

A photograph of a modern, single-story house at dusk. The house features large glass windows and doors, some of which are open, revealing a brightly lit interior. The house is reflected in a pool of water in the foreground. The sky is a deep blue with some light clouds. The overall mood is serene and sophisticated.

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BRAVE NEW HOUSES

ADVENTURES IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA LIVING

RIZZOLI
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David Hertz is best known for compact, energy-efficient houses in Venice, but he has spread his wings over the past decade, designing a variety of buildings as far afield as Oregon. Keith Lehrer, formerly a drummer in a punk rock band and now CEO of his family's eye-glass business, saw an article on one of the early houses and picked Hertz to remodel a generic ranch house on a ridge high above Bel Air. He wanted a place of calm and order he could retreat to after stressful business trips, and he let the architect decide how to achieve this.

Lehrer wanted the work to proceed slowly, and that allowed Hertz to design for the site, responding to topography, views, prevailing breezes, and the orientation of sun, as he always prefers to do. Working closely with contractor Michael MacDowell, he remodeled the

front of the house to serve as a temporary residence (and later as a guest wing) while the rest was leveled to make room for new construction. The Northridge earthquake cracked the original foundation, so that was replaced by a new steel structure rising from caissons. Existing trees were removed from the edge of the site where the ground drops sharply away, leaving a solitary pine that was sculpted by a Japanese gardener and revealing a vista of city lights and distant mountains. The pool to the rear of the house seems to flow into the reservoir far below. Dark green stucco makes the building recede into the landscape.

A spinal wall of steel-troweled black cement curves through the house, dividing public from private spaces, and extending from the entry to the

master bedroom. At certain points it is cut away to become an arch or a balustrade, but its presence is always felt. Lehrer wanted an old-fashioned, wire-cage elevator with a staircase wrapped around it, leading up to a belvedere, and this was craned in as a pre-assembled, forty-foot-high unit of framed steel mesh. He also asked to see the lights of downtown from his bed, which is placed against the curved wall. To put him among the treetops, a balcony is cantilevered out towards two mature pines, saving their roots and shading a terrace. It is tapered and cut away at the end to open up the view.

The form of the living room was determined by tall pines on the opposite side of the house.

By putting the sitting area into a sunken pit, you have an unbroken view

- 1 Lofty living area, wire-cage elevator and second-floor master suite
- 2 First floor plan



across the room to the horizon from the narrow rock crevice of the entry. The roof is high and tilted up so that, from the pit, you can see the full height of the pines outlined against the sky. Glass sliders open onto the lawn and pool. The white, steel-troweled plaster walls are a foil for the black concrete pit and spinal wall, the beech floor and built-in cabinets, and the exposed joists of recycled old-growth fir. Light floods or filters in from every side, blurring the divide between house and landscape, while three translucent glass columns pull light down into the recessed kitchen. Foliage casts its shadows on translucent glass in the master bathroom.

A Japanese influence is evident throughout the house, in the monochromatic palette, the openness to nature, the play of soft light and

shadow, and the emphasis on the floor plane. The dining room looks into a walled Zen garden and has scrim-shaded ceiling lights. Hertz designed a slab table that can be raised or lowered hydraulically, allowing guests to sit on cushions or on Jacobsen chairs. The architect also designed the white cubist fireplace, which contains speakers, shelves, and amoebic figures in cut-out slots—an architectural sculpture that anchors the living loft. Kingsley, an LA artist, created a sonic sculpture on the curved wall of the upstairs gallery leading to the music room. It comprises eight strings, covering an octave, that can be plucked or bowed, which resonate in the thick hollow floor and turn the house into a musical instrument.

"It's hard to call a 7,500-square-foot house 'green,' but it incorporates

many environmental strategies," observes Hertz. "The elevator shaft works as a chimney with a shutter that opens automatically to evacuate hot air or recirculate it through the trusses of the second floor. We also have solar radiant heating and a high-efficiency mechanical system, and we specified non-ozone-depleting refrigerant, and zero voc paint in the master bedroom and other key interiors to reduce toxic emissions. Though high-efficiency glass costs more, the payback came quickly, and it allowed us to use a much higher ratio of glass to wall than in conventional buildings."



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- 3 Second floor plan
- 4 Looking back from the seating pit in the living room to the entry





- 1 Translucent glass columns pull light into the breakfast room
- 2 Play of shadow from skylight in the steel-ribbed stucco rotunda
- 3 The dining room hearth is as sharply angled as a cubist sculpture



- The curved spinal wall of black cement is cut away in the gallery
- The master bedroom balcony is cantilevered into the treeclops