

OUT OF THE BOX

Introduction from *Brave New Houses: Adventures in Southern California Living*

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Southern California was never the Garden of Eden its early boosters promised; rather, it was arid land that could, with effort and irrigation, be made to bloom. That challenge did nothing to diminish its appeal. For over a century, it has lured the struggling and the ambitious from around the world; all of them seeking a fresh start, a new identity, fame, or fortune. Millions more are expected to arrive in the next few decades. The volatile mix of cultures and desires has produced an ephemeral townscape, and a chaotic sprawl of generic dwellings interspersed with vulgar displays of new wealth, but there have always been a few mavericks with the taste and courage to break loose and give talent its chance. Idyllic pockets of wilderness and wooded canyon survive, even at the heart of the metropolis, and still more in the hills around Santa Barbara and San Diego. The coast has been overbuilt, but the ocean retains its pristine appeal. Older neighborhoods have distinct personalities and a few are seeded with modern landmarks. Architects and clients still enjoy unique opportunities to strike out in new directions, uninhibited by tradition and unconstrained by climatic extremes.

Throughout its years of explosive growth, Los Angeles has been a crucible for experimentation in residential design. Irving Gill reinterpreted the Mission style in shallow planes of poured concrete. Frank Lloyd Wright was inspired by Meso-American temples, and sought to create a new American architecture from patterned concrete blocks. Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra brought progressive European ideas to a city that was then characterized as Iowa-by-the-Sea, yet found eager clients and built their practices through the Great Depression. In the 1940s, John Entenza launched the Case Study House program, which included steel-frame structures by Charles and Ray Eames, Raphael Soriano, and Pierre Koenig. Gregory Ain and Harwell Hamilton Harris designed frugal dwellings that are treasured today. John Lautner emerged from the shadow of Wright to create soaring structures of wood, concrete, and glass. Frank Gehry launched his career as a "cheapskate architect," infusing simple forms and industrial-grade materials with artistry. Morphosis, Eric Owen Moss, and the late Franklin Israel explored that same gritty aesthetic, using houses as laboratories in which to test their ideas for larger structures.

Successive generations of architects emerged from the offices of these pioneers, to set up their own practices and struggle for recognition. Sadly, a majority of these bold spirits are currently underemployed, and few have made an impact on their community. There's a major disconnect between the potential and the reality of residential design, between the exceptional few and the convention-bound majority.

Most Americans spend too much of their lives in boxes: driving in tin boxes to work, shop, study, or play in larger boxes, before returning home to stucco boxes that are tastefully wrapped in Colonial or Mediterranean-style ornament. Mediterranean living has more to do with sitting under an olive tree, lunching off local produce and a gutsy red wine, breathing in the scents of wild thyme and lavender, than it does with stamped-out moldings, symmetrical doors and windows, and red-tiled roofs. And yet that magic word will sell the trashiest tract house. Retro residences have little to do

with the way we dress, move around, and equip ourselves. Nobody goes into a showroom to ask for a Tuscan car or a Cape Cod computer. Equipment is meant to look functional and ahead of the curve; our shelters seem to be caught in a time warp.

Created as status symbols and investments for profitable resale, houses are increasingly shaped by nostalgia for an idealized past and a deep anxiety not to stand out from the crowd. In a nation that prizes freedom and personal expression, conformity rules. Builders dumb down to win acceptance like insecure kids in high school, and neighborhood vigilantes prescribe pitched roofs and an approved color palette in the hope of creating ersatz historic districts. Big is valued far above better, and modern classics are torn down to make room for historical pastiches on steroids that loom menacingly over their neighbors. Once you pass through a columned portico into a lofty foyer with Palladian windows and a crystal chandelier, you may wonder if you've strayed onto the set for a period movie. Where can Miss Scarlett have gone?

A sentimental attachment to an invented past is matched by an instinctive rejection of the unfamiliar. Most Americans now live in suburbs where it's hard to experience the best contemporary architecture first hand - especially on a residential scale. As a result, most people still perceive modernism as cold and unfriendly, and innovative expression as strange and disturbing. Modernism never put down roots in the United States, as it did in Northern Europe, and it enjoyed only the briefest, most superficial acceptance, from about 1925 through 1965. Popular faith in the future shriveled and died in the turbulence of the 1960s. Hollywood established the rules early on: it's the villains who live in sharp houses; good guys slouch around cozy, cluttered homes, coffee mugs 'in hand, to show that they are just like us.

"Home" is a word that is heavily freighted with emotion, the embodiment of self-image, family, and childhood associations. No wonder so few people can resist its lure. Many of those who would like to break out of the box fear that an architect-designed house may prove too costly or take too long to realize, that the design will be contested or that the end product could prove hard to live with and harder to sell. Their home may be their only substantial asset and they are afraid to put it at risk.

Gathered here are thirty-four houses commissioned by people who were willing to take a chance and please themselves. Old and young, affluent or with limited means, connoisseurs and neophytes, these clients are as diverse as their dwellings. Each individual, couple, or family wanted something tailored to their dreams and practical needs, to the site and the climate, and all found architects who would listen and respond, creating houses that fulfilled their program and brought boundless rewards. In a few cases, the architect was also the client. Without exception, they found that their lives as well as their portfolios were enriched. Formerly skeptical friends congratulated them on their good fortune. Strangers came on tours and envied what they saw. Delays or cost overruns during construction were quickly forgotten.

None of this happened by chance. Designing a house is a balancing act - satisfying present and future requirements while addressing the site and context and giving the architect abundant scope for creativity. Success depends as much on careful planning as flights of inspiration. It is crucial to choose your architect with as much

care as you select your life partner - the relationship can bring a couple together or cause a split, and it can last even longer. Almost as crucial is the selection of a contractor. Make a list of what you want and of houses and features you like, in photographs or real life. Conduct interviews, make field visits, and talk to owners about their experience. The firm you select may have a signature or change its style with every job; it may be headed by a veteran or a fledgling architect. That's less important than getting the full attention of the individual who will be making the key decisions. The best buildings are the product of chemistry: the client talking and analyzing, the architect listening and explaining, sketching, modeling, and sharing a vision. Good clients know when to talk back and demand alternatives, and when to stay silent and participate in a journey to a place they've never been before and may not have imagined.

This is a personal selection of new and recent houses, located from Santa Barbara to San Diego counties, but mostly in greater LA. What unites this region is its Mediterranean climate: generally sunny and dry, with warm days and cool nights, and increasingly temperate as you move higher or approach the ocean. You can live outdoors for much of the year: something that astounds visitors, though residents often take it for granted. The house that Schindler built for himself in West Hollywood, eighty years ago, was inspired by a camping trip and remains a model of indoor-outdoor living. Nearly all the houses shown here are inspired by that idea and are designed to be naturally cooled, through cross ventilation, and warmed by passive solar gain in winter.

Each house occupies one of six thematic groups (three form-driven, three identified by site) but might feel just as much at home in another. The goal is less to categorize than to explore affinities, while examining radically different approaches to design in a wide range of sizes, situations, and budgets. These houses were chosen because they satisfy needs and address their sites in an elegant and/or inventive way. They are all modern in spirit, drawing on the enduring lessons of the past without mimicking its outward forms. Many are remodels, the new conducting a dialogue with the old, or merely taking advantage of existing footprints to avert a tedious quest for new building permits.

The first section, *Shifting Geometries*, shows how you can achieve complexity by sliding and rotating boxy volumes, as Stan Allen did in Glendale, or by employing Patrick Tighe's Silver Lake strategy of dividing a rectangular volume with a diagonal wall to create a house that doubles as an art gallery in West Hollywood. In *Serene Volumes*, Holger Schubert's canalside house is only a seventh the size of Charles Gwathmey's hilltop palazzo, but both are spas for the spirit, places in which your pulse rate slows as you step inside. *Dynamic Structures* covers more ground. In the windswept Tejon Pass, Michael Jantzen turned cement board and steel frames into habitable origami, and RoTo Architects created a loft from salvaged steel on an industrial site in downtown LA.

Fronting the Ocean includes a house by Ray Kappe in Malibu that feels as though it is surfing, and another, by Callas Shortridge in Castellammare, which floats high above the Pacific. *Engaging the Landscape* is an elastic term that could apply to many of the houses in the book, but these five open up to nature and draw it inside. Barton Myers performed this feat on a heroic scale in the hills of Montecito, while Melinda Gray

established an intimate relationship with the wooded slopes of Rustic Canyon. *Confined Lots* is likely to prove a growth area, as scarce land escalates in price. Architecture flourishes on constraints, and Whitney Sander responded to the challenge of a tiny, hemmed-in plot on a Venice canal, as Lorcan O'Herlihy did on a precipitous site in Silver Lake.

A seventh section, *Radical Visions*, anticipates the creativity we can look forward to if even more people decide to think out of the box. One of these houses is under construction, three are in design development, and the last is the product of speculation.