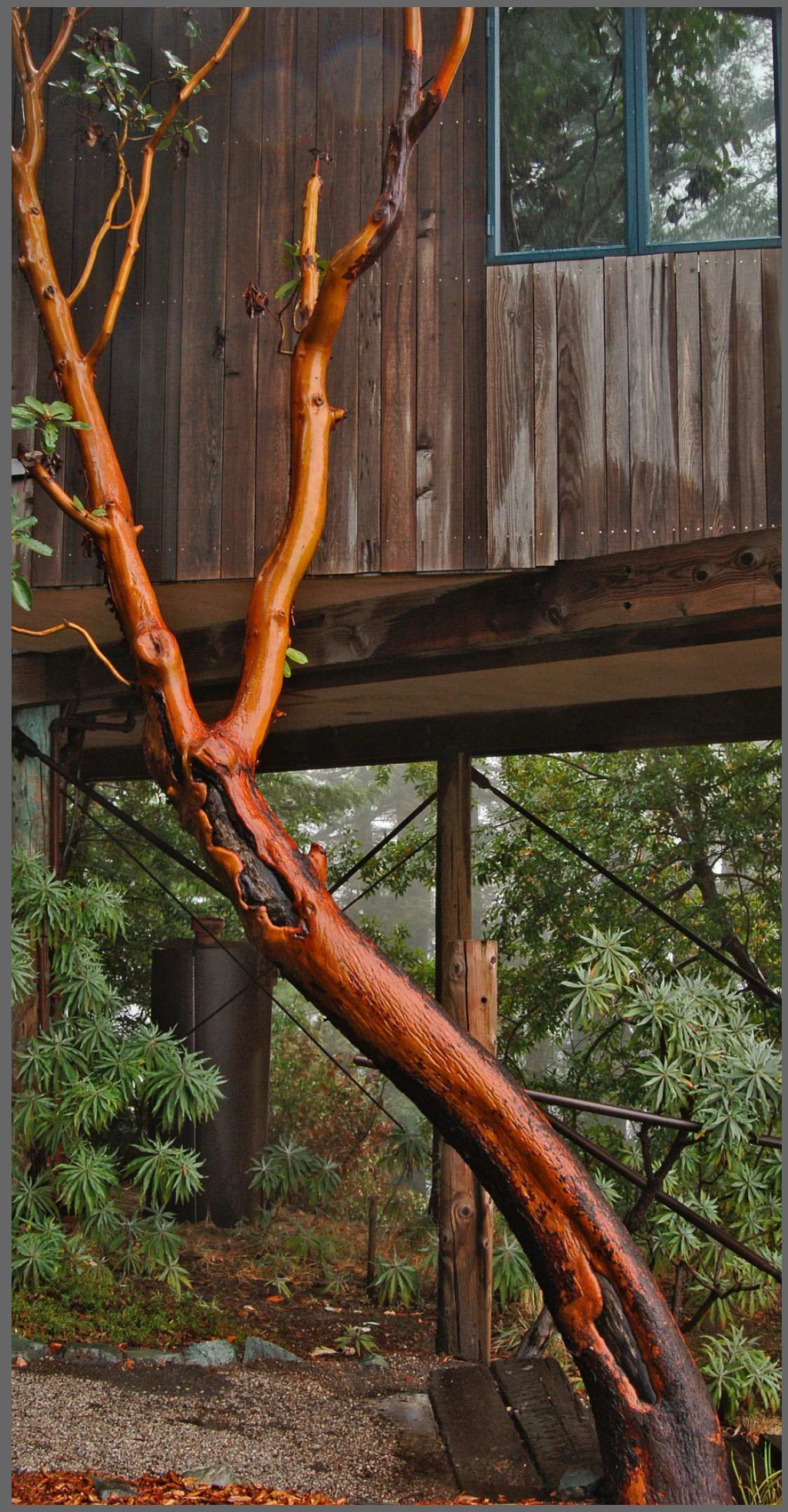
“This is a rare place,” said Starkey, “where people can just sit and take command of the ocean. When you can see infinity like this, it creates space in the back of your mind and gives you a sense of perspective. At night, it all disappears.”

Sierra Mar Restaurant at Post Ranch Inn
Mickey Muennig, Architect



Above and Right: Sierra Mar Restaurant at Post Ranch Inn

Lower Left: Infinity Pool
Mickey Muennig, Architect



Butterfly Rooms at Post Ranch Inn
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Hawthorne Gallery
Mickey Muennig, Architect

When the Post family of Big Sur assembled an aggregate of talent to create their inn, they hired artist Gregory Hawthorne as an "aesthetic consultant." Through this association, the artist introduced developers to Mickey Muennig, who later designed the celebrated Post Ranch Inn.

During the construction, Hawthorne was commissioned to create sculpture and other artwork to decorate the inn. Working alongside Muennig, the artist developed an artful ambiance he quickly identified as the same vision he held for his own coastal gallery.

Today, a dramatic sculpture rises out of the eastern bluffs, a contemporary structure designed with art in mind and known as the Hawthorne Gallery.

In 1973, newlyweds Gregory and Susan Hawthorne were soaking in their inner-city Detroit hot tub when Susan said, "The only thing better would be if the hot tub were on top of a mountain overlooking the ocean with the moon on the rise."

Eight years later, they bought three ridge-line acres just southeast of Big Sur's legendary Nepenthe Restaurant, and built a Muennig-designed home, a separate art studio and that hot tub overlooking the ocean. The art gallery was still a dream.

"I wanted to establish an art gallery," said Hawthorne, "that would project a magnetic context so intriguing that we could draw the art-sensitive out of the urban sprawl and into an experience that would challenge their perception and alter their understanding."

Muennig rose to the occasion.

Unlike a private home which, in Big Sur, must essentially disappear into the landscape, the dramatic two-story art gallery is a commanding presence along Highway One. The intrusion of its 22-foot glass panels framed in Cor-ten steel mullions, and Muennig's signature curved copper roof line, is mitigated by lush terraced landscaping, natural materials and organic architecture.

Behind a 10-foot door carved like a wood relief sculpture, the main floor of the gallery is a 1,800-square-foot expanse on concrete flooring with just enough art to warrant attention and eliminate a warehouse effect. Considerable storage and work space hides behind the gallery, through conventional doors within walls that slide open to accommodate art of all sizes. Support walls are made of board-formed cement; classic Muennig architecture.

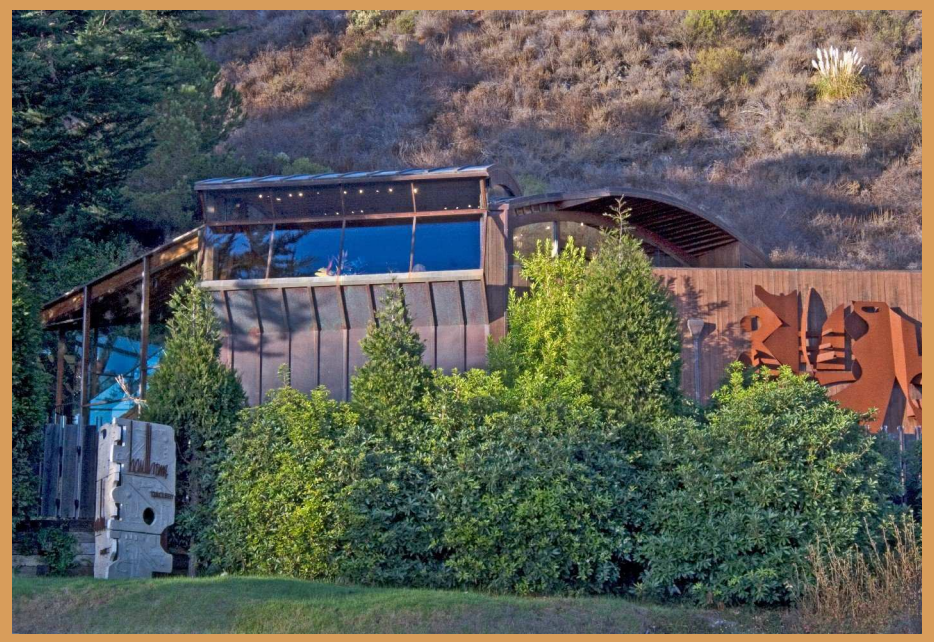
The lofty space suggests no second story, yet it is visible through glass panels in the ceiling which forms the upstairs floor. A steep hairpin staircase frames thick curved treads crafted from laminated Douglas fir archways originally planned for the Post Ranch Inn.

The second floor is defined by a curved bridge-truss ceiling framed by heavy, glu-lam beams and on-edge timbers, which appears to be floating overhead like an amphitheater. The exposed structure is fitted with glass to access views, natural or landscaped, from all directions.

Expansive sliding glass doors disappear into glass panels to access an open deck where art exhibition guests can spill out into the ambiance of the Big Sur coast.

"Striving to consider any and everything that might come up," Hawthorne said, "we have created an amazingly functional thing of beauty. Every aspect of the gallery is artistic."

Hawthorne Gallery
Mickey Muennig, Architect



Hawthorne Gallery
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Terra Mar (Scharfenberger House)
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Were it not properly fenced, one could easily notice the comparison between the rolling roof line and the undulations of the ocean beyond. The wave begins upon the flat roof of the garage, gathers speed and lifts onto the house, a 2,700-square-foot fortress, built of concrete blocks, which also rolls across the front, its sweeping curves punctuated by large portholes.

To those standing before the glass entry, its door braced by steel abstraction and flanked by glass sidelights, the roof appears flat. Not on the inside.

The ceiling is formed by a series of “on-edge” beams of Douglas fir, spinning out from one radius, at which point the beams begin to fan out in the opposite direction, creating a complementary curve. The flooring is poured concrete, acid washed and stained. The few walls that divide the open space are made of redwood panels, cut out at one point, to reveal the apex of the ceiling.

The kitchen is a study in contrast, the granite surface of its island is a textural complement to cabinets finished in a smooth laminate over wood. The bar tucks into an alcove within the central living space, its green glass shelving suspended on cables.

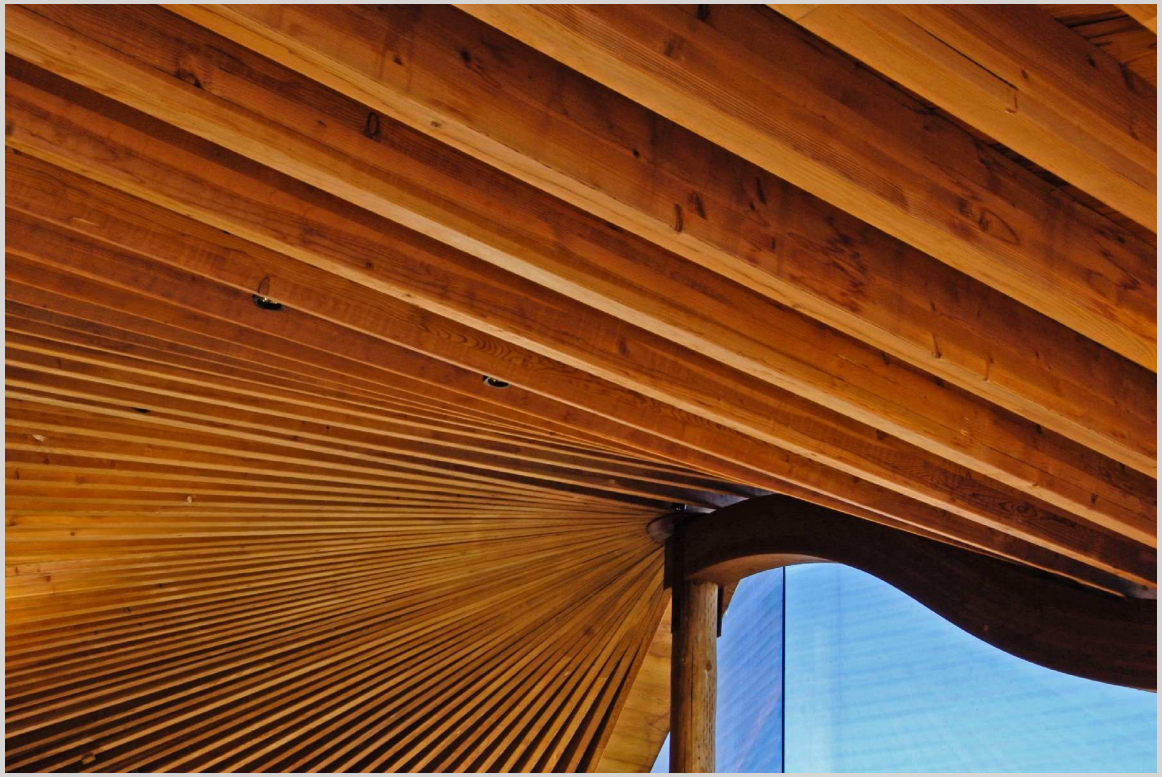
The main bath, fully tiled, is sparse, simple and open to the ocean, its triangular soaking tub flanked by glass, as are the twin sinks set in black granite.

Upon entry, details of the interior of the house are eclipsed by the magnificence of the ocean seemingly just beyond a wall of glass, framed in steel to handle the wind load coming off the sea. Visible through the glass, a catwalk of steel grating spans the coastline between the main house and its guest quarters. Open to the sloping terrain, it feels precarious but isn't. A series of low glass panels spaced along the bridge are all that exists between a pedestrian and the open sea.

The destination of that path on the edge of the world is a circular observation deck framed by the same glass panels, which also forms the roof of the round guest cottage. Stairs of exposed aggregate wind from the deck down behind the house to a cement path leading to the front door. Crafted of the same cement blocks that give structure to the main house, the cottage is accessed though a heavy arched door fitted with an iron grate that mimics a medieval dungeon.

Inside, the cozy refuge demonstrates an efficient and artistic use of space with redwood closet doors that slide into place, and a Murphy bed that folds into an arched and paneled wall to create more living room. The black granite bath is framed in glass blocks to give bathers a view of the sea. Opposite the guest house is a wine cellar whose near subterranean orientation keeps the climate cool and constant. A hammock rocks in the breeze, nearby.

Terra Mar (Scharfenberger House)
Mickey Muennig, Architect



Terra Mar (Scharfenberger House)
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Wittbrodt House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

A smooth cement drive sweeps down the face of the slope and deposits the vehicle at double garage doors. Replacing the redwood doors with titanium is practically the only change the owner made to the classic Muennig architecture. Even that was a reluctant acquiescence to climate.

True to the Muennig aesthetic of tucking the architecture into the site, the 2,500-square-foot house, with the exception of its dual-domed roofline, is visible neither from the road nor the driveway. The house, a fortress in board-formed concrete, rises at the base of 15 steps, surfaced in decomposed granite and flanked by cement walls softened by native foliage. The copper front door, once redwood, opens to the heart of the home and the coastal landscape visible through a southern exposure in glass.

The floor, in acid-washed cement, is a testament to the “rules of three” in that three steps up, down, to the right or to the left provide access to the various rooms of the house and define its elevations. To the left of the entry, the kitchen, whose charcoal cement countertops run beneath cabinets of narrow redwood paneling, sits like a stage above the living room.

At the southern end of the kitchen, three steps up, a small dining area reveals coastal views through sliding glass doors. Three steps down from the kitchen and also from the entry, the living room is all about the fireplace, a floor-to-ceiling cylinder of board-formed cement with a curved cement bench.

Muennig’s signature open-beam ceiling, a radius of on-edge rails supported by heavy laminated curved beams, is structured in perpendicular panels like the stepped perspective of a mountain range.

Three steps below the living room is an interior tropical garden whose exposed earth is surfaced in a mosaic of granite stones. A south-facing window straddles the circular hot tub, which can be enjoyed in the round, inside or out.

Three steps above the entry and to the right, the master bedroom is defined by a built-in bed, anchored by a slanted headboard of paneled redwood. The master bath hides behind a wall of redwood serving as a bank of closets and source of privacy. The focal point of the bathroom is a sunken rectangular soaking tub, accessed via three steps and surrounded by a garden of palms and ferns.

Three steps below the landing outside the master bedroom is an office, whose built-in desk, sweeping the corner, complements the kitchen counters. Above the desk, the cement wall bears a wide rectangular cut-out, providing vantage on the rest of the house and a view of the coastline.

A stone path in the interior garden leads to the second bedroom, an enclave exposed only by a circular cut-out in the cement wall, which provides views of the ocean and the dramatic Sycamore Canyon.

Wittbrodt House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Wittbrodt House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Wittbrodt House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Tuscan Farmhouse
Mickey Muennig, Architect

If you pay attention to the organic structure, heavy, rough-cut timbers and rugged texture complementing the landscape, you can recognize the architect in the architecture. Otherwise, the weighty stone structure rising from the coastal bluffs of the Santa Lucia Mountains transports you from Big Sur to the rolling hillsides of the Tuscan coast.

Nearly five perilous miles up a forgotten road of mud and stone that winds through the terrain, a guest house emerges among the madrones, a decidedly Muennig structure, with its corrugated copper roof of bisecting arches, walls of board-formed concrete and signature glass doors. Inside the pied-à-terre, the cracked cement flooring appears purposeful, its acid wash another indication of intentional wear. And the horizontal redwood planks create another textural complement to the board-formed cement structure.

The one-bedroom, single-bath cabin is tucked beneath a loft that houses a stainless efficiency kitchen, community space and, behind the cement fireplace wall, a hidden den. The beauty of the loft is its western exposure to the ocean undulating in the distance.

About a mile into the 150-acre property, at the end of a lane edged by a low wall of locally quarried, hand-set stone, the main house rises from the bluff like a rural Italian estate anchored on the edge of the sea.

Edges softened by olive trees brought north from coastal Santa Barbara, the 4,000-square-foot stone villa appears settled among elderly oaks, its intentional crumbling of walls suggesting the wearing of time. Its roofline surfaced by Italian tile and sod, the structure both complements and disappears into the landscape.

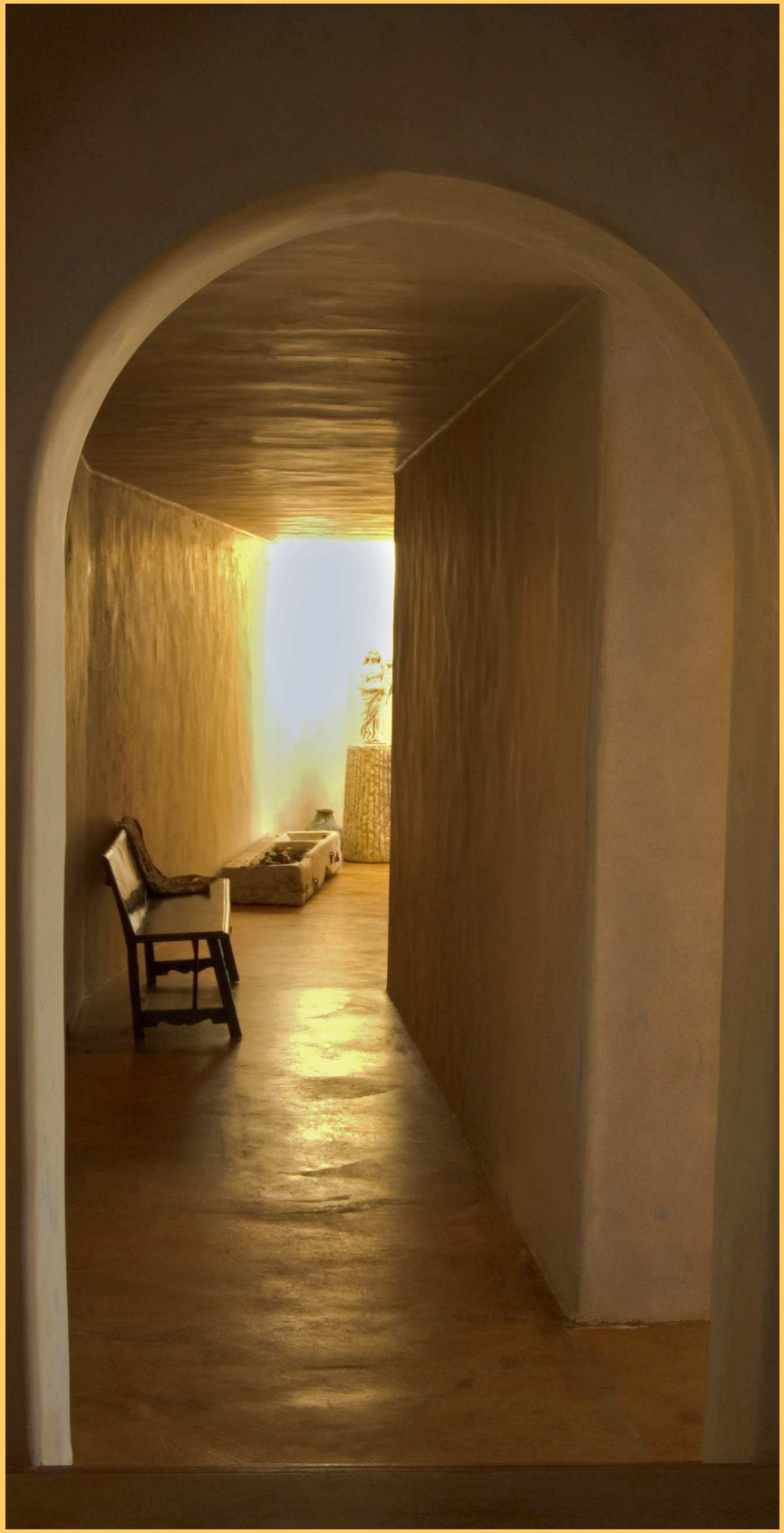
Five cement steps pass between stone walls and centuries into a foyer of acid-washed cement flooring, these open living spaces framed by plastered walls beneath heavy dropped beams and rough-wood ceilings. Wide glass panels set between heavy frames provide both southern and western views of the grassy coastal landscape rolling over the craggy cliffs and into the ocean.

A two-sided fireplace, whose stone chimney rises up through one of many clerestories, separates the living room from the kitchen, dropped three steps below. Most dramatic is the 18th-century, three-tiered Genoese crystal chandelier lighting a rough-hewn, 15-foot Italian farm table, its opulence anachronistic in an otherwise understated galley of French stone and rough wood cabinets. The pantry was excavated to create a cavernous production space, which houses staples and appliances.

Despite an open, contemporary flow throughout the property, the house carries an Old World aesthetic, particularly in the stone turret rising like a bell tower, its spiral staircase winding above a salvaged chandelier to access the arcade that serves the master suite and adjacent rooms.

The balance of the estate echoes with the hallowed chambers of an Italian monastery, its solemn hallway distinguished by Italian Renaissance-style archways and interrupted by entrances to a recessed bathroom of limestone and glass, and a sunken study and bedrooms, all faced with glass on the southern exposure to the sea.

Tuscan Farmhouse
Mickey Muennig, Architect



Tuscan Farm House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Katz House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

From the sea, a view most will never have, an octagonal fortress in glass and Cor-ten steel rises 275 feet out of the steep, stony cliff that trudges down into the ocean. Despite its stature, the structure exists largely below the elevation of the highway snaking past its gates and the coastal meadow that unfolds across the level surface of the property. It is accessed, slowly and carefully, by a dramatic coastal stairway of 124 decomposed granite steps edged in redwood and flanked by an imposing wall of granite stones collected from the site. This otherwise dynamic presence is eclipsed by the sheer cliff, dropping down to the legendary Partington Cove, which is faced by the commanding block of granite rising from the southern side of the cove.

Mickey Muennig actually designed and built the remodel for the house, which began in 2000 and took nearly three years to complete. The house originally was designed and built by architect Richard Clements during the early 1970s. However, the aesthetic of each architect appears sufficiently complementary that only the educated eye would discern where one's work ends and the other's begins.

The entry level of the now 900-square-foot home is the second story of the house. The subtle entrance opens to the kitchen, whose hard edges are juxtaposed with soft curves. Its smooth modular cupboards, clad in patinaed copper, and poured-concrete counters provide a textured complement to the glass wall around which it bends.

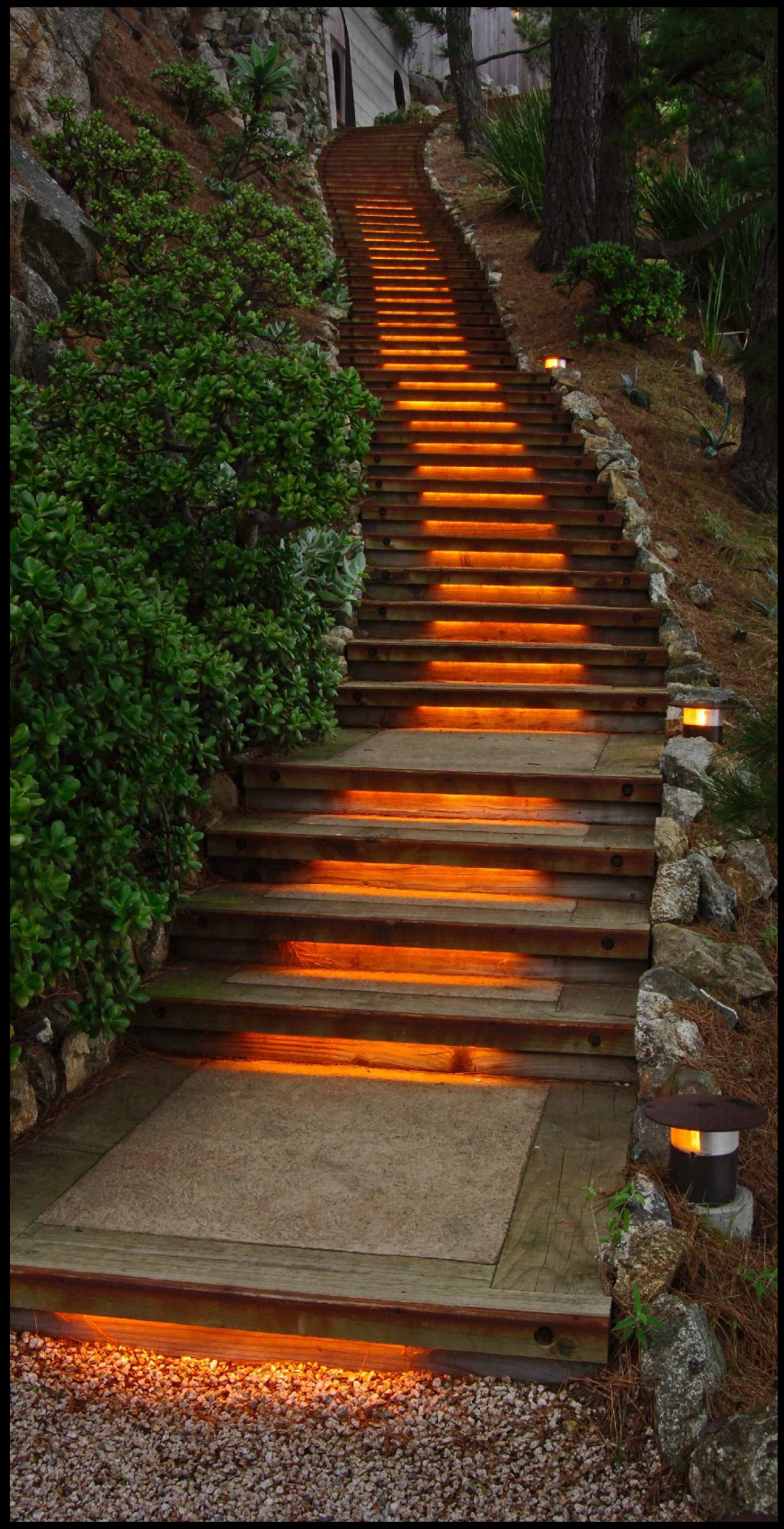
Aerial View of Katz House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

Accessed through an 8-sided glass screen that pivots on an axis, the living space is anchored by four tapered cement columns, 10 feet at their widest, which rise from the foundation to support the steepled roof. The space rests on an open frame around the tracery of steel Muennig used to replace the original heavy wood railing overlooking the living room. The area was converted to an office and a sleeping station tucked behind one cement column that houses a hidden closet. Muennig bridged a third, otherwise inaccessible side with a steel grate to facilitate passage. The fourth is consumed by the cement chimney rising from the living room hearth to the roof.

The house once stopped at the kitchen. Muennig extended the space to create a master suite, housed in a stone cave and served by a poured cement hearth with stone chimney. The bathroom, surfaced in black slate, is open to the bedroom and to the scenic coastal ridge.

Anchored on a granite outcropping is an immense abstract sculpture titled, “Yggdrasil” or “Tree That Holds up the World.” Crafted in Cor-ten steel and Carrera marble, it was created by the late Gordon Newell and deposited on the site via helicopter. The legendary sculpture came with the house.

Katz House
Mickey Muennig, Architect



Katz House
Mickey Muennig, Architect

George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

To understand the sensibilities of architect George Brook-Kothlow, take a look at his home. It also will explain his architecture. Anchored in a grassy knoll on a ridge overlooking the Carmel Valley, the structure seems designed by someone loath to be asked indoors.

The site, no longer landscaped, has largely returned to its wild ways, which seems to suit its inhabitants and the home equally well. The redwood house is structured, both inside and out, within a rank of heroic parallel frames, crafted from heavy timbers that had outlived their use as a trestle near Northern California's Russian River.

"We discovered these timbers down the coast and bought a million board feet of wood, carried in 14 lumber trucks," Brook-Kothlow said. "It was enough to build eight houses. Once we had built ours, we planned to glass-in the top of the frames between the main house and the bedrooms, but we liked it so much, we skipped the glass and learned not to complain if we got a little wet, heading to bed in the rainy season."

The house is set on concrete or exposed aggregate flooring, warmed by radiant heat. The bathrooms are tiled in ceramic, as are the sinks, crafted by the architect's wife, Jennifer. The kitchen table is salvage wood from the floor of a boxcar, sanded and planed to provide a hand-smooth surface. It is hard to say whether lifestyle choices dictated the house, or the house determined the lifestyle.

Brook-Kothlow knew from the time he was 8 years old that he wanted to be an architect, and pretty much the kind of architect he would become.

"Working to create a timeless statement through the structure of my designs is, for me, what architecture is about," he said. "I started working in heavy timber and have appreciated it ever since. I prefer to work in wood, rock, glass – materials natural to the environment."

Growing up in classic farmhouses of the Midwest, with their traditional box shapes and painted surfaces, Brook-Kothlow is, upon first consideration, unsure of his inspiration for the organic structures he designs. Yet in reminiscing about the barns; jumping from exposed rafters into piles of fresh hay, as well as their unfinished interiors, wide open spaces, and heavy, textured timber, it all makes sense.

Raised in Minnesota among a lot of art and craft, Brook-Kothlow understood his interest in design as a natural characteristic of his family. He graduated from the University of Colorado with a bachelor's degree in architecture and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he spent four years working on contemporary designs with Warren Callister, an architect once partnered with Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) and noted for his organic sensitivity in residential development.

Callister (1917-2008) was known for his practice of walking a site and just listening and learning what it had to tell him. "You leave yourself open," he once said, "and it all starts flooding in. You're listening for more than superficial things. The most powerful things come in when you listen."

Callister was strongly influenced by the heavy structural designs of architect Bernard Maybeck (1862-1957) and the organic designs made legendary by Wright. Such sensibilities have become legacies in the work of Brook-Kothlow, identifiable in the materials and framing of his work.

"My whole philosophy," Brook-Kothlow said, "is to express the structure and not hide it in the walls. All of my structures are really rigorous exercises in geometry. The challenge is getting them to work, particularly where structures converge."

Although Brook-Kothlow was the principal architect behind the dramatic Pebble Beach home Maggie Eastwood once shared with ex-husband Clint Eastwood, he is best known for the structures he has designed along the Big Sur Coast.

"Each is a really romantic, incredible site," he said, "which I complemented with natural materials and expressed structures whose 'Wrightian' elements disappear into the landscape. Above all, my designs must work in harmony with the landscape."

Staude House
George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

Staude House
George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

During the late 1920s, the 140-acre expanse housed a tent cabin community, its blank white forms littering the coastline while resident convicts worked to construct the coastal Highway One. Upward of 40 years later, the verdant turf and native plants remained, but the tents and their inhabitants had been replaced by a single-family home crouching on the edge of Big Sur history and the Pacific Coastline.

Architect George Brook-Kothlow had a vision for the property when he reclaimed the weighty redwood timbers from the original Buck Creek Bridge upon its early 1960s replacement in reinforced concrete. The entire bridge cost him $1,500.

The timbers were shipped from Big Sur to the Monterey Peninsula, where they were inventoried, measured and then rough milled to fit the specifications of his architectural plans, upon their return to Big Sur.

Brook-Kothlow's signature architectural style requires an exposed frame or structure which, in this house, honored the heavy redwood beams and posts anchored by piers set deep into the ground, their steel plates extending into the wood and bolted into perpetuity. It looks, by most interpretations, like the underneath view of a bridge.

"The house is made of redwood, inside and out," Brook-Kothlow said. "The preferred palette for coastal structures, it is both romantic and native to the area. My whole philosophy is to express the structure of a house, not hide it behind walls. This one is framed like an umbrella structure that appears to float from above."

The ceiling is crafted of some 20 linear miles of 1x3 redwood rails turned on edge and staggered to facilitate the curve of the circular structure. Posts cantilever into the center of the building to support the skylight at the apex of the umbrella.

The floor, a foundation of concrete, sandblasted to expose variable aggregates, was embellished by stones, hand placed to create an illusory river bed, running from the entry down to the living room hearth and concluding at an outcropping of granite rocks. The hearth is sheltered by an iron hood, hand rubbed with earth to create a matte patina.

The balance of the two-bedroom, two-bath house built on a half round, exists on the perimeter of the central living space. The master bedroom, oriented toward the sea, is grounded in an actual granite rock outcropping, a nod to the granite boulders anchored behind the home. Both the design and the bracing of the building simply repeat the structure of the landscape.

The southern exposure of the building is faced with a wall of heroic glass panels. Mitered at the corners, these unframed doors and windows open and close on a hydraulic system, engineered to withstand the coastal winds of winter without so much as a rattle.

The house rests mere feet from the cliff that drops 114 feet straight into the sea at Anderson Canyon. Three feet from the edge sits a bench.

Staude House
George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

Otter Cove (Stemler House)
George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

The house was designed with the landscape in mind. Imposing in its parallel framework of reclaimed bridge timbers, the weighty structure is actually a rather subtle intrusion on the view shed as it progresses along the terrain flanking Otter Cove and culminates on the craggy point overlooking the sea.

Rising 45 feet above sea level, the 2,600-square-foot house is not visible from Highway One. A sweep of exposed aggregate departs from a private road below the highway and slopes down to the heroic double doors of the redwood garage and workshop, a subsequent addition designed to complement the original architecture of the house.

Below the garage sits its predecessor, now the guest house. A Brook-Kothlow redesign which mirrors the original style, the 463-square-foot space provides an open living area that doubles as a bedroom once the Murphy bed drops into place from behind redwood panels.

A series of parallel frames forms an open corridor leading from guest house to main, its structure continuing into the configuration of the larger house; its stepped roofline consistent with the horizontal planes of the main roof.

Crafted of treated redwood anchored on cement piers and flanked by vertical panes of glass, the house radiates warmth, particularly as the sun sinks into the sea, its golden tones reflecting off a western bank of glass, while evening lights glow from within.

The core of the house is an open floor plan whose kitchen, living room and dining room all face a coastal exposure. Set on acid-washed, stamped concrete, the living room, framed by a right angle of paneled glass walls, is open to the wind-swept grasses of the cliffs above the cove. It is warmed by a completely open hearth edged in textured cement and Brook-Kothlow's signature rock outcropping, and sheltered by a heavy steel hood.

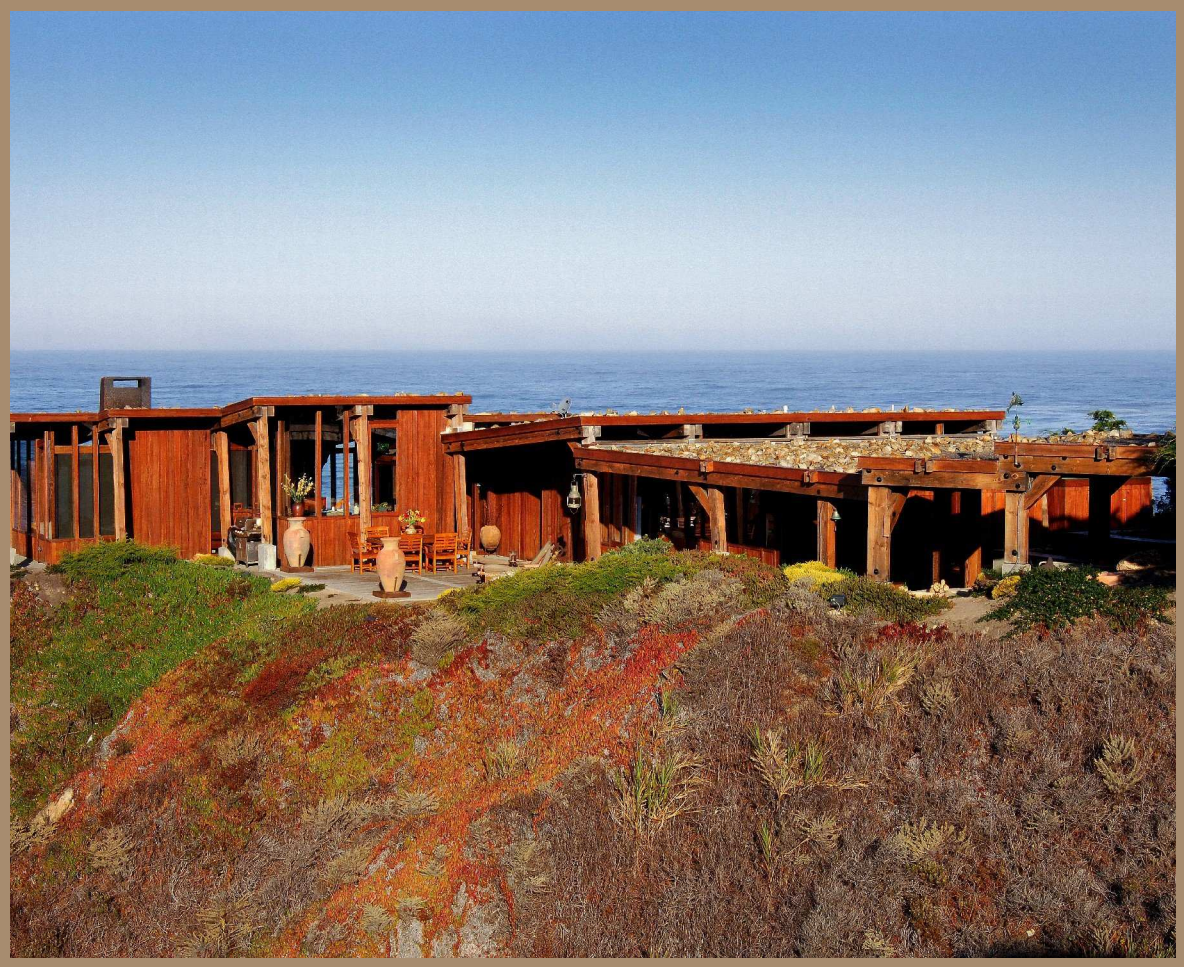
Steps down from the living room, the dining room is just big enough to house a custom glass-and-steel table and chairs by Big Sur artist Greg Hawthorne.

The kitchen, which benefits from a southern exposure to the cove, is separated from the living room by an imposing counter faced in slick granite. Set into that surface is a deep sink of smooth black granite, its exposed edge revealing the craggy texture of natural stone. Accompanied by smooth redwood cabinetry and black-glass appliances, the space is a complement of clean lines and textured surfaces.

Just off the main living space, the master bedroom faces a western exposure, its built-in bed set on the bias against a half wall that serves as both headboard and the distinction between bedroom and hallway.

Beyond a contemporary powder room, the master suite continues with his-and-hers closets flanking the hallway, which leads to the master bath, a granite-faced space with glassed-in shower and views of the sea.

The hallway passes through a media room and ends at four steps leading up to two more bedrooms which share a bath, also finished in granite. Insightful modifications have both customized the home and complemented the original design whose intention was to create an open structure united with the land in substance and form.



Otter Cove (Stemler House)
George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

Otter Cove (Stemler House)
George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

Hamilton House
George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

Despite the fact that Big Sur houses are supposed to be essentially invisible from a Highway One vantage, the highway was largely responsible for this home site. The knoll, just south of Rocky Point, had been ripped into during the early 1930s on behalf of highway construction, leaving a rock ledge, terraced from summit to sea.

It was on that ledge that architect George Brook-Kothlow designed and built what was intended to be an art studio for illustrator Paul Coker. The 1972 project predated the Coastal Commission and its prescriptions, reducing constraints to the coastal terrain and its climate.

The house was first built as a 785-square-foot open space with a loft, under which Brook-Kothlow staged the entrance. The structure of the house was a series of frames, slightly radial and converging at one point around the knoll. The southern face was constructed in glass to take in the warmth and expose the sea terrace and spectacular rock formations below. The roofline followed the fall of the knoll, effectively restoring the structure of the landscape while camouflaging the building.

The house was designed in one month and built in two more, originally out of bridge timber and redwood, and all for about $5,000. Within six months, a wind-blown Coker put the house on the market, and another six months later, it sold.

Brook-Kothlow was retained to design a master plan for expansion to a 3,000-square-foot house, plus two-car garage.

The house sold again in the 1980s, to a Los Angeles developer who acquired the permit to rework the property on the “beautiful, dangerous terrain.” He sold it to Ed Hamilton, who retains the 3,500-square foot, three-level structure.

Built of wood and stone, and set on a sand-finished cement floor, the house was designed with the landscape in mind – not to complement it but to commune with it. The interior stone wall, built on a concrete core, was constructed without grout for a more natural appearance. Individual stones, placed within the main living space, appear to have tumbled off the wall and landed nearby.

The exposed ceiling reveals a Douglas fir structure of laminated 2x4s on edge and framed radially around the knoll. None of the interior walls reach the ceiling, providing visual access to the structure of braced frames that support the copper-edged roof.

The original loft morphed into the only bedroom in the main house, which rests above the living room. Because of the terracing, the kitchen, living room and bedroom all enjoy a view of the legendary Hurricane Point, but from different elevations. An outdoor gallery or covered walkway connects the main house to the expansion, another radial structure, which houses three bedrooms and two baths, its invisibility owing to superimposed structure.

Hamilton House
George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

Hamilton House
George Brook-Kothlow, Architect

Gabriele Mary Ann Schicketanz
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Gabriele Mary Ann Schicketanz sees herself as a straight-line kind of woman, motivated to move directly from point A to point B, as efficiently and effectively as possible. It is her business partner Rob Carver, however, whose path she considers straight, if not narrow, throughout the evolution of his architectural career. Not hers, she surmises, which has taken many twists and turns, pushed by fate into places often uncomfortable and unexpected but, nevertheless, miraculous in their contributions to her experience.

Born and raised in northern Austria, by 17 she intended to be a dancer – was a dancer – until a life-altering fall from a horse, which broke her back and shattered her plans. Classically trained but impassioned by modern dance, she had scheduled a year-long trip to India to study the roots of flamenco, a vigorous rhythmic dance of Spanish affiliation yet Indian origin. She went anyway.

“In India,” she said, “I became interested in space; how it feels, how to explore it in terms of movement – not in terms of dance but utility.”

Schicketanz returned to Austria in 1976 to pursue her undergraduate studies in Vienna. Nearly five years later, she commenced from the Technical University of Stuttgart with a Diplom Ingeneur in architectural engineering.

“I had returned from India wanting to really learn something,” she said, “and I wanted to become very good at it. I wanted something that had a certain aesthetic, but I wanted it to be functional, purposeful.”

She applied to UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, founded to encourage international peace and universal respect by promoting collaboration among nations. Her vision was to design houses for impoverished regions.

“They told me they had received 3,500 applications for 56 positions,” she said. “They told me Austria was over-represented and that I would not, in my lifetime, work for the United Nations. It was my second big blow, causing another curve in my life path.”

Schicketanz went into contemporary industrial and commercial architecture, working in a historic context. She also developed master plans, hotels and country clubs in West Germany and in Spain, where her training, at the birthplace of the Bauhaus movement, was revealed in the precision and craftsmanship of her work.

Founded in 1919 by German architect Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus school trained students to integrate art and technology to the betterment of both. The intention was to “unite creative imagination with a practical knowledge of craftsmanship and thus to develop a new sense of functional design.” (Bauhaus 1919-1928 p. 13) The result was innovation.

The Bauhaus sensibilities came naturally to Schicketanz.

When her then husband, a literature professor, decided to return to his native country, the United States, she was presented with yet another curve in the road. She went with him.

They landed on the Central Coast of California, a place unmarred by heavy industry, commercial development or low-income housing. He left; she stayed.

Gabriele Mary Ann Schicketanz
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

The curve in the road had sharpened. If she were to remain in California and practice architecture, Schicketanz had little choice but to return to school and acquire her American license.

“It was a humbling experience,” she said, “like starting over. I had built a career doing steel, long-span, utilitarian, hip architecture. The last thing I ever thought I would do is high-end homes along the coast of California. But, I think architecture is where my biggest growth has happened.”

She had, admittedly, always wanted be where she could do distinctive work. She created that opportunity when she came to Carmel and met architects Mickey Muennig and Rob Carver, each of whom was doing what she considered wild, organic architecture. She went to work for Carver at Diamonite Design in 1987. By 1992, they had changed the name to Carver + Schicketanz Architects.

“I had a lot more technical knowledge than Rob at the time,” she said, “but it was not my place to do anything but execute his designs. The situation demanded that I do something I would never have done on my own, which is where the growth began.”

The only lesson Schicketanz believes she ever really needed to become a good architect came from her mentor Gustav Peichl, who told the class to start at two opposite ends, which must come together.

“On one end,” Peichl told her, “I go out to sketch what would be right for the site; I sketch an object, looking at the land, the shapes. On the other side, I analyze my client’s request and the land use plan. Working from left to right and from right to left, the two must perfectly mesh. I can’t have either side dissatisfied; they must come together.”

This advice Schicketanz continues to use and pass on to others.

“I do believe I have come full circle,” she said. “Designing single-family homes has brought me back to theater, setting the stage for private lives. “And I do believe what’s most important before starting any project is to have a strong idea or concept. It’s not what dictates the design, but it’s what helps guide the decision-making process.”

Treadwell House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Treadwell House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Whether designing a spectacular showplace or a small but special house, the landscape always asks for excellence.

The challenge in designing and building this house lay in working not with the environment but within it. The structure, which is completely hidden from elevated neighbors, is anchored into the rolling profile of the hill. By carving a wedge out of the terrain into which the house is secured, the architects enabled the gentle slope of the ridge to continue onto the roof, effectively camouflaging its existence. The garage, built below the ridge, disappears into the hill.

A rock wall, constructed like an abstraction of the environment, retains the hillside from where it starts at the cut in the slope, then continues on into the kitchen. Built on a coastal stone patio, the house is a complement of timber and glass, its rectangular presence situated for front-row seating before the Pacific stage.

“We worked very hard,” said architect Mary Ann Schicketanz, “to simplify things; to subtract the design elements down to their essence.”

The entry is a glass door within a glass wall, which reflects the landscape, not the interior. Inside, the open floor plan marries the kitchen, defined by an island surfaced by a blue cast-concrete counter, to the living room, whose most prominent feature is the steel hearth, framed by a mantel of reclaimed barn wood.

The recessed ceiling, which undulates overhead, is supported by narrow planks, and the floor is set in stone. The walls alternate wide glass panels and long expanses of horizontal wood planks.

The 1,600-square-foot house has just two bedrooms, one considered the master, plus two and a half baths.

“I never imagined anything but earth tones in this house,” said Schicketanz, “but the client offset the neutral tones of cast cement and stone flooring by choosing tiny hot pink tiles for the master bath and aqua tiles for the children’s or guest bath. It works.”

Bathroom walls, painted in soft sea tones of blues, greens and sand suggest color is the only addition of art to the simple, almost austere design of this sculptural home designed with the outside in mind.

Treadwell House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Rob Carver
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

As a kid, Rob Carver liked to race go karts. Fascinated by structure and fabrication with exotic materials, he took advantage of a chance meeting with a racecar driver not to race cars, not to spectate from the stands but instead, to get under the hood and become a racecar mechanic for the team.

Three years eclipsed while he traveled on the professional sports car circuit, meeting drivers and showing up, week after week, at a different track in a different state. While he is still into go karts and is still interested in the dynamics of structure and shape, of form and function, he has shifted focus from automotives to architecture.

Born in Manhattan and raised in Glen Cove, NY, Carver, like his grandfather before him and two of his three brothers, spent four years at Lawrenceville, a private, all-boys boarding school near Princeton, NJ. Although the rest of the family went on to Princeton University, Carver broke tradition and went to “Cal,” the University of California at Berkeley, to study architecture.

“I just love California,” he said. “My mother was born in San Francisco. The first time I visited, I was 10 years old, and it was summertime. As soon as they opened the plane door, I knew, instantly, I would live here. I never varied from that plan.”

Actually impassioned by painting, Carver might have studied art, but he never quite believed he could make a living as an artist. Also intrigued by business and finance, he saw architecture as the alchemy of interests that would sustain him.

“At 18, what attracted me to architecture,” he said, “was its simplicity. All I really needed was a pencil to design architecture. Not everybody has a paintbrush and a set of paints, but everybody has a pencil. I liked the fact that I didn’t need a lot of tools to do my craft. Of course, that has changed today, and it’s all gotten rather complex. But I could still be an architect with a pencil.”

Carver graduated from Cal with his degree in architecture, but he hadn’t given up on art. Enchanted by the Central Coast, he paid $19,000 for a small property in Big Sur where, in his self-described shack, he painted for the next seven years.

“Always enthralled by the beauty of Big Sur, I was drawn to live there the first time I visited,” he said. “I wasn’t looking for a house but decided, in the first 15 minutes I was there, that this was where I wanted to be. I’ve been there ever since.”

In 1979, Carver established Diamonite Design, an architectural firm dedicated to creating projects which fully integrate the needs of his clients with the nature of their site.

“It probably took 10 years to get really established,” he said. “At first, I really didn’t know how to accomplish what I wanted to do. I knew what I liked but didn’t know how to get there. I knew what was beautiful but didn’t know how to execute it. So, I started slowly, started small, and put in the time.

“You have to be patient, be devoted to it and very observant to understand what is right, what is wrong and how it was accomplished.
You have to study good architecture, take it apart in your head to see how it was done, and put it back together to see how it works.”

In 1987, Mary Ann Schicketanz joined the firm and, five years later, it became Carver + Schicketanz, a “tight-knit group of creative individuals with overlapping talents and a shared goal of excellence.”

“Rob and I come from completely different backgrounds and nearly contrary schools of design,” said Schicketanz. “And yet, although

Rob Carver
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

we come from opposite approaches, we bring the same values, so we end up at the same place. We provide quite a complement to one another."

Today, Carver + Schicketanz is a full-service architectural firm, which employs an in-house interior design team and landscape designers.

"Many of our Big Sur houses are second homes," said Carver. "We do towels, dishes, art – we've even done the toothbrushes. We enjoy a diversity of clients from all over the world, some who want to be sheltered from the elements and some who want to be exposed to the majestic views. Some people can't stand up to Big Sur; the weather, the rugged terrain, the remote sites. Others thrive on it."

Although his architecture continues to dominate his art, Carver established an art studio down the coast where he always intends to devote more time to his painting.

"I am a very realistic painter who's trying to be more abstract," he said. "My work has always been very photo real, so it's a good exercise to break loose from that. I am always trying to get the thing perfectly real, so I can then abstract it."

Taylor House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Taylor House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

All motor vehicles must be abandoned at the street level and housed in a custom-built garage. With the benefit of a mechanical lift, two cars and a motorcycle stack neatly inside. On the driveway just outside, a space too tight to navigate, the solution was a turntable on which a parked car is manually spun around prior to departure.

Heading home is a bit of a hike.

Accessed by a fairly steep descent along a path of switchbacks through the duff, across a narrow bridge spanning Garrapata creek swirling below, and up the opposite bank, this steel house, set in and among the redwoods, is the ultimate campsite.

The original plan was inspired by the construction of the bridge to gain access to the site for a septic system installation. It evolved to the decision to build the home directly on the bridge. Absent approval, the plan was redesigned to site the structure across the bridge, where it would float on steel beams anchored by concrete piers.

Crafted of copper and rusted Cor-Ten steel, the façade of the house is an abstraction of redwood, its shape the suggestion of an expansive redwood stump. Barely visible from the lightly traveled Garrapata Road, the structure, housed in its matte rust coat, disappears into the anonymity of the forest.

In stark contrast, the interior of the house is fresh, clean, bright, white. Its two-story core, from which ancillary rooms cantilever like limbs among the trees, houses the master bedroom, which hovers above the living room. Among the various extensions, occupied by the media room, library and kitchen, the dining room juts out high above the creek. Its floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall glass creates a subtle distinction between inside and out, which provides the most dramatic presence and engaging view.

“The house just floats among the trees,” said architect Rob Carver.

Sequestered in an environment renowned for high fire hazard, all wood used in the structure was treated with a fire-resistant chemical, and a special foam system was installed, intended to withstand the rare yet legendary fires that have burned through the woodlands of Big Sur. The ultimate safeguard, however, is the fire shelter, a vault constructed of poured concrete and supplied with oxygen.

Resting assured, residents can enjoy their secluded retreat from the warmth of a hot tub recessed in their custom-milled deck among the trees or from a second, rooftop deck or from within a home designed to commune with the landscape.

Taylor House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Dickstein English House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Tucked into a natural berm in the hillside and sheltered by its foliage, it took two hearings to gain approval for the sod-roof house that would blend into the landscape. Slightly noticeable from Highway One, its architects were equally concerned with the visibility of the house. They also pondered its orientation toward the majestic rock face rising up from the canyon at the mouth of Garrapata Creek and its namesake bridge, a twin to and often mistaken for the picturesque Bixby Bridge a little farther south.

Working in and around existing cypress trees, the goal and the challenge merged in designing and building a house rugged enough to complement the dramatic landscape and withstand the coastal elements, without creating an obvious presence from the side of the road.

Fourteen years later, architect Mary Ann Schicketanz had a chance meeting with the current property owners, who had made plans to update or complete the house, depending on perspective, but had not yet chosen an architect. Carver + Schicketanz returned to finish what they had started.

“We remodeled and built an addition to the house,” said architect Rob Carver, “and had our interior design team furnish it. The property became a popular site for fashion photography owing, we imagine, to the privacy, the dramatic setting and the quality of the light.”

The house is a rugged fortress of sand-colored stucco, bolstered by heavy reclaimed timbers and softened by native grasses. The roof, a horizontal plane, is opened by deep skylights and elevated on the eastern exposure to accommodate high linear glass panes, and extended in a generous overhang to the west to protect the building from coastal weather.

Dickstein English House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

A massive stone structure flanking the house complements the craggy face of the mountain and supports the living room hearth bordered by glass to reveal the ocean. The floor alternates between slate and heavy wood, each weight and texture a complement to the artist-combed cabinets and refrigerator façade in the kitchen.

The interior design team completed the home with furnishings intended to stand up to the heavy timbers and rustic nature of the architecture, as well as the earthy colors of the house and its natural surroundings.

By respecting the spirit of the Land-Use plan, honoring the landscape, and working to design a house that would complement the natural elements of the coastal property, the structure was not only approved, but it was later cited as an example of quality Big Sur architecture.

“Based on the site of this house,” Carver said, “the way it hunkers down to the force of the ocean and the kind of weather we get on the edge of the continent, it has a certain strength to it." It had to.

Dickstein-English House
Carver + Schicketanz Architects

Leslie House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Whatever sensibilities a client brings to the design of the house, they are, necessarily, tempered by the coastal environment. When the two align, the synergy begins.

In this case, the clients brought a fascination with water to a site defined by a craggy reef anchored to a cove, its waves spilling over an imposing rock formation into numerous waterfalls. The house became a shelter from which to witness the water.

“Context is everything,” said architect Rob Carver, “which means the idea has to come from the site. The point is not to come up with a great idea and just put it somewhere, but to get a sense of what will work, what will blend in, and then honor the site without sacrificing the expectations or comfort of the client.”

Every room in the house offers a view of the ocean. Working from a simple design of complex execution, the architects designed a solid spine from which radiate pie-shaped segments framed by curved walls. Each staggered segment offers at least a corner of glass on the western exposure to access the ocean, and a bank of high windows on the eastern wall to bring in light.

A sense of arrival was essential to the architects, to the owners, to the ocean. Not only must the landscaping become an inviting complement to the natural environment, but the entry, the ushering in to a coastal home, must be equally dramatic. A solid front door, when flung wide, exposes the ocean through an opposing wall of glass. The sea looms in, seemingly up close and personal.

Leslie House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

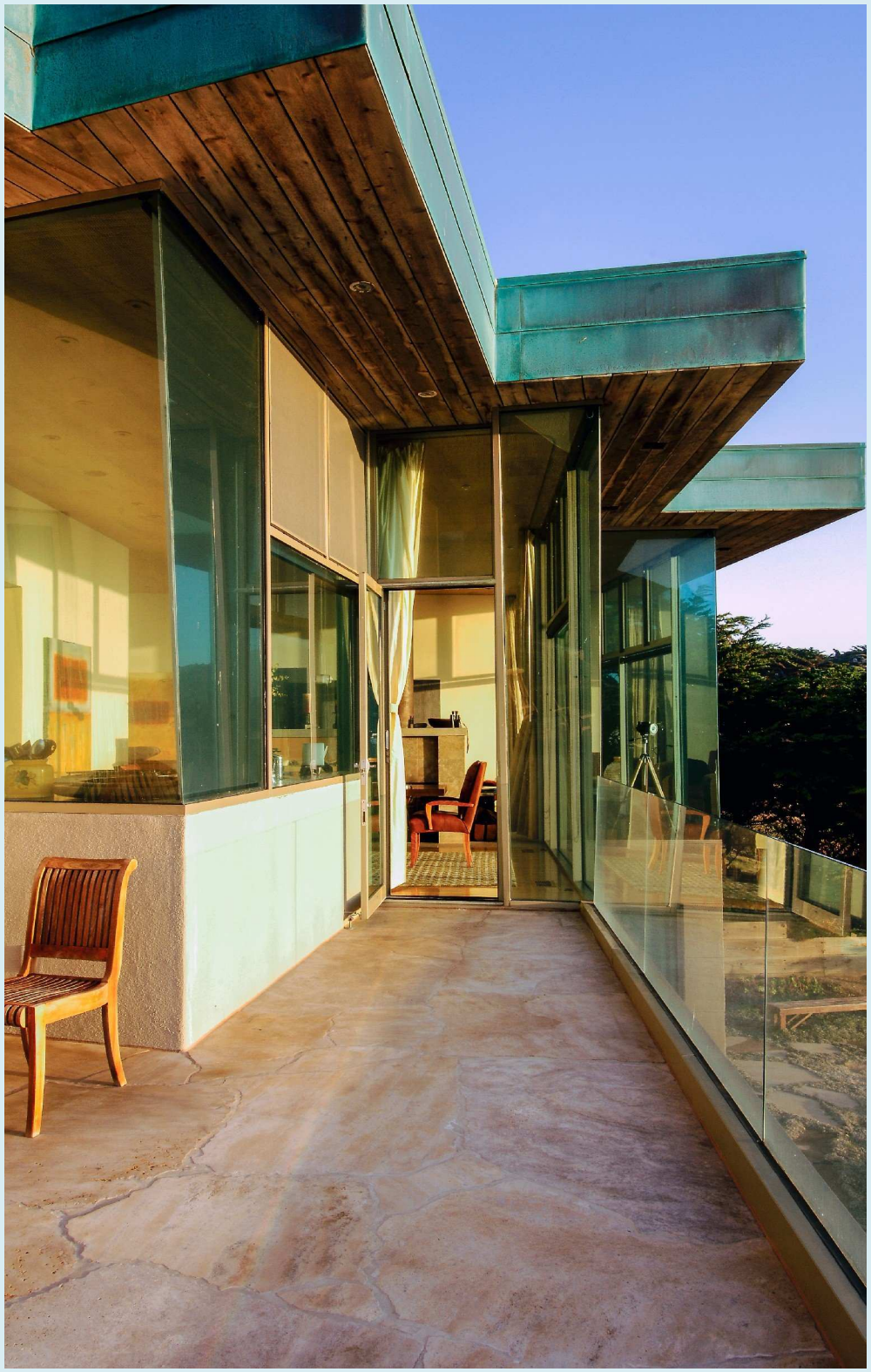
The structure is a modern, contemporary study in geometry, its low profile dropping into the rolling contour of the coastline. By stair-stepping the roof, the architects broke a larger form into smaller segments that fit into the landscape. As it works with the environment, it also must work for its residents.

The 3,600-square-foot house, constructed on two levels, was designed with two lifestyles in mind. The main floor was intended for the couple who bought the property; a clean, sophisticated space for adult living. The lower level, stepped into the landscape, provides generous guest quarters for visiting grandchildren and their families.

“We started by designing a small house that would serve two people,” said architect Mary Ann Schicketanz, “and expanded it to a house that feels right and works for 15, without compromising the experience of the two. Downstairs, where the children stay, is a play area, kitchenette and laundry. And, of course, stunning ocean views.”

When the children are not in residence, life continues upstairs, where bamboo flooring is warmed by radiant heat, the counter is dropped to avoid obstructing the view, and hot tubbing is enjoyed in the relative privacy of the open sea.

Leslie House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects



Leslie House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Sarin House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

The greatest challenge in designing and building Sarin house was that there was none. Except, therefore, to make it interesting. That and, perhaps, the Coastal Commission.

Normally, there is some sort of natural feature in the landscape around which to shape or pattern or anchor the house. But, in this case, a wildflower meadow fell from the highway and rolled down toward the ocean. And, on that, the client wanted a house.

The client hoped for a house set back from the cliff, far enough to obscure the view of neighboring homes yet built as close to the edge as possible to maximize the view of the ocean. Therein lay the challenge.

“Normally,” said architect Mary Ann Schicketanz, “the house is subordinate to the land. But in this case, we needed to design and build a house that would become the feature. It needed to be simple, something that reflected the sweeping simplicity of the site. It also needed to have a dramatic presence that could stand up next to the ocean. And, it needed to temper the brilliance, the glare coming off the sunlit sea.”

The house is designed on a strong axis and organized around a core of skylights intended to bring light to the middle of the structure, while creating ventilation at the apex. Created as a long, linear space that parallels the coast, the 4,500-square-foot house flows easily from one end to the other, each anchored by dramatic sculpture.

The intrigue of the house is the weight and texture of materials introduced to create depth and presence. Supported by peeled lodge-pole columns at the covered entry and along the western face, the house is introduced by a heavy hand-carved wood door, which opens to an island – surfaced in travertine and textured with a subtle combing – that serves to separate the entry and dining spaces.

The central living space, flanked by a wall of dark-wood closet doors, introduces an open floor plan, which exposes a blond kitchen with wide wood counters, the center island surfaced in travertine.

Slate flooring gives way to reclaimed fir, which steps down into the butter-yellow living room, whose western exposure is a wall of six vertical panes of glass bearing witness to the sea.

The length of the structure houses four bedrooms and four and a half baths off a long, tall, narrow hallway broken by blond wood doors shielding closets or access to each room.

“I tend to design from the inside out,” said Schicketanz, “defining the living space by what creates continuity and facilitates the lifestyle of the client, all within the context of the landscape.”

The house, with its series of right angles and minimal design forming a long, rectangular shape, is a rather subtle intrusion to the flow of scenery from the verdant palisades rising to the east, and the native grasses and coastal plants rolling down toward the craggy coast.

Sarin House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Sarin House
Carver + Schicketanz, Architects

Daniel Piechota

Architect Daniel Piechota was raised with a lot of structure. His father was a civil engineer, and both brothers followed his lead into the engineering field. For Piechota, it was never a matter of whether he should do something else or if he would even think of it. Yet ultimately, he broke ground and went into architecture.

Graduating in 1985 with a degree in architecture from California Polytechnic Institute at San Luis Obispo was a step on the right path toward a career that complemented the family aesthetic while fostering his own.

Another exceptional career move was Piechota's participation in the design of a Southern California residential project under the legendary Bart Prince, an architect renowned for his organic designs. The six-month stint led to a subsequent opportunity to work with Mickey Muennig, the architect of record on the renowned Post Ranch Inn and some 30 signature residential designs throughout Big Sur. The influence is subtle but unmistakable, a style reinterpreted.

"I worked with Mickey from 1987 until 1991," Piechota said. "He was designing Post Ranch Inn then, so I worked with him on that, and then continued helping him with projects while doing my own designs out of San Francisco. In 1995, I got the commission to design the house on Division Knoll in Big Sur, which really sent me out on my own."

Although the owner knew what he wanted, and remained closely involved in the 6,000-square-foot project, Piechota actually experienced a fairly free reign in executing that vision.

"I knew ahead of time," Piechota said, "that he wanted curved roof lines and a certain floor plan. But, as the project went along, attitudes changed toward choices we made; pieces of glass got bigger and bigger, and aluminum was necessarily replaced with stainless steel."

Another commission arose during the construction of the house on Division Knoll; this time to redesign a legendary Big Sur property. Known simply as "Greyrock," the property had once housed foremen's quarters during the 1920s construction of Highway One. Already rebuilt as a single-family residence under the guidance of Samuel Fineberg, it was to be cleared of the footprints of history for a fresh investment in the future.

The project, which began as a remodel, evolved into a 10,000-square-foot complement to the landscape, much of it underground.

"I usually have the luxury of working from scratch," Piechota said. "By studying the landscape and working with the client, I develop an understanding of the project. But Greyrock began as a bathroom remodel and grew, organically over time, to a complete renovation, including kitchen and baths, a few new bedrooms and an underground bunker to house wine, a wood shop and a tractor. The five-bedroom house and its environment is the result of quite a process."

Piechota's next design for the Big Sur coastline went into construction in 2005 to realize a 10,000-square foot estate at Otter Cove.

"We were commissioned to do the design for this house by next-door neighbors," said Piechota, "who wanted to sell the property with a design they approved. The new owners weren't looking for a house as modern as this is, so I took them down to see Greyrock, and they decided a modern design can be a lot warmer than they imagined. Besides, there is a lot of value in buying a Big Sur property with the entitlement already achieved."

Piechota remains in the San Francisco area with his children and his wife, Kim Piechota, an affordable housing developer.

Division Knoll
Daniel Piechota, Architect

It is hard to go unnoticed when perched on top of the world. It is also hard to imagine a better view. What is hidden about this property is not the expansive blue-green panels of glass shimmering in the sun, is not the arched copper rooflines reflecting light, is not the imposing presence of the 3,300-square-foot residence, rising like a crystal sculpture out of the landscape. Its identity is a carefully guarded secret.

The wonder of the glass house that glows like a hearth on the hill by night and gleams like sunlight on the sea from its station upon 90 acres sequestered behind a sturdy steel gate off the Old Coast Road is part of the allure of the journey that becomes Big Sur.

Designed in 1995 by Muennig disciple Daniel Piechota, and constructed in 1997, the house was a somewhat evolutionary process as the design played out on the landscape. The glass became bigger and thicker, aluminum gave way to steel, and the flooring was surfaced in a 3/4-inch Santa Fe limestone.

Some of the decisions were structural; others were simply by choice. The budget is rarely a problem when there really isn't one.

"Essentially, this is an all-glass house built to take advantage of an exceptional 360-degree view," said contractor Bill McCloud, who built Piechota's design through an eponymous firm later named Coast Ridge Construction. "A second house for its owners, it's an architecturally advanced cabin, rarely used, whose five bedrooms and living room were built in a glass row to host parties and brief visits. It wasn't really designed as a residence."

The glass is anchored by a steel-framed structure, its copper roof constructed in five barrel vaults floating above the glass via clerestories, interior risings permitting the passage of light, and largely supported by three board-formed concrete fireplaces. The ceiling is constructed in Muennig-style open beams, each vault an arc of on-edge rails supported by heavy glu-lam curved beams.

"The house took 18 months to build," said McCloud. "We built the entire Post Ranch Inn in18 months, so you get a sense of the challenge. The site was almost always windy, and we were dangling 14 by 9-foot panes of 3/4-inch glass, weighing 2,500 pounds on the end of a crane while the wind was blowing 25 to 50 miles an hour."

Securely in place, that glass stops all exterior sound. The ubiquitous ocean, surging and crashing below, moves by like a silent picture. There is no deflection in the glass even, says McCloud, when the wind hits it at 80 miles an hour. And, when the glass front door is latched, the place is still.

When not entertaining, the residents sit side by side in matched leather chairs slung low to the ground, creating ideal front-row seating before an enormous panel of glass affording a wide-angle view on the coastal scene that reaches all the way to Santa Cruz.

"I have to admit," said McCloud, "those chairs and that setting are my favorite on the property."

Behind the chairs, which turn their backs on the living room, the kitchen reaches across a stretch of southern exposure,flanked by glass walls revealing the drama of the coastal mountains. Bulthaup German cabinetry in stainless steel complements a heavy Gaggenau stove and Sub Zero refrigerator. Twin islands in blond wood, with stainless steel cabinets, are surfaced in a dark granite.

Beneath the house, caretaker's quarters form a rather unassuming complement to the main structure, with its white walls, blond-wood cabinetry and stone surfaces. The northwestern exposures are, of course, glass.

Divison Knoll
Daniel Piechota, Architect

Division Knoll
Daniel Piechota, Architect

Greyrock
Daniel Piechota, Architect

On behalf of an 80-acre, ridge-top expanse overlooking Anderson Canyon, Daniel Piechota set out to design a 10,000-square-foot copper complex. His vision was a structure that would not rise above the terrain but work with it, following the fall line and becoming part of the landscape, without obscuring the dramatic coastline and blue ocean spreading out to the horizon.

He achieved his goal in Greyrock, whose name speaks to the natural stone texturing the verdant elevations of the property, and the expansive retaining walls formed of rocks quarried on site, which support the structure and define its dimensions. The name also suits a massive stone outcropping that flanks a stairway of low-profile stone steps leading down to the unobtrusive entrance of the estate.

East of the entry, a two-car garage retreats behind copper-framed doors that complement the architecture of the house, an arrangement of right angles open to northern and southern exposures, as it runs, east to west, down the terrain. The front of the building is flanked by a rectangular moat constructed in two steps, one flowing into the other, the water rolling off a curved edge and landing in a small aggregate pond braced by natural stone.

Smooth stone steps follow the elevation of the moat, leading down to the lower reaches of the building and out onto a manicured lawn and recessed hot tub edged in stone that seems to disappear into the setting.

Through glass front doors framed in copper and flanked by sidelights, three polished-wood treads are visible, which rise from the stone flooring to matching back doors that open to an observation deck rimmed in stainless steel and wire cable for an unobstructed view of the sea.

A second set of treads leads to a lower level, visible from the entry through low glass panels flanking the stairs. The space is dedicated to a trio of bedrooms, each set in stone flooring, sheltered by open-beam ceilings and fitted with custom wood closets, cupboards and counters.

The bedrooms, which open through French doors to the landscape, are served by a single bathroom surfaced in stone that continues across the double-sink counter and up one wall, adjacent a glass shower stall. Instead of a mirror, the counter is installed beneath windows open to a southern coastal view.

A set of treads rises to a the master suite, a spacious setting warmed by woven carpeting and served by a private bath whose glass shower provides an 8-foot window to a coastal view. The suite opens, through French doors, to the central patio.

The western side of the structure houses the kitchen, separated from a spacious living area by a utility island surfaced in mottled gray granite. A second counter, perpendicular to the first, houses bookshelves and serves to divide the room. A low fireplace beneath a cylindrical copper hood matches a second fireplace in the sitting room directly below.

A sunken library, accessed by a set of stairs flanked by bookcases, looks out onto the front moat. The dining room, arranged within the main living area, offers a coastal view via seamless corner windows.

The main ceiling is framed by blond, arched, glu-lam beams which support a coved skylight running the length of the room. The living area, like the structure of the house, is clean, simple, sculptural. Accessed through a rounded copper door set into stone, a cavernous stone bunker emerges from beneath the private drive, which houses an expansive wine cellar and workshop. Much of the complex actually exists underground, a secret in the coastal landscape.

Greyrock
Daniel Piechota, Architect

Greyrock
Daniel Piechota, Architect

Mark Mills, Architect

The first time he visited Taliesen West, the winter camp of Frank Lloyd Wright, Mark Mills was still in high school. Wright, himself, was off in Russia, “receiving some kind of recognition,” but the desert masterpiece did not disappoint the teen, who had seen his work, read his books and considered Wright the “only live one around.”

Five years later, Mills (1921-2007), an Arizona native who had studied two years at the University of Tucson, graduated from the University of Colorado with a bachelor of science in architectural engineering. His first job was in Phoenix, where he became a draftsman for the architecture firm Lescher and Mahoney. He also sent Wright a telegram, requesting an interview.

Mills met Wright for dinner on a Saturday night in Scottsdale, Ariz., in the lobby of an inn where the senior architect was improvising at the grand piano.

“I understand you’ve been working in an architect’s office,” said Wright. “You understand I can’t pay you anything.”

“I do understand,” said Mills. “I can’t pay you anything, either.”

The account was settled. Mills spent four years working at Taliesin West on what he later called a “scholarship basis.”

“He reminded me of it most often,” said Mills, “whenever I broke something. Seriously, I got about everything I didn’t know from Wright. His was a very intense and lasting influence. Working with him was a very broad and extensive experience, the kind you don’t forget about, down to the details.”

Perhaps the most important aesthetic he adopted was a reverence for the use of space and a respect for the landscape.

“The architecture always has to be oriented properly to the sun and the views,” he said, “and every other detail about putting a structure on the ground must involve not having to disturb too much of it. We like to be kind to the ground, not tear it all up with backhoes. To design well is, hopefully, to minimize the disturbance of nature.”

Two years after departing Taliesen in 1948 to work with Paolo Soleri, the two completed “Dome House,” in Arizona, a Soleri design, and the first published project for both. Mills went on to work for the firm of Anshen & Allen in San Francisco until he was invited to build a “shack” for the lady friend of a colleague. This assignment led to a job with Miles Bain, who had contracted to build the Walker house in Carmel, a Frank Lloyd Wright design.

Upon completion of the project, Mills decided to stay in town. He took a room in a Carmel duplex and went to work for himself.

Mills met Barbara, his wife of 53 years, through friends, mosaicists who introduced him to the Novice living in a Benedictine enclave on Partington Ridge, Big Sur. Inundated by the “sandal-wearing Bohemians” living down the coast, she had an aversion to the sandals Mills was wearing. They married anyway, and raised two daughters while Mills’ career played out in Carmel.

“I never had a firm,” he said, “no office, no street traffic. People went looking for me; I never had to advertise, never had to sell anything. After I built my first house, news of it was published, and that brought work. Each time we built another house, it was publicized, and the work followed. During the day, I built houses; at night, I worked on my drawings.”

Mark Mills, Architect

Much of Mills' architectural sensibilities reflected a conversation he shared with Wright during a Sunday morning talk at Taliesen. In portraying seashells as "housing produced by God," Wright said, "You see, there is never a limit. Nothing indicates that the infinite variety could end, so long as [its] principle is inviolate." Mills' resulting orientation toward forms in nature is reflected in more than 35 structures throughout California, many of them along the Central Coast.

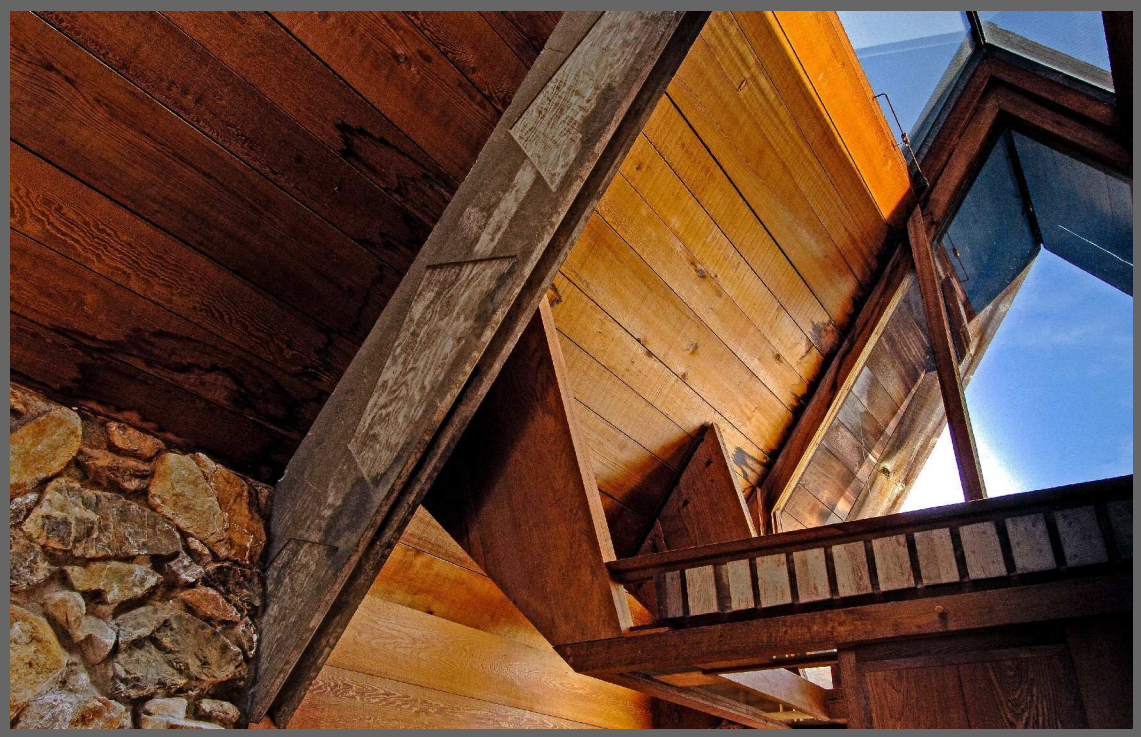
Working with a client's affinity for the Greek isles, in 1969, Mills designed a barrel-and-groin-vaulted structure whose complex interior space was formed of the intersection of vaults. Rising no more than 14 feet above grade, the structure clings to the landscape on a coastal cliff overlooking the ocean near Big Sur.

Mills' 1972 "Fan Shell" house, a low-profile concrete structure formed of four radiating vaults flanking a larger, center vault, is anchored into the dunes overlooking its namesake beach along the legendary 17-Mile Drive in Pebble Beach.

"There must have been a sense of God in these little seashell forms," said Wright, "to produce this infinite beauty of form. There is in us, too, that interior sense of becoming which we call God, working in us all, and which, you will see, has infinite capacity which no human mind can ever encompass and imprison."

In 1977, Mills designed a progressive house on a ridge overlooking the Monterey Bay. Arguably his masterpiece, the tri-wing structure extends beneath a sky-lit dome rising like a space ship over the open architecture. Once again, shape, form and elevation complement the profile of the terrain.

"The successful house fits into the environment," said Barbara. "It doesn't intrude; the landscape or coastline is, by and large, untouched. For Mark, the site was the determining factor. He tried to make his buildings invisible. The land was the first client."



Ceiling Detail Wildbird House
Mark Mills, Architect

Wildbird (Owings House)
Mark Mills, Architect

Wildbird (Owings House)
Mark Mills, Architect

Just off Highway One at a bend in the road near Grimes Point and down a lane obstructed by tree roots and time, a cliff dweller sits, perched on the edge of obscurity. Called Wildbird reportedly by the woman who loved it most, the caboose-shaped A-frame marked the end of an era, particularly as it awaited renovation by the family who would love it next.

Maybe it was because he lived in a small A-frame cottage in Carmel, but admittedly, architect Mark Mills believed there was a more dramatic style for the home he was asked to design on a precipice overlooking the Big Sur coastline.

But the late Nathaniel and Margaret Owings were set on an A-frame, perhaps envisioning the structure jutting out even further over the craggy cliff rising more than 400 feet above the surf, swirling and crashing upon the jagged rocks below.

Presumably Owings, an architect of his own renown, could have designed the house. But he or maybe Margaret, a noted conservationist and animal rights activist, asked Mills, a Frank Lloyd Wright disciple, to design the house they had in mind.

Mills rose to the occasion with his signature simplicity of style and economy of scale, a design sensibility which had a tendency to honor the landscape first and the client, second.

He acquiesced to the A-frame; though he designed the structure to run north to south instead of facing west, out to sea.

Using a series of heavy cement frames painted to resemble wood, Mills supported the long open structure between two expansive A-frames fitted with cathedral-like windows, one facing up the coast and toward the palisades of the Santa Lucias, and the other, straight down the southern coastline.

“There wasn’t anything I could do to dissuade the Owings,” said Mills; “they were set on that A-frame. I felt it was not appropriate for the setting. I designed a wing at the junction of the two forms that went into the hillside; there was just no other way of resolving it. I believe Margaret did some artwork on the wall that went into the hillside.”

The western wing housed a utility room, which shared the space with large granite rocks jutting out from the hillside, as well as a narrow hallway leading to two bedrooms and a modest bath whose suspended counter was surfaced in Caribbean green tile. The house, which straddled the sharp ridge, required a concrete platform, the construction of which Mills considered a major structural operation. He also designed an exterior terrace with a railing around it to keep folks, enjoying the 180-degree view, from falling into the ocean.

The terrace patio and interior entry of the home were surfaced with a mosaic of river rocks and other stones resembling geological striations, which Mills credited to the late Gordon Newell, a renowned sculptor who spent many years and left considerable art on the Big Sur Coast.

The spare kitchen, which faced south down the coast, opened to the main living area, which was flanked by heavy stone masonry, the western wall relived the by an inset fireplace beneath a heavy rusted-steel hood. The floor was exposed aggregate and wood, the ceiling, a series of horizontal redwood planks, framed the A-shape of the home, at the apex of which a convex skylight ran the length of the building.

Overlooking the home atop a series of stairs set into the hill was a separate caretaker’s unit, which was to be upgraded to a small guest house.

The renovations made to the home, intended to bring the 1957 structure to current lifestyle standards, promised to maintain the integrity of the original structure and focus on the setting.

Wildbird (Owings House)
Mark Mills, Architect

Vanderveen House
Mark Mills, Architect

The blaze began to the south, at Red Creek. He called the fire brigade, but they had been sent out to a coastal fire, which turned out to be a false alarm. By the time they returned, the fire was out of control. It burned 70 acres, leaving nothing in its path.

“We got out one hour before the house burned down; there was fire all around us,” said owner Loet Vanderveen. "We had gathered a few small things, but you just don’t think clearly in that circumstance. I suppose you are more or less in shock. I forgot things, like my photographs. We saved some of the ceramics; a bronze horse melted down totally. The fire was that hot.”

From among the ashes, Vanderveen, a renowned sculptor, rose like a phoenix to begin again, starting with the house.

The first time architect Mark Mills designed the place, in 1959, he did so with views in mind. The second time he designed the house, after the fire in 1985, he focused on the landscape. Perhaps, once you learn how easily it can all go up in smoke, you direct your concerns to the art of it. The first house was a study in geometric design, an angular place intended to flank the elevations of the terrain. With minor modifications, the second house is a fraternal twin to its predecessor.

“The main difference,” said Mills, “is that the first house was made out of heavy reclaimed bridge timbers. We couldn’t get them the second time, so we manufactured the look out of glu-laminated beams.”

Rising two miles out of a canyon and cresting a ridge, the property echoes silence despite the ubiquitous presence of the open sea, churning without sound, below. Kukui grass rolls out across the approach to the 2,000-square-foot house, whose level roofline, lying just below the summit, is not immediately visible from the drive.

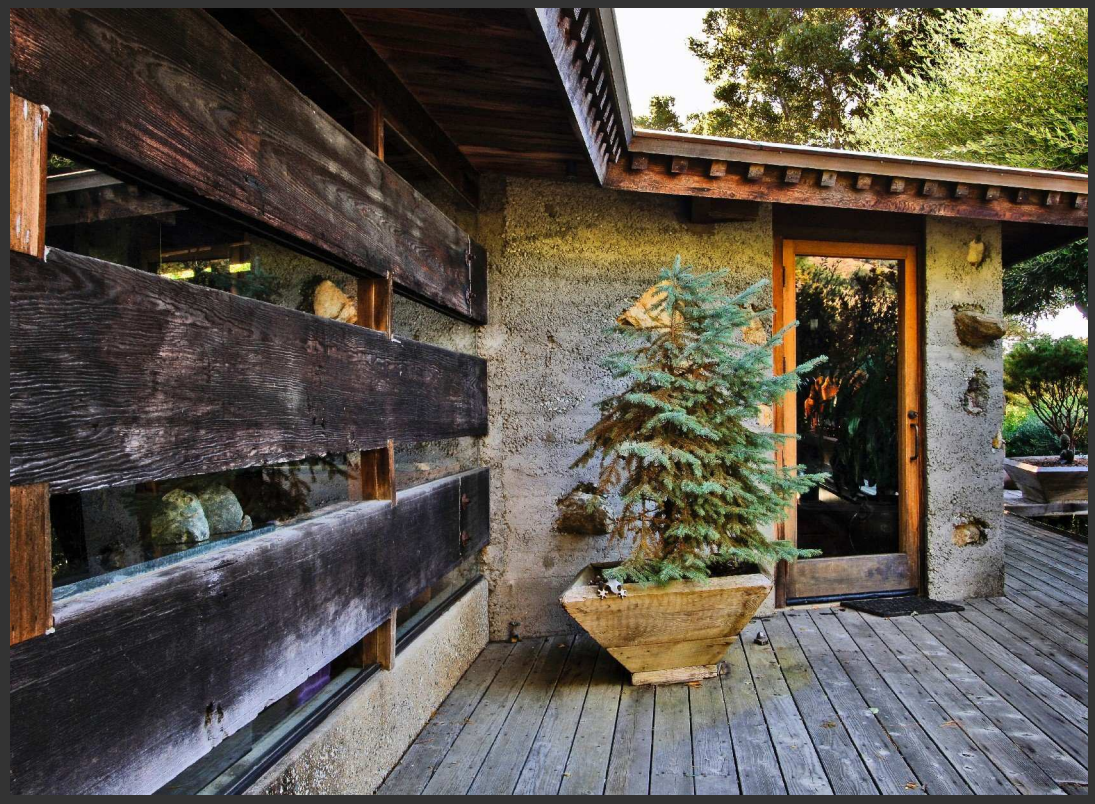
The structure, itself, is weighty and thick, anchored to the cliff by heavy beams and chunky cement, and flanked by horizontal wood beams, relieved by panes of glass. Two heavy carved-wood doors open to acid-stained cement flooring cut in parallelograms spreading out across the open living room. Local granite stones add texture and presence to the cement chimney, a focal point of the living room. Cement piers support the structure throughout the house.

“Mark usually put rocks close together,” said Vanderveen. “We changed the composition a little the second time around. All concrete was poured by hand, its pebbles purposely exposed. This fireplace is more monumental than the first one.”

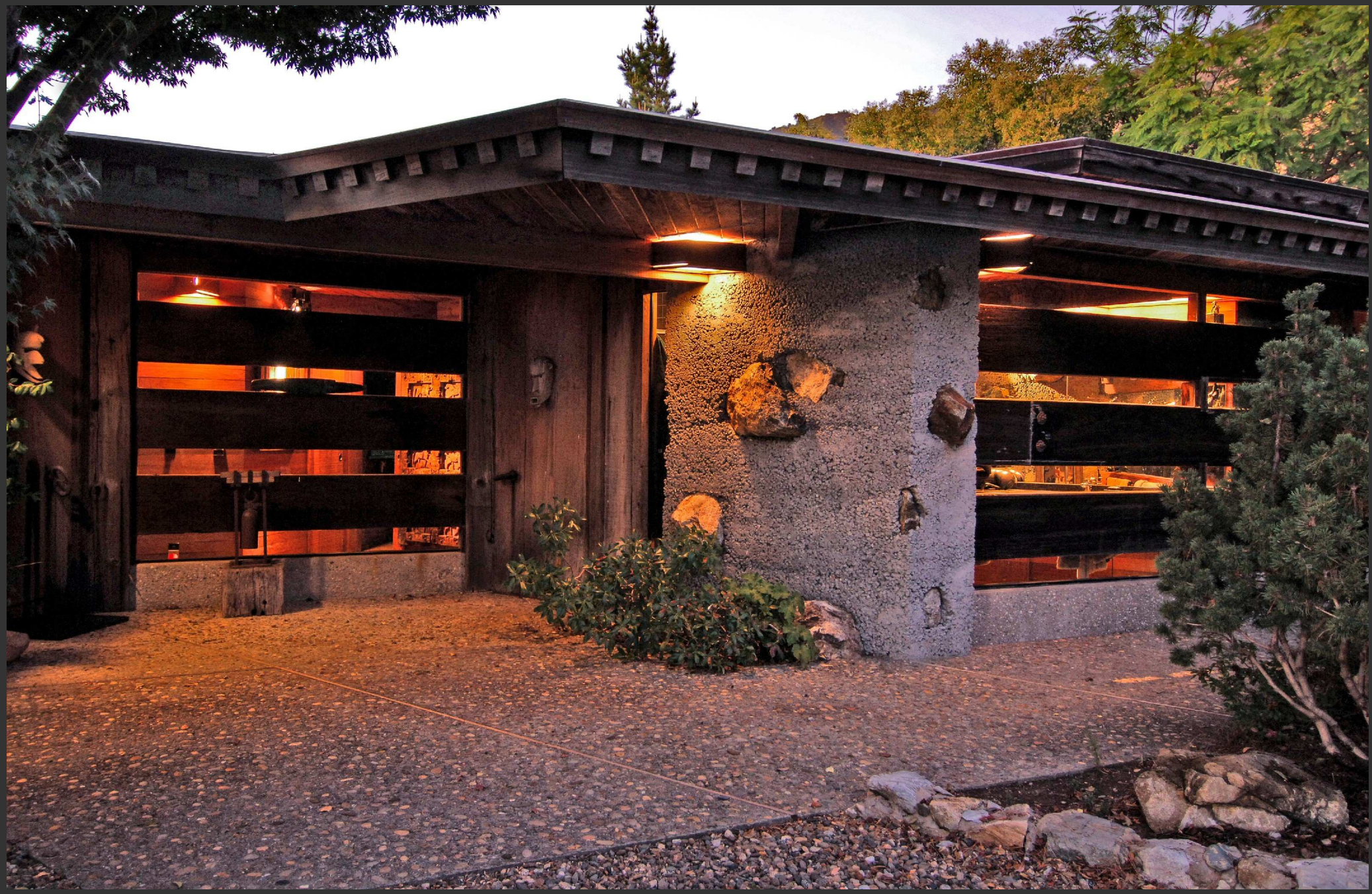
The dark, galley-style kitchen behind the living room is an elegant pass-through in walnut and granite, complemented by Vanderveen's work, a bronze panther in black patina. An exterior hallway turns to enter the media room, formed by one wall of pebbled cement, with others in redwood where cabinets disappear into paneling.

The bathroom is efficient, angular, almost sculptural in its sophisticated black granite façade. The bedrooms, framed in redwood and faced with glass panels, are oriented toward the landscape. “There is hardly a right angle in the house,” said Vanderveen.

Rimless decking surrounds the north side of the house, and a screened-in deck, shaped like the bow of a ship with its angled timbers, provides a comfortable vantage on that silent sea.



Vanderveen House
Mark Mills, Architect



Vanderveen House
Mark Mills, Architect

Erik Nielsen, Architect

The Big Sur landscape warrants an economy of scale in architecture. The Big Sur resident tends to requesst an organic design that complements the landscape, and the use of natural materials, both design elements that speak to the sensibilities of master architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Architectural designer Erik Nielsen would be happy to incorporate such vision into his plans. Just don't call it a "Wright" house. Unless it truly is.

"From an architectural point of view," said Nielsen, "what has always stuck with me is people who attempt to do a 'Wright-inspired' house. One must say 'inspired' if it wasn't actually Wright's design. And yet, most people usually miss Wright's intent, his scale, his proportion. They throw in a mitered glass corner and call it a 'Wright' house. It just isn't."

Nielsen, a disciple, considerable scholar and apparent authority on the work of the late Master, has what he calls the largest private collection of Wright's plans and drawings outside the Taliesin archives at Wright's winter haven in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Nielsen believes he hit the mark with what he called "Surenisea," a word play on the nearly 2,000-square-foot home he designed for himself and his wife Linda along the Big Sur coastline. Focused on Wright's 1940s design aesthetic, Nielsen endeavored to create the kind of building Wright would have placed on the property had he visited the site during that era. His visitors from Taliesin West, he says, approved.

"I started the design in 1976," said Nielsen, "and moved into the house nearly four years later. Being a long-time admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright and his principles of architecture, I approached the design, having done a lot of research on Wright, with a good understanding of how he would have designed for such an inspiring site."

The property was later sold, renamed to Abalone Cove, and modified to suit the lifestyle and aesthetic of the next owner, another Frank Lloyd Wright fan.

Quite simply, after nearly 20 years, Nielsen was ready to move on, to invest in a new project. He stayed in the area for several more years in a house of completely different scale and proportion, more consistent with the weighty presence of a monastery. Nielsen's next move took the couple to the Gold Country of Sonora, Calif., where he designed their present home, Eagle's Lair.

The drama of Nielsen's architecture does have a theatrical foundation. Born and raised in Seattle, Nielsen landed the opportunity to work in a 1963 Elvis Presley movie being shot in town during his junior year of high school. Impressed by the potential of a career in film, he auditioned for the Seattle Repertory Theater and got in on its inaugural season. Contacts led the young actor to summer stock theater in Santa Monica, Calif. and, eventually, to a bachelor's degree in theater arts from the University of California, Los Angeles.

"Along with my degree in theater arts," said Nielsen, "I minored in architecture. Every art class I took involved a design project, which I usually worked out to involve a house. After about 10 years of both film and television work, I decided it was time for a change. I enrolled in architecture classes at California Polytechnic Institute, San Luis Obispo, and made the decision to pursue architecture."

Nielsen still enjoys referencing and working from a Wright inspiration, but he also appreciates historic architecture, such as the medieval-style castle he designed for a bed and breakfast inn, as well as the French Normandy-style estate he built for a grape grower in Fresno, Calif.

"Generally, he said, "I try to work with my clients to help them achieve their idea of a dream house. Ultimately, it is the client who has to be happy with what I design for them. If it just happens to go in the 'Wright direction,' that thrills me."

Abalone Cove
Erik Nielsen, Architect

Abalone Cove
Erik Nielsen, Architect

Hidden behind a wood gate, a glen of some 300 cypress trees effectively erases the highway and shelters the estate from wind and weather. Stone steps wander down to a gentle verdant slope, where sits a stone bench by a memory garden.

Inspired by the 4.4-acre spread along the Big Sur coastline between Granite and Abalone coves, and imbued with the architectural sensibilities of Frank Lloyd Wright, Erik Nielsen designed a house that would enable him to live with the land rather than on it. His intention was a house that would neither contribute to nor take from environment but rather, would become part of it. Nearly 20 years later, Nielsen sold the house now called “Abalone Cove” to a buyer seeking a similar experience.

Built on 2.1 acres, the 1,800-square-foot, low-profile dwelling resides beneath a hipped roof of fiberglass slate composite with low pitch and extended eaves that shelter floor-to-ceiling panels of glass from southern and western exposures to the sea. Crafted of more than 12,000 board feet of clear-heart redwood milled expressly for the house, and some 70 tons of Bouquet Canyon stone quarried in the Los Angeles basin, the structure is an icon of organic architecture tailored to the Big Sur aesthetic and worthy of the elements of coastal weather.

The flooring, typical of a Wright design, is an expanse of stained concrete scored in panels, which continues out onto the patio. The coved ceilings are surfaced in a board-and-batten pattern and rimmed by a dropped panel, behind which recessed lights provide a subtle glow as warm and as red as the wood.

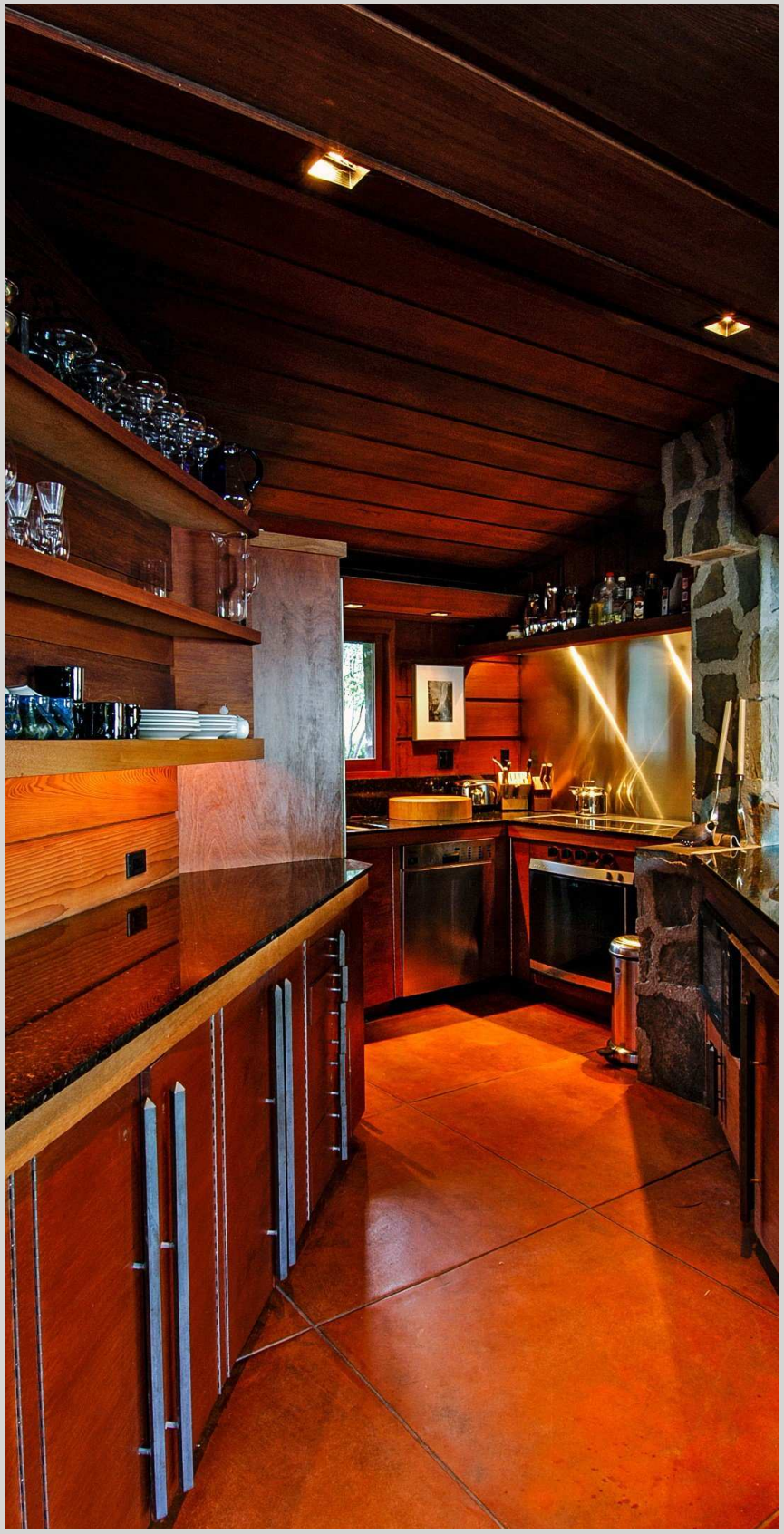
The glass front door pivots on a hidden axis to reveal an open entry, which distinguishes the main living area of the home from the master suite. The entry empties in to a long, open hallway flanked by windows that expose the lawn spreading out to the cliff, and a wooden bench perched at the edge of the sea. The windows are divided by angled columns of stone, creating a gallery effect down the hall. Beneath the glass, a granite counter sits atop built-in cabinetry along the length of the hall, its doors fitted with steel pulls.

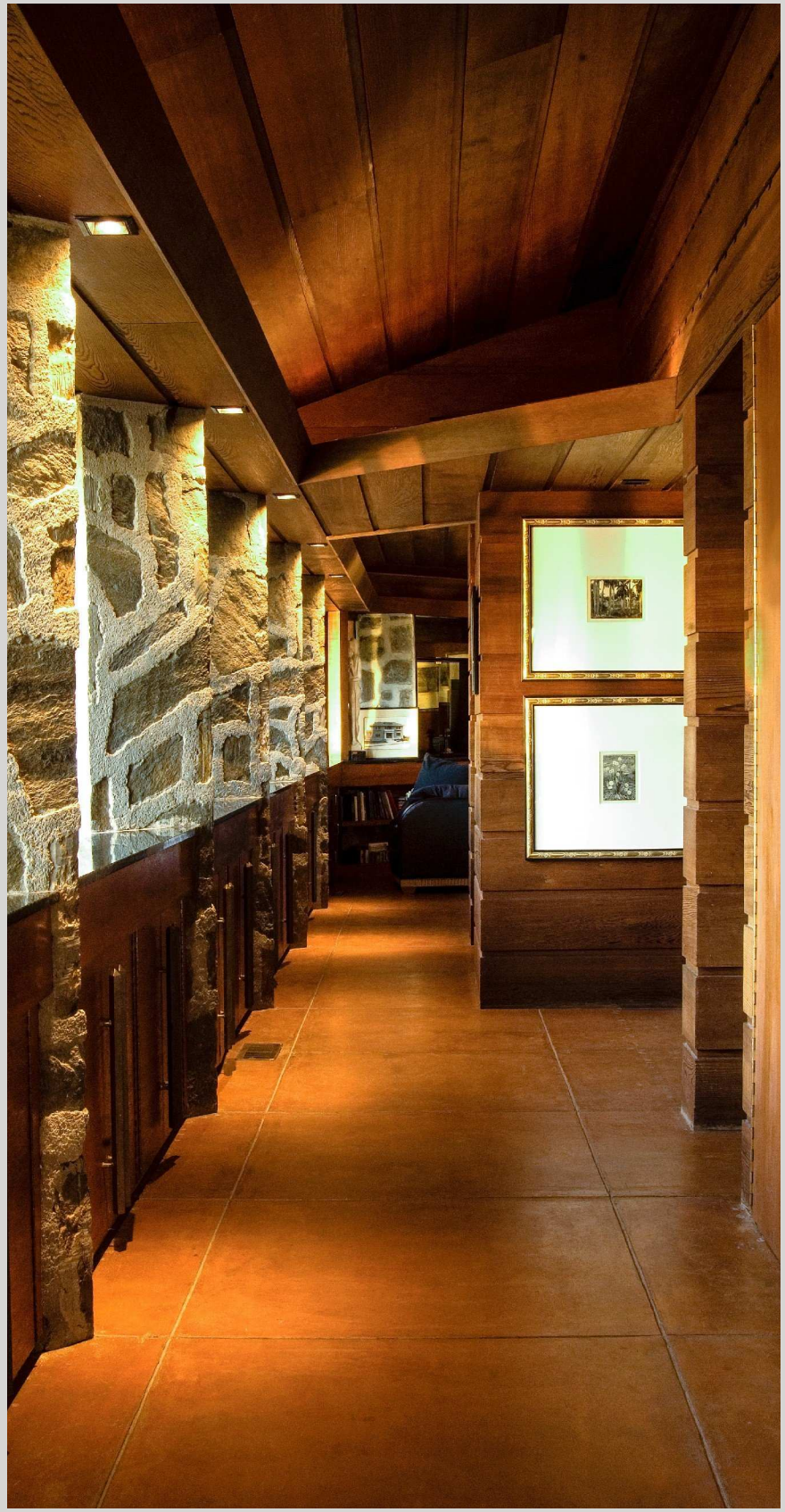
The warm interior of the home is enhanced by a walk-in fireplace and custom built-in furniture upholstered in red-toned fabrics designed by Wright and reproduced with permission from Schumacher & Co. The galley is small but efficient, anchored between stone pillars and open, across a dark granite countertop, to the living room.

At the opposite end of the long hallway, a guest room and accompanying bath are tucked into a modest space paneled in redwood and exposed, through southeastern windows, to a lush garden of poppies and bougainvillea. The double bed slips into a space once occupied by a closet, and the bath hosts a set-in cast iron “thinking” tub framed in mahogany.

The hall concludes in the master suite whose bath is tucked in the corner behind doors that slide like shoji screens. The bed, set into an alcove, faces the coastal setting with vantage on two coves. Closet doors, set on the bias, are fitted with full-length mirrors to create the illusion of space and light. A fireplace adds warmth to the room. The angled architecture, wood surfaces and economy of space create the aesthetic of a private yacht.

At the back of the columned carport, a guest suite, complete with built-in media room, bedroom, open shower and laundry, is a visual complement to the original architecture.





Abalone Cove
Erik Nielsen, Architect

Abalone Cove
Erik Nielsen, Architect

Will Shaw, Architect

The first time she saw the property playing out in all its wild and rugged ways across five coastal acres overlooking Pfeiffer Ridge, she simply said, “This is a piece I’d like to have.” Mary Shaw bought the property in 1966, when she was an independent woman, with the means to purchase the place she saw as the setting and the premise for a long-running romance by the sea. She had the man in mind and imagined he could conjure the house where the story would unfold.

By the time she laid the cornerstone of her home, she had married modern architect Will Shaw, who had designed the Big Sur house as a love poem to his bride while on a teaching fellowship in environmental design at the American Academy in Rome. There, he was presented the prestigious Prix de Rome award.

Upon their return to California, the couple lived in an old adobe home at 502 Pierce St. near City Hall in Monterey, which they bought from her brother by telegram. Eventually they moved into a home of his design in Pebble Beach. But their weekends were often spent in Big Sur.

Shaw built the staircase first, from reclaimed redwood timbers, which led to nowhere but infinite possibility, and eventually to the master bedroom suite. The couple hosted many parties around that stairway during the two years it took to complete the project, and ever after when they came to Big Sur from their Pebble Beach home, for a getaway. Sometimes they came alone to read and make art and spend time with each other, the ocean and their coastal retreat. Other times, they brought friends or family to share their secret space.

Mary was born in San Francisco but had moved to the Peninsula at age 5 or maybe 6, where she lived until she enrolled at Stanford University to garner a degree in American history. Born in Hollywood in 1924, Will grew up in Los Angeles and attended UCLA before joining the Navy. Upon his release, he enrolled in the graduate program at UC Berkeley’s school of architecture, where he developed a modern aesthetic with a focus on environmental design. He went on to establish the Foundation for Environmental Design in the early 1960s.

Will was cofounder and past president of the Big Sur Foundation and of the Peninsula chapter of the American Institute of Architects. He also served as president of the Monterey History and Art Association, and the Community Foundation of Monterey County.

Will died in 1997, at 73. When asked to describe the personality of her late husband or the style of architecture he designed, Mary answered the same on both counts, “I would never try.” Which left those who never met him to perceive his warm, quiet nature in his work; including the school of architecture at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, as well as the Buddhist Temple in Seaside, the clubhouse at Carmel Valley Ranch Resort, the iconic Shell station in Carmel, a redesign of what is now the Hyatt Carmel Highlands, and various noted homes throughout the Peninsula. Mary maintains his favorite design and, certainly hers, is the “Pfeiffer Ridge" house” he designed for love.

Pfeiffer Ridge
Will Shaw, Architect

The first thing he built was a stairway to heaven, an ascent of heavy timbers leading to nowhere but up. Until he constructed the loft bedroom to which he would bring his bride. Around that staircase he built the shell of the home, tucked into the manzanita and chaparral of the untamed Pfeiffer Ridge, overlooking the swirling waters of Pfeiffer Cove and the ubiquitous ocean stretching into the horizon, where sky slips into sea. Architect Will Shaw believed love is a shell that protects.

The ride to Pfeiffer Ridge is circuitous, beginning by dropping below Highway One and wandering past the beach in a series of switchbacks until it reaches the ridge. Atop Pias Ranch Road, a rough-wood frame whose hard angle is softened by the intrusion of a moss-covered recumbent limb, bears a vertical wooden sign made of hand-chiseled letters that read, “Shaw.”

The road continues upward until it reaches the summit, where rests a simple wood bench overlooking the universe of the sea. The small guest cabin is most visible, rising on stilts within a redwood glen, its few windows and narrow deck taking little advantage of the ocean view.

The home Shaw built for his wife, Mary, sits on five acres the couple bought in 1966 from movie producer Martin Ransohoff. By 1969, Shaw, ready to realize his design, brought in contractor Sam Morse, Mary’s nephew, and grandson of the legendary Pebble Beach Company founder, SFB Morse, to make it happen. It was Mary who chose a northwestern exposure to enjoy the sunsets; it was Will who designed a wall of windows to access them.

Despite a soaring A-line roof, which Mary called her “wooden tent,” only the apex of the shingled roof is visible from the road. At the peak, a skylight ushers in light, and an eastern wall composed of narrow glass panels rising from floor to ceiling creates a cathedral effect.

A smooth path of golden pea granite braced by wood planks curves down to the house, becoming solid cement underfoot as it approaches the building. The cement continues, peppered with pebbles to the entrance, where the roofline slopes down low, causing anyone of height to duck en route to the front door. To the right, a narrow panel of stained glass adds a little light and color to the heavy wood.

The house was constructed on a cement pier, resting on short stilts to level out the sloping terrain. Heavy timbers of clear-heart redwood rise right up through the house to support the roof. Such timbers, also used to construct the stairs, were salvaged from Dolan Creek Bridge, the last of the Big Sur redwood bridges to be demolished.

Inside, the exposed aggregate floor continues, until it meets with four weighty wood steps polished by years of coming and going, as they lead to the open living space laid with hard Monterey pine. The main feature of the living room, once night erases the expansive ocean view, is the open stone hearth beneath the hood of an iron chimney.

Behind the hearth rises the master bedroom, an open loft with narrow vertical windows that barely intrude on the private space to give a glimpse of the sea. The adjacent master bath, subtle in its aggregate flooring and rough wood, is brightened by a skylight. Yet the unexpected delight is a vibrant red contemporary claw-foot Kohler bathtub. The house has two other bedrooms; a sleeping loft and a main-level guest suite with a second bathroom, similar to the master but without the splash of red.

The few doors inside the house seem cut from the walls in which they reside, and hinged back into place. Similarly, narrow shutters of unfinished wood are hinged over the narrow bedroom windows. In the details, one can appreciate the apparent simplicity of a structure that does not intrude on the natural setting, but is of it. The silence of the empty house reads like a retreat, maybe mistaken for melancholy. But it was a romantic refuge, a weekend getaway for a mature couple who read by the hearth and contemplated the sea as they sat on the rough-wood bench framing the deck. The energy is subtle, sensual, slow – a story that surfaces in the structure as if it is still being written.

Pfeiffer Ridge
Will Shaw, Architect

View from Pfeiffer Ridge
Will Shaw, Architect

Pfeiffer Ridge
Will Shaw, Architect

Timber Claim (Emile Norman House)
Atop one of the highest and more storied ridges guarding the Big Sur coastline, upon 220 acres of unspoiled timberland and alpine meadows, they built their fortress by hand. Employing only native materials and unobtrusive designs, an artist and a creative sculpted their vision, one room at a time.

More than 65 years later, "Timber Claim" remains a home inlaid with fine art and good memories, and the mosaic wood sculptures that were the artist's signature. Although the companion with whom he built his artistic dynasty has been gone more than 35 years, and the artist a mere three, their collective spirit remains ever present, as though carved in the cornerstone of their foundation. Providence brought artist Emile Norman and his partner Brooks Clement to Big Sur in 1946. They were actually on their way to evaluate land in Mendocino when a "for sale" sign and the view caught their attention.

They planned to live in the modest dwelling on the 17-acre lot just long enough to complete their dream house, reflected in a model awaiting construction. Meanwhile, they began adding on to their way station, converting one exterior wall after another to an interior space.

In time, their 17-acre purchase grew to 220 acres, through the generosity of the late Florence Pfeiffer, who owned the contiguous land. "She loved us and she loved the land," said Norman. "She knew we'd take care of it."

Accessed by a long, narrow ramp flanking the house, which acquired a railing in later years, the redwood building is a study in texture and form, not unlike Norman’s sculptures. Beneath a redwood lathe ceiling, the floor is a series of 1x2-inch on-end planks, and the walls are formed of horizontal tongue-and-groove panels. A rectangular porch was ultimately roofed and enclosed to serve as a dedicated gallery representing Norman’s long and prolific career in art.

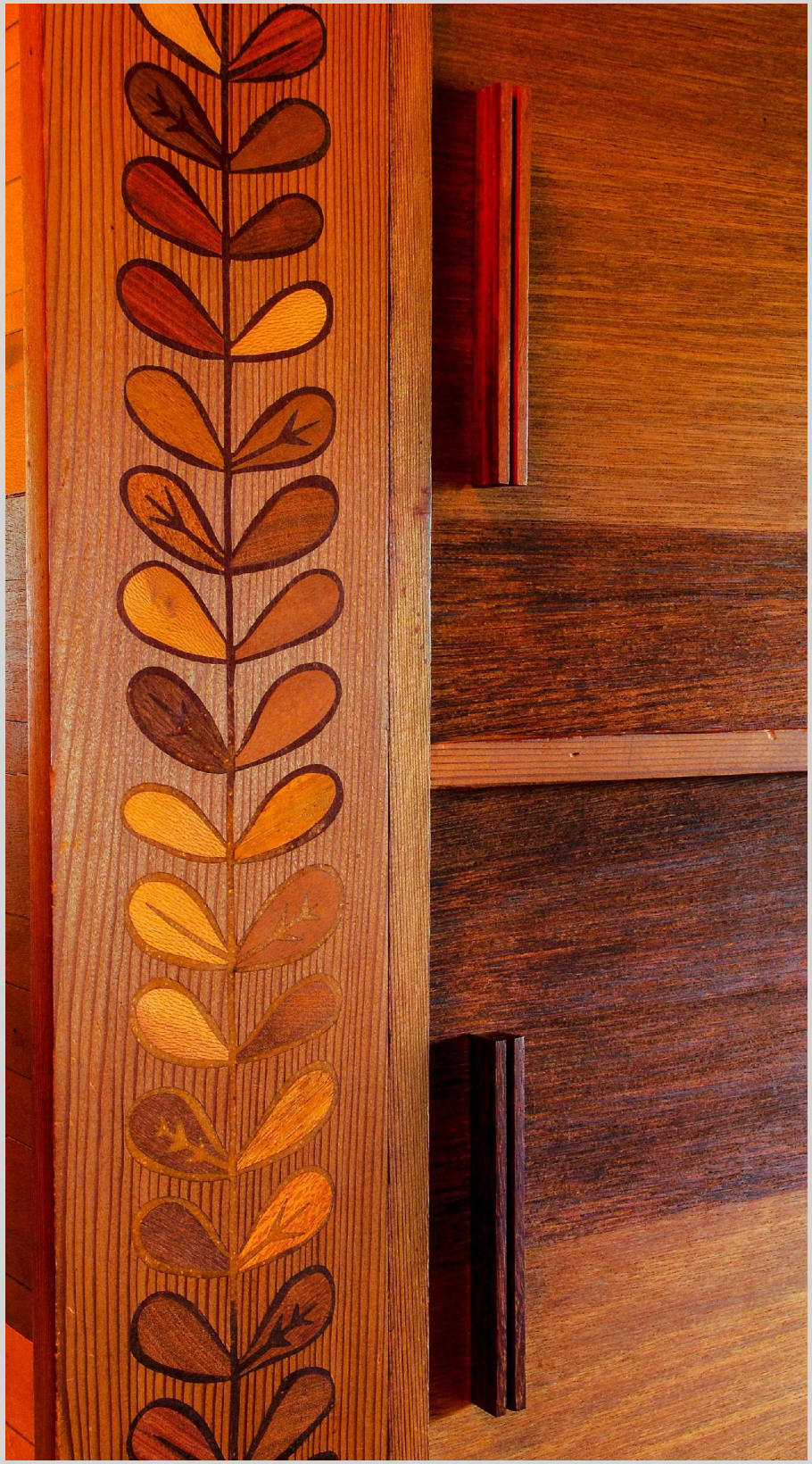
The central living area is formed of redwood walls that serve to define space and conceal cabinets and drawers. A built-in lounge opens to a commanding presence, the 16-rank, tracker action Baroque pipe organ, delivered from Bonn, Germany. The organ is installed on parquet flooring and enclosed within an enormous teak case Norman inlaid with rare woods in a nature-inspired design of leaves and flowers, bugs and butterflies. Across the front of the organ, the words, “Soli Deo Gloria” are painted. Meaning, “For the Glory of God Alone,” these are the words Johann Sebastian Bach inscribed on all his music.

Behind the living room are the doors to a guest room and an apparent closet, which actually opens to reveal a ladder rising into a look-out tower. “You can see the whole world from there,” said Norman.

The western wall of the living room is relieved by a bank of windows, which expose an enclosed solarium beyond. Beneath the windows, Norman inlaid the wall with a mosaic of stone, which resembles a riverbed. Using cast concrete, he created striations and a realistic fossilizing throughout the layers of stone. The mosaic culminates in a wide fireplace sheltered by a rusted iron hood and flanked by prescorched maple flooring to camouflage sparks that flew off the open hearth. The flooring was further textured by rows of roof nails.

The living room opens to a galley kitchen surfaced in 24k gold squares left over from a sculpture. The cabinets are faced in a complement of charcoal Formica. Narrow and technologically sparse, the kitchen has served multj-course meals and dozens of guests at one time.

Behind a door, whose sign warded off visitors when the artist was in residence, and down a short flight of stairs, is the studio. There, within the lower reaches of “Timber Claim,” Norman sculpted daily. A surveillance of the room records an array of equipment and work benches, wood of all sizes, shapes and rarities, and row after row of jars filled with colorful crushed glass like crystallized sugar. And sawdust. Every surface was lightly dusted from the fallout of his art. “Sometimes my work turns into a sculpture, and sometimes,” said Norman, “into a house. There is no boundary. It all comes out of the same source.”



Timber Claim (Emile Norman House)

Timber Claim
(Emile Norman House)

Casa Lauria (Anthony Crane House)

You know you're almost there by the pungent smell of laurels wafting up among the density of trees along the ridge. A welcome contrast from life in Los Angeles, owner Anthony Crane gets up to Casa Lauria as often as possible to breathe mountain air, ponder the ocean and, on occasion, pound a few nails into the legendary 3,000-square-foot cabin built in the 1940s by Big Sur brothers Frank and Walter Trotter.

"The Trotters were famous Big Sur builders," said Crane. "They were Paul Bunyan guys who could pick up a bale in one hand and a slab of redwood in the other. The two worked closely with Rowan Maiden, a Frank Lloyd Wright disciple hired by the Fassets to build Nepenthe in the late '40s." That family-owned-and-operated way station was intended to sustain generations through thick and thin. And it has.

Crane never actually imagined affording a house in Big Sur. But, during an escape from Los Angeles soon after the devastating storms of El Niño in 1998, Casa Lauria, this sturdy box of old bridge timbers under a rolled composite roof, was the first house he was shown and the one he bought.

"When I hear the wood creak at night," said Crane, "I think of what it meant to work in this huge scale. The landscape of Big Sur can handle it; I can see the evolution of architecture here. I think my house is the forefather of the current movement in organic architecture."

Commissioned by Hollywood westerns writer, the late Jack Curtis and his wife, artist Lavon Curtis, the couple reluctantly sold the house to Frank Trotter 10 years later to afford the purchase of the sprawling Curtis Ranch that remains just above Casa Lauria on "Apple Pie Ridge." The name originated at the Big Sur River Inn, still operating off Highway One, whose freshly baked apple pies, reportedly, still send their aroma wafting up through the trees and across the entire ridge.

By the time Crane bought the house, it had three bedrooms and two full baths, one of which he completely remodeled, using a European-style open floor plan with poured concrete floor that drains in the center.

Crane introduced natural slate to the house, rich with variegated earth tones inspired by the Big Sur landscape. He also made and installed a copper sink into a concrete countertop, the weight and textures of his materials a conscious complement to the environment.

"There's a certain ruggedness you can and should get away with in Big Sur," said Crane. "I made the house for winters and for a little bit of dirt - not too precious, not too clean. So I went with materials both rugged and strong, introducing concrete and metal to balance the natural redwood and bring it out even more."

Big Sur lends itself to this organic architecture, says Crane, which means using what's available and keeping the architecture in context and scale with the landscape. "You just wouldn't put up something in Big Sur that stands out or is not made of local materials," he said. "It's a matter of respect."

Casa Lauria (Anthony Crane House)

Acknowledgements

Neither sheer fascination nor pure talent would have brought this book to fruition. We could never have realized our project without the generous cooperation of the owners who envisioned such spectacular homes, as well as the architects who designed them, the builders who constructed them, and those who granted us access to the “Hidden Architecture of Big Sur.”

We owe a debt of gratitude to Kierstyn Bachmann-Berlin, who tapped us to do this project and shepherded us through our initial pursuit. We respect and celebrate architects George Brook-Kothlow, Rob Carver, Mark Mills, Mickey Muennig, Erik Nielsen, Daniel Piechota, Mary Ann Schicketanz and Will Shaw. We are grateful to builders Bill McCloud and Frank Pinney for the time they spent with us and their insights into the construction challenges of some of these residences. And we thank the property owners, some of whom were recognized in the text, and others whose privacy was respected, for inviting us into their version of Valhalla, that we might provide a backstage pass to our audience.

Ultimately, we thank the main character in this story, whose wild, untamed personality both beckons us and keeps us at bay; the rugged and revered, bold and beautiful, Big Sur.

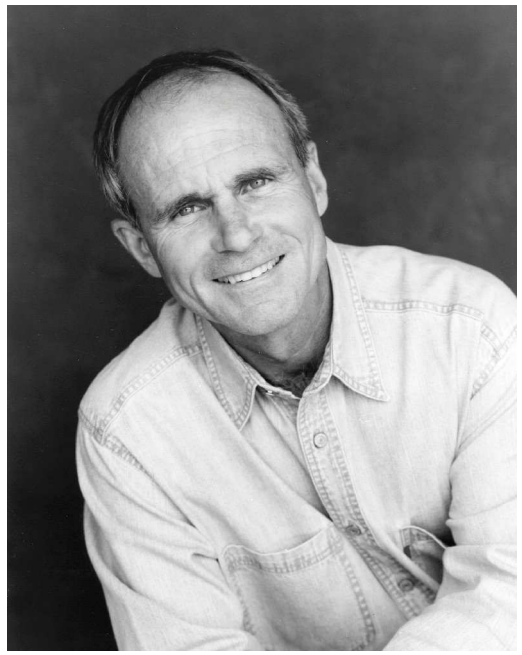
Doug Steakley and Lisa Crawford Watson

LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

A fifth-generation Northern Californian, Lisa Crawford Watson belongs to one of three sets of twins in a large and dynamic family - at times, the source of her writing. With an undergraduate degree in Sociolinguistics from the University of California at Davis, a Master's degree in Education Administration from California State University, Sacramento, an advanced teaching credential and her Real Estate license, she has enjoyed a diverse career in business, education and writing.

Lisa lives with her family on the legendary Monterey Peninsula, where her grandmother once lived and wrote. An adjunct instructor of writing and journalism for California State University Monterey Bay and Monterey Peninsula College, Lisa is a free-lance writer who specializes in the genres of art & architecture, health & lifestyle, food & wine.

She has published various books and thousands of feature articles and columns in local and national newspapers and magazines; among them *Art & Antiques, Southwest Art, Art Business News, Luxury Living, Carmel Magazine, Art & Living California, The Dallas Morning News, Your Health Monthly, Pulse Magazine, GuestLife Monterey Bay, Edible Monterey Bay, The Carmel Pine Cone,* and *The Monterey County Herald*. In addition to fitness, fun and family, writing defines both who she is and what she does.



DOUGLAS STEAKLEY

Doug Steakley is a widely recognized photographer from Carmel Valley, California. He received a Master of Fine Arts degree from Indiana University and was a jewelry designer and gallery owner for many years. His interest in travel led him to pursue photography and, in 1993, he became a full-time photographer. His distinct images range from the Monterey Peninsula where he lives, to many international destinations where he enjoys traveling.

Two large format books featuring his color photography have been published: Pacific Light, Images of The Monterey Peninsula and Big Sur and Beyond, The Legacy of The Big Sur Land Trust. Two other books, A Photographer's Guide To The California Coast, and Photographing Big Sur were recently published by Countryman Press.

Doug supports and works closely with several land conservation groups, and a variety of his images have been published in their annual reports and other publications. He has worked with The Big Sur Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, The Land Trust Alliance, The Trust For Public Land, The Wilderness Coalition, and The Tuolumne River Trust. In 2003, he received the *Ansel Adams Award* from The Sierra Club for his conservation photography.

Doug leads many photography workshops and tours both locally and internationally, and is currently an online instructor with BetterPhoto.com.
He currently serves on the Board of Directors and as Treasurer for The Center For Photographic Art in Carmel, California.

Stock photography by Doug Steakley is represented world-wide by Getty Images.

Doug's photographs have appeared in many national and international magazines including *National Geographic*, *Outside, Backpacker, Architectural Digest, Town and Country, Art and Antiques* among others.

Doug's photographs have won awards in several juried competitions, including those sponsored by National Geographic, Nature's Best, The North American Nature Photographers Association and The National Park Service.

Recent one-person exhibitions of Doug's photography include, The Pacific Grove Art Center, The Fireside Gallery at the Highlands Inn, The Monterey Conference Center, The Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History, The Maureen Doud Gallery in The Sunset Center, and The Gallery at The Blackstone Winery in Gonzales.