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THE HOUSE IN THE WOODS THAT ARCHITECTS HANK KONING AND JULIE EIZENBERG BUILT FOR A LOS ANGELES FAMILY LUXURIATES IN OPENNESS AND LIGHT.

Many homes in Los Angeles have glamorous provenance, but few sites have a better pedigree for quality of living than the property owned by this high-profile couple (she's a prominent entertainment attorney and he's a TV director with serious prime-time credits). Their heavily shaded private road alongside a creek is little more than a paved track off Sunset Boulevard; what traffic you encounter is as apt to be equine as fuel-injected.

Which was exactly the point. The couple was looking for a quiet and healthy place for themselves, three active children (a daughter, now in college, and two teenage sons) and a family menagerie that presently consists of two dachshund puppies and a full-grown Ainu (a Japanese breed). The house that stood on the lot, formerly owned by filmmaker John Houston's last wife, did not impress them, but they were smitten by the greenery: The enclave backs up against a state park and was originally developed by a landscape architect with Filmland connections (the property was once a nursery from which plants were jobbed out to the motion picture business). The resident landscape artist was responsible for the plantings at Disneyland and Walt Disney World, among others, and for his own magic kingdom, he imported trees from all over the world, including now-magnificent bamboos and grasses that define the woodscape.

It was the idyllic ambience, not the proximity to A-list celebrities (the neighbors are called Arnold and Maria), that inspired the couple to make an offer on the place.

PRODUCED BY LINDA O'KEEFFE AND LAURA HULL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONN COOLIDGE. WRITTEN BY MICHAEL LASSELL.

The soaring great room celebrates California vernacular in a modern way, by sampling influences of Bernard Maybeck's northern California Arts and Craft style and such modernist southern California pioneers as Irving Gill. The sculptural ceiling prisms hold lighting for the owners' contemporary photography collection; their Mission pottery is displayed to maximum effect on minimal glass shelving.



To undertake an overhaul, the couple turned to family friends Hank Koning and Julie Eizenberg, principals of one of the most respected architectural firms in the city. "Our kids went to preschool with Hank and Julie's kids," remembers the attorney. "We had always joked that if we ever built a house, we'd hire Hank and Julie to do it. So when we bought this place, we did."

Koning and Eizenberg, however, are more than just parents of the kids' friends. The Australian-born duo have built a strong reputation in and beyond L.A. with their particular take on modernism. Their firm is known for residential and public buildings that blend the southern California vernacular with strong color and natural materials, a sense of fenestration as witty as the footprints of the homes are unexpectedly askew, and a commitment not only to the natural environment but to social justice (they first became known for low-cost housing, including SROs for the homeless).

One of the earliest problems the client-architect alliance faced was where to site the house. "There wasn't much flat space," recalls Julie Eizenberg. "We could have built at the bottom of the grade, but they wanted to have as many experiences of the property as possible, from views looking down at the creek to nestling into the hillside—even though building on a hillside in Los Angeles is very difficult, from getting the permissions to actual construction." Particularly tricky would be installing a new swimming pool while preserving the thriving mature flora.



The dining area, which pairs new furniture with an antique sideboard and an iconic modern chandelier, is at one end of the dramatic double-height great room; the kitchen is up the steps to the right. Opposite (clockwise from left): The facade of the bedroom wing is not flat: It's a long, slow undulating curve; the couple's daughter browses the floor-level bookcases under huge sliding window walls; the space also serves as photo gallery and music room.





The open kitchen not only has ample room for cooking and dining, but for socializing. Koning Eizenberg designed most of the storage as individual pieces rather than banks of matched cabinets ("Any stainless-steel fabricator can do it," says Eizenberg, "as long as you can find one who will interface with a cabinet maker"). Above right: A midcentury chair cozies up to an Italian glass-tile fireplace set in a window wall.

In essence, the house consists of two wings: One, which features wood, houses the double-height public rooms. The other, clad in stucco and inspired by Spanish colonial design, is a full two stories and consists of family and guest bedrooms. They meet at a transitional area that includes a family room and a media nook. The wings do not, however, form a normal L: They come together at less than a 90-degree angle because the architects had to fit the house among the trees.

The owners were adamant about keeping as much of the landscaping as possible, including a regal sycamore whose roots were perilously exposed during much of the construction process. "I used to go out there and put my arms around the trunk of that tree and tell it that things would soon be fine," says the attorney, "and sure enough that tree did not give up."

Among the aesthetic parameters the clients brought to the project was their love of the work of northern California so-called Stick-style architect Bernard Maybeck (the couple lived in Berkeley while the wife went to law school). And that was a challenge for the architects. "They wanted Maybeck," says Eizenberg, "but Maybeck is dark, and we all wanted a light house."

Happily, the clients also respected such southern California pioneers as minimalist Irving Gill. So woody nature met intelligent geometry in a living/dining/great room largely clad in cherry plywood. To satisfy the crafts roots of Maybeck, Eizenberg and her staff designed a surround for the Rumford fireplace with brand-new gold-gilt glass tile from Italy set alongside matte-finished handcast tile bearing the imprint of sycamore leaves (the trees line the creek bed).



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e like to play with expectations," says Eizenberg, "and then subvert them by subtle manipulations. With the bedroom wing, we wanted to be evocative of the Spanish vernacular but not sentimental." (Hence, the curved wall inset with a barbecue; the curve also softens the house in the landscape.)

The large triangular window in the great room was requested by the owners. "We had a window like that in our last house," says the lawyer, "so we asked Hank and Julie if they could do something like that for us here." Of course, the innovative architects were not about to replicate the gabled roofline of an anonymous '60s ranch house: The apex of this gable is not parallel to the walls of the room—it runs at a slight diagonal—so the ceiling angles are askew, upping the ante on the room's modernist hand.

True to their interest in new materials, Koning and Eizenberg shingled the roof in copper Veral, a laminate of copper fused to a bituminous membrane. A much lighter material than slate, it's fire resistant and not much more expensive than asphalt. It also lasts much longer and weathers to a natural patina. "It's quite a cost-effective product," enthuses Eizenberg.

And is everyone still speaking? "Oh, yes," laughs Eizenberg. "They're very happy with the house. It was fun to do, and we're all still friends. In fact, when we saw how lovely the fireplace was in the outdoor wall, we decided we had to have one of our own."

"We like to say we live up the creek," jokes the director, obviously pleased with his new home, "but that's a good thing." ♦
See Resources, last pages.



The master suite contains this spa-quality bathroom, which plays wenge wood off greenstone countertops and glass tile. The room, like the house, celebrates openness, light and transparency. The suite has its own living area, separated from the bedroom (which features a wenge-wood platform bed designed by the architects) by a three-sided fireplace faced in copper.