

A Not-So-Simple Plan

BASED ON A PINWHEEL, A CONTEMPORARY PALO ALTO RESIDENCE OFFERS A UNIQUE OUTLOOK ON CALIFORNIA LIVING

Architecture by Steven Ehrlich Architects /Interior Design by Mike Witt

Text by Therese Bissell/Photography by Matthew Millman



Biomorphic, cast-resin modern it isn't," Asher Waldfogel says of his residence, stating not so much the obvious (its geometrically precise massing is vastly divergent from the computer-modeled free-form spaces and surfaces of trendy "blob" architecture) as his allowance for the traditional design mien of the neighbor-

hood in which it was just built. Waldfogel, a technology industry entrepreneur, and his wife, Helyn MacLean, had known since attending school in Massachusetts—where they were exposed to architecture of the Bauhaus school—that someday they would have a modernist house: "It was," he says, "never a question." They moved to Palo Alto, California,

The massing of Asher Waldfogel and Helyn MacLean's Palo Alto, California, residence "is complex and utilizes taut horizontal and vertical planes, clad in charcoal-gray Rheinzink, that extend beyond the building envelope, seamlessly moving from interior to exterior," explains architect Steven Ehrlich. **ABOVE:** The front entrance. **OPPOSITE:** Glass bridges on the first and second floors link the wings of the house, which was planned as a pinwheel.

Sills and Huniford designed a bed for the master bedroom that "is very architectural and strong," remarks Huniford. An 18th-century Italian cabinet stands near a 1977 untitled work from Robert Motherwell's Samurai series. Stark chair fabric, with Scalamandr  fringed. Lee Jofa drapery lining.





“In the juxtaposition of
a late-19th-century rug
and a Nakashima bench
and Kjaerholm chairs in
the living room, you see a
dialogue on modernism.”



ABOVE: Mike Witt selected furniture, including a George Nakashima bench and a Claude Conover stool in the living room, to serve as “pleasant interruptions to the rigid edges and surfaces” of the house. Above the Edward Wormley sofa hangs Robert Motherwell’s 1972 oil *844*; a 2002 sculpture by Antony Gormley is on the hearth. RIGHT: Running past the dining room, a poured-in-place-concrete wall forms “the spine of the house,” says Ehrlich.







"Alternately grand and intimate, the interior spaces wrap around to frame a series of varied perspectives," remarks the architect. **LEFT:** The kitchen can be separated from the family room by a pocket door. Cabinets from Bulthaup. **BELOW:** Besides serving as the horizontal axis of the house, the concrete wall—roughly three feet thick—also provides space, in the family room, for built-in seating and display areas for the couple's collection of ceramics.



a university town that, Waldfoegel comments, had been "fairly receptive" to the new architecture of the 1950s and 1960s. "But there's a limit to what you can do in the name of modernism in older communities. For ourselves, we had to build in this idiom. For the city, it had to be contextual."

California modern. Contextual. The portfolio of Culver City-based Steven Ehrlich Architects, studded with allusions to West Coast demigods R. M. Schindler and Richard Neutra (the firm had done a sensitive addition to a Neutra house in Santa Monica nearly a decade ago), aptly found its way to the couple. "The ideas of both architects ebb and flow in my work," Ehrlich says. "Schindler had more interest in exploring materiality is-

sues, while Neutra focused on indoor-outdoor relationships. I like to think that, as with theirs, my buildings follow a clear logic."

The 8,000-square-foot house that Ehrlich designed for Waldfoegel and MacLean radiates outward in a pinwheel plan, opening on all sides and graciously breaking down in scale as it approaches the street. Two parallel wings with end quadrants—a motor court, an entrance/dining court, a large garden off the living room and a pool terrace extending from the kitchen and family room—fulfill the desire of the couple, who have a young daughter, for discrete formal and informal living zones. The plan is highlighted by interior spaces that engage the landscape through the architect's

Rheinzink flat roofs—the “spatial connective tissue”—cantilever from the façades and become softly reflective ceilings in the interior.



ABOVE: In the master bedroom, as throughout, Ehrlich used mitered-glass corners and large sliding windows “to extend internal space visually and physically.” **RIGHT:** Landscape architect Willett Moss notes that he was “inspired by and bound to the architecture: The pool and garden experiences are inseparable from those of the building.” Janus et Cie rattan lounge chairs. **OPPOSITE:** **BELOW:** The first-floor plan. Four distinct courtyards radiate from the pinwheel.



use of pocketing glass doors, mitered-glass corners (a Schindler device that emphasizes the pinwheel concept), metal overhangs of various depths and limestone floors that continue from inside out.

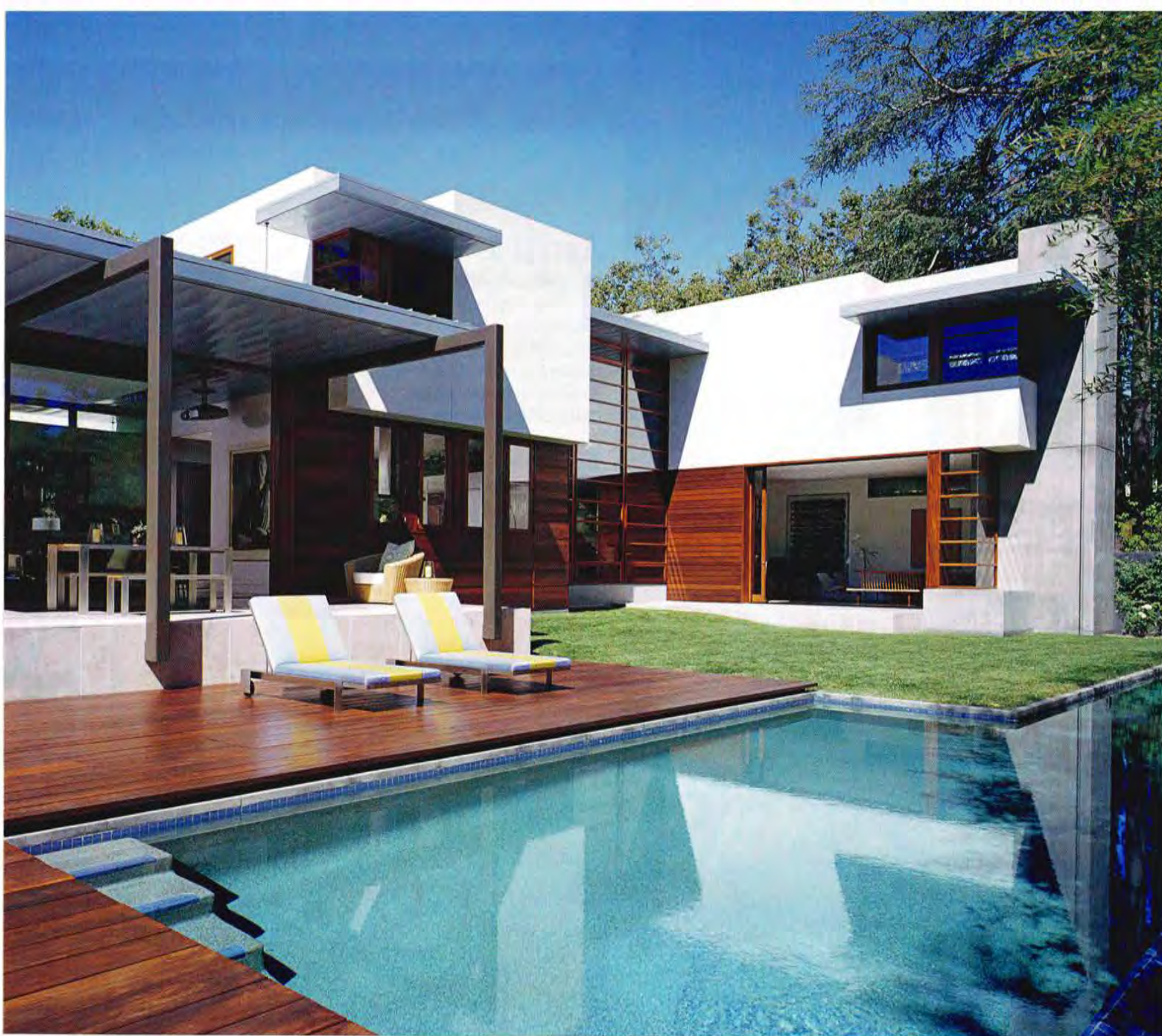
The north (living room, study) and south (kitchen, family room) wings are linked by a translucent glass bridge situated between the double-height dining room and a dynamic stainless-steel stair, which leads to a finished, light-filled basement. Overhead, the stair and another glass bridge

separate the master suite, and a second study, from three bedrooms and baths. The upper-level rooms are encased in two white-stucco boxes that appear to float above blocks of mahogany below; the horizontality of the wood, especially where it frames and articulates several series of glass planes, acts to relieve the complexity of the house's massing. Rheinzink flat roofs—the “spatial connective tissue,” in Ehrlich's terms—cantilever from the façades and become softly reflective ceilings in the interior.

Aspinelike, poured-in-place-concrete wall that is first seen flanking the front door runs perpendicular (north-south) to the wings, bisecting and organizing the circulation of the residence. As well as providing space for built-in seating and cabinetry, the concrete axial wall, with its platforms, perforations and shelving, makes generous display areas for art and objects. Waldfoegel saw the concrete itself as “structural mud—a nice reference to the California adobe.” Noting that it is composed

of sand, he says: “Building in Silicon Valley with silica always struck me as appropriate.”

Waldfoegel reveals that he and MacLean spent so much time studying and drawing the building during design and construction, they “anticipated how everything would play against each other, every detail, every seam.” Ehrlich and project architect Takashi Yanai encouraged the owners' involvement; at the same time they prepared them for certain inevitabilities. “One of the big points I made to Asher



in particular was that there are aspects of materiality that you can't control fully, whether it's the liquid-stone nature of the concrete pour or the expression of the grain in mahogany," Ehrlich says. "Even the Rheinzink is a natural, weathering surface. Both he and Helyn came to appreciate that the materials, in their variations, have an unpredictable kind of beauty."

MacLean and Waldfogel are collectors who had long been clients (acquiring largely American ceramics and furni-
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