

METROPOLIS

MAY 1998 \$4.95

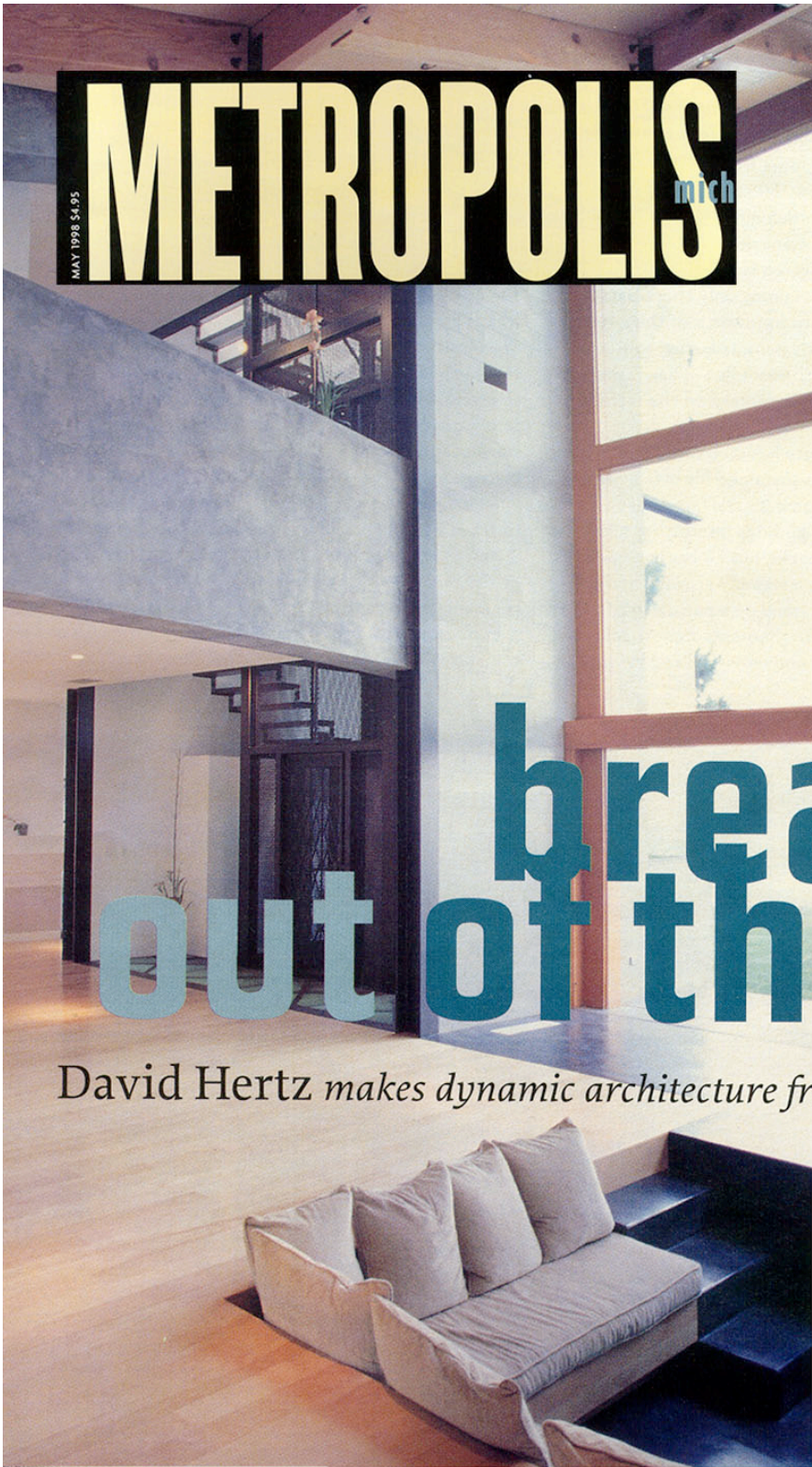
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rowerui geometry marks a recent remodel by David Hertz; he transformed a ranch house, below, left, and opposite, into a complex of soaring spaces that open out onto balconies and a terrace overlooking Los Angeles. The architect describes the steel-framed staircase as a "knuckle" around which the house shifts its axis. Balancing this spatial drama is a sense of enclosure that suggests a Japanese aesthetic of shoji screens and dark wood, reinterpreted in windows and dividers of glass and dark gray stucco. Hertz's own innovative material, Syndecrete, was cast into tiles, countertops, and sinks.

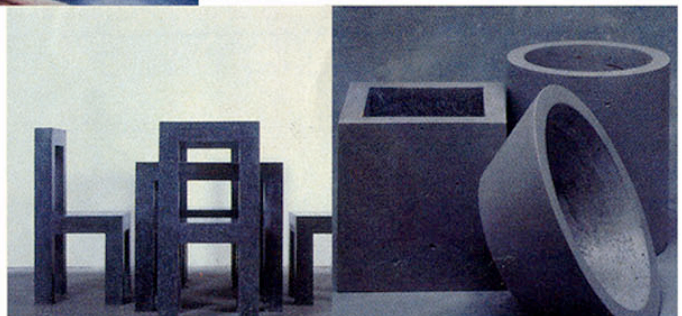


out of the box

David Hertz makes dynamic architecture from the humblest of materials.



Fifteen years after opening his office, Hertz is beginning to realize the potential of the name he chose: Syndecrete, a bringing together of a wide range





by Michael Webb Broken records, smashed videocassettes, and splinters and shards of CD jewel boxes are embedded in the smooth floors of the reception area at Rhino Records' offices in west Los Angeles. Meanwhile, at a department store in Seoul, South Korea, a mix of surprising aggregates in the floors serve as environmental graphics: used golf tees are scattered underfoot in the sports department, tiny nuts and bolts in hardware, and old circuit boards in home electronics. The alchemist who turned this trash into terrazzo is David Hertz, a 37-year-old Santa Monica-based architect, and his material is Syndecrete, a lightweight concrete he invented and now garnishes with all manner of waste products.

"I see trash as a resource that can be used in a creative way," he says. "I'm taking something that's usually dumped together, and adding value. The color variations become positive attributes, like the flecks in recycled paper." Hertz first became concerned about the environment when, as a surfer, he saw how polluted the ocean had become. After graduating from the Southern California Institute of Architecture in 1983, and working briefly for Frank Gehry and the late John Lautner, Hertz founded his own company, Syndesis, to put his ideas into prac-

additional discards that the homeless would be paid to bring in. When that initiative failed, he tried to enlist support from The Gap, which had expressed interest in ordering tiles for 200 stores, but found the interest had waned. His plan to build affordable housing from recycled waste in Playa Vista, a mixed-use development near LAX, fell victim to interminable delays. Meanwhile, he discovered that Sony sent surplus appliances to Mexico to be dismantled, retaining only those parts that could be reutilized, and he hopes to incorporate some of the sweepings into the expansive tiled walls Syndesis is contributing to that corporation's new virtual reality entertainment complex in San Francisco. The detritus, he hopes, will offer a wry commentary on the rapid obsolescence of consumer electronics.

Although the development of Syndecrete has distracted Hertz from his architectural practice, the income has sustained his office, where he works with his wife, Stacy Fong, and some 20 staffers. It has also allowed him to accept only those projects he finds interesting. Like every architect, he's had his share of setbacks, but he has been able to satisfy his artistic and ecological goals in a steadily growing body of work, notably the house he built for his family on a narrow (40-foot by 90-foot) lot in Venice. In contrast to its neighbors—symmetrical cottages with pitched roofs, small windows, and underutilized yards at

tice. He developed Syndecrete—cement mixed with fly ash from power stations, sweepings from carpet mills, and an agricultural by-product used to aerate soil—as an alternative to chemical-based substitutes for stone. It weighs half as much as conventional concrete, can easily be colored and formed into tiles and cladding panels, or cast to make furniture, sinks, and other elements.

The idea for decorative mixes came to Hertz in the shower one day when he noticed that a stray blue plastic coil had been set into one of the stone gray Syndecrete wall panels he had designed for his bathroom. So he bought a bag of multicolored PVC pellets and mixed them with a new batch of Syndecrete; when the slab dried and was ground smooth, what emerged was a kaleidoscopic mosaic. Realizing the potential, he experimented with brass shavings and eyeglass frames, broken glass and Swatch watch components. He also took impressions from bubble-wrap and fallen leaves to create varied textures. "You never know which way the chips are going to fall," Hertz says. "Each piece is unique, and we are trying to restore the notion of craft by playing up, rather than disguising, the irregularities."

For 12 years, Hertz was unwilling to license production of Syndecrete, fearing a loss of control over quality and innovation. Now, however, he realizes that if he is to achieve his goals of reducing the price (from about \$50 a square foot for panels) and of having a significant impact on the commercial waste stream, he has to let go. Discussions with potential partners are ongoing. "I feel the same frustration that the Bauhaus designers and the Eameses did at the difficulty of making good design affordable," he admits. "It becomes academic if it doesn't succeed in the market."

Hertz has made several attempts to broaden his reach, dealing directly with big recyclers and waste haulers, and participating in the Cal Max network, an industrial exchange that posts needs and offers on the Internet. In the wake of the 1992 riots, he proposed a public-private manufacturing plant for South Central L.A. that would sort waste and produce Syndecrete products for city use, incorporating front and back—the Hertz homestead puts every square foot and each of its seven split levels to use.

Though contemporary in expression, the house is based on timeless principles. The interiors are full of light, the varied openings frame views, and upper rooms lead out onto roof terraces. A bridge links the house to bedrooms over the rear garage and the two buildings enclose a play court for Hertz and Fong's three small children. The architect, who is happiest when hiking in the Santa Monica Mountains, enjoys the sense of being outdoors when he's lying in bed, looking out at the stars, or watching the course of the sun and feeling every change in the wind. But the house also addresses less idyllic realities in this area of L.A. that's part gentrified, part gang territory. The front fence is a translucent band of the tough woven fabric typically used on trucks. A concrete gate that weighs a ton but pivots easily on a steel post provides a sense of security. "The bullets stop short of our neighborhood," Hertz remarks, "though you can often hear gunfire at night."

Hertz's buildings are solidly grounded in the Modernist tradition, but he has broken out of the box that confined some of his predecessors. He attributes this to the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright, who believed that houses should grow organically from their sites and be responsive to nature—a philosophy of building whose implementation he 89→

