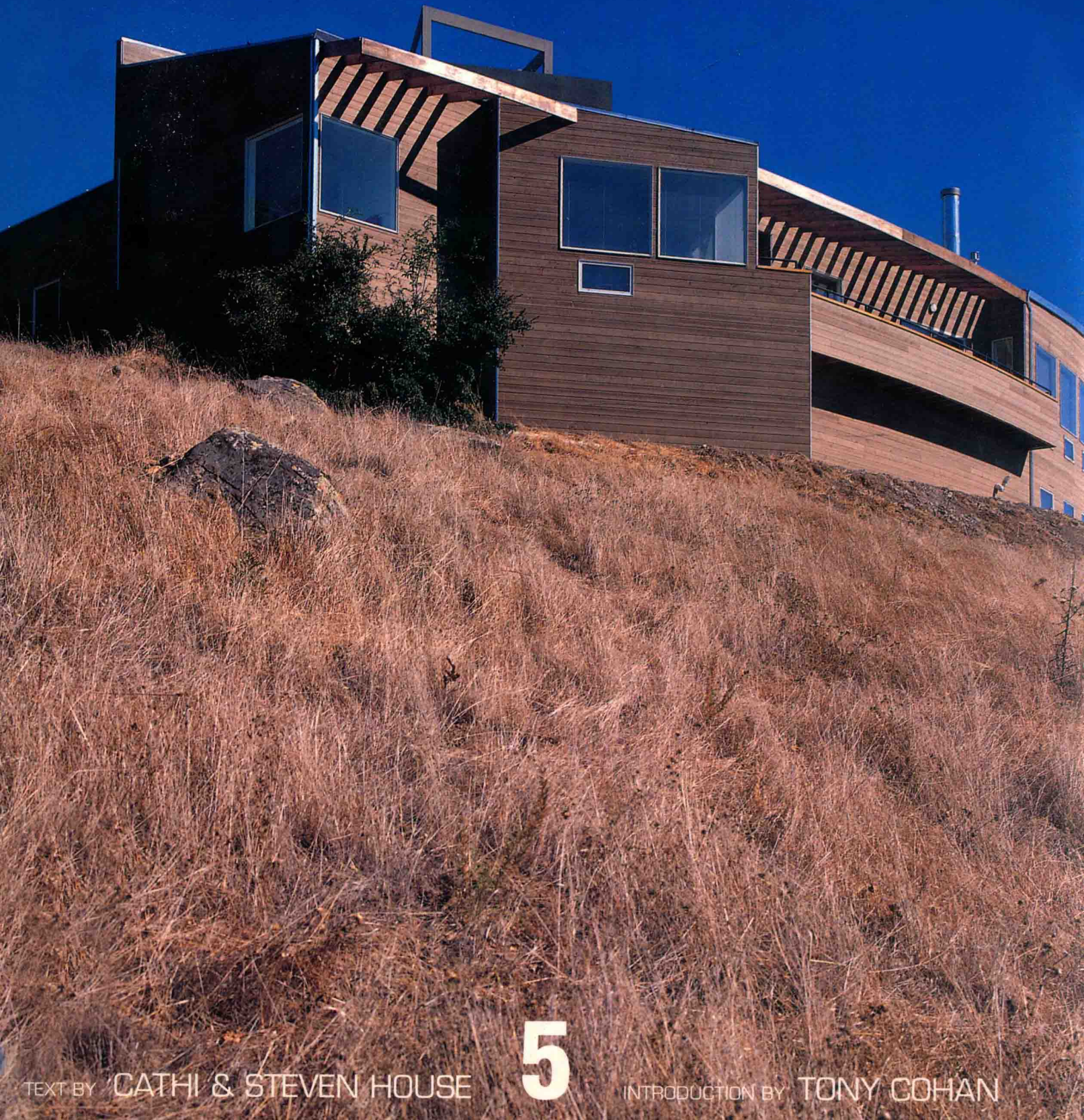


House Design
HOUSE + HOUSE



TEXT BY CATHI & STEVEN HOUSE

5

INTRODUCTION BY TONY COHAN

C H O R E O G R A P H I N G S P A C E

House Design
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First published in Australia in 1999 by
The Images Publishing Group Pty Ltd
ACN 059 734 431
6 Bastow Place, Mulgrave, Victoria 3170, Australia
Telephone + (61 3) 9561 5544 Facsimile + (61 3) 9561 4860
E-mail: books@images.com.au

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

House, Steven, 1952–.

House & House choreographing space.

Bibliography.

Includes index.

ISBN 1 86470 029 7.

House Design Series ISSN 1329 0045

1. House, Steven, 1952–. 2. House, Cathi, 1953–.
3. Architects – United States. 4. Architecture, Domestic – United States – Designs and plans. 5. Architecture, Modern – 20th century – United States – Designs and plans. I. House, Cathi, 1953–. II. Title. (Series : House design : 5).

728.022273

Designed by The Graphic Image Studio Pty Ltd
Mulgrave, Australia

Printing by Everbest Printing, Hong Kong

CONTENTS

7	Introduction by Tony Cohan
8	Choreographing Space by Cathi and Steven House
10	Selected Projects
10	Telegraph Hill Residence
14	Jarvis Residence
18	Langmaid Residence
28	Waldhauer Residence
32	Private Residence
42	Grandview Estate
50	Buckingham Way Residence
56	The Homestead
60	Forest View Residence
70	Stine Residence
78	A House for Two Architects
90	Hammonds Residence
98	Selected Works
106	Firm Profile
107	Selected Bibliography
108	Works and Credits
110	Acknowledgments
112	Index

CHOREOGRAPHING SPACE

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110	Acknowledgments
112	Index



INTRODUCTION

A Few Notes on the Work of House + House by Tony Cohan

'Beauty was the aura surrounding the object, the consequence of the secret relation between its making and its meaning.'

Octavio Paz,

Seeing and Using: Art and Craftsmanship

I first met Cathi and Steven House on a street in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. At the time they were finishing work on their own house—a remarkable synthesis of Mexican building concepts and artisanship, Mediterranean space and light, and the subtle employment of contemporary ideas. Since then, the house has been much praised, widely featured internationally, and won various design awards.

Even before I saw their house they'd visited mine, an 18th century dwelling in the middle of town with thick adobe walls, soaring interior volumes, and great mesquite doors. I and my artist wife Masako take great pleasure in our house, yet sometimes we'd think of making changes: aligning it more closely to the uses we put it to. When the Houses came to visit, I saw that they immediately grasped its mysteries and paradoxes: what made it sing, what was eccentric or odd about it, and what made us want to change it while keeping it the same. Our old Mexican house and their new one formed the axis of a conversation extending outward into a wide-ranging contemplation of culture and materials, travel and time, life and art. It soon became apparent that the Houses were no ordinary architects.

In his brilliant essay on Mexican art and craftsmanship, the Nobel Prize-winning poet and essayist Octavio Paz says: 'A glass pitcher, a wicker basket, a *huipil* (dress) of coarse cotton cloth, a wooden bowl [are] handsome objects not in spite of but because of their usefulness. Their beauty is inseparable from their function: they are handsome because they are useful. Handicrafts belong to a world existing before the separation of the useful and the beautiful.'

Paz' commentary is not to be constrained by considerations of scale—certainly not in this part of the world, where the hand's touch is equally

visible in great monumental architecture, ancient and new: the Mayan, Aztec and Toltec temples, the festive structures one sees in every town and village, the houses and buildings of Luís Barragán. The work of the design firm House + House, grounded equally in the elastic languages of modernism and the world's vernacular architectures, bears the intimate, tactile qualities we associate with the best crafts but wrought larger: evocations of a world before the fragmentation of the industrial age, when use and beauty were inseparable. The Houses understand that, as Leger said: 'Architecture is a natural function. It grows out of the ground, like animals or plants.'

With Steven and Cathi House, architecture does indeed seem like a natural function: they breathe it. Products of a unique, intensive education at Virginia Tech's College of Architecture modeled after the Bauhaus, emphasizing design at all scales and the inter-relatedness of all forms of art and architecture, they began House + House with the full array of practical and theoretical tools at their command. At the same time, a series of extensive, revelatory travels in Asia, the Mediterranean, and Latin America awakened them to the enduring power of indigenous architectures. (One result was their traveling exhibition, 'Mediterranean Indigenous Architecture - timeless solutions for the human habitat,' a critical analysis of village architecture in Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Spain.) Additionally, both draw beautifully; both are exceptional photographers. Cathi House's personal involvement in crafts—sewing, weaving, spinning, painting, working in clay and fabric and plastic, making baskets, rugs, toys, clothes and furniture—lends an added dimension to House + House projects, allowing them to extend their architectural vision down into custom furniture, landscape, and interiors.

This diversity of technical skills, and their ease with genres and eras, gives the design firm of House + House near-infinite range—and the freedom that comes with that. But what really distinguishes its work is the use to which this virtuosity is put: for House + House understands a dwelling as a dialogue among space, materials, and client whose ultimate aim is not to glorify the builder but to illuminate the client's

existence. Far more interested in the 'soul' of a house than its 'look', House + House's conversation with clients more resembles a communion, revolving less around design issues than the quality of experience: What human creative end is trying to be realized? Where do function, esthetics, and pleasure meet? What would release joy? Deeply sensitive to elements of forms, color, texture, natural light, and movement, House + House attempts to create a tangible spirit within each home, molded to the process of living. How will this tree, this slope, this shaft of light be experienced? The result is an intimate, personal architecture, delving to the core of the client's special nature.

Though international in scope, most House + House projects have been built in northern California, within range of their San Francisco office. Contemporary California—eclectic, innovative, multicultural, with an emphasis on the inner life and reaching out for new experience—is a perfect environment for House + House. Such human and geographic diversity requires site-specific, client-specific architecture: projects as unique as those who commission them.

In a world where beauty and function have been sundered, House + House's mission is to knit them back together.

Sometimes when we're in Mexico at the same time, the Houses come over and we sit in the back garden on a stone seat by the old rubble wall, beneath the ring where horses used to tie up, shaded by a jacaranda and a cheremoya tree. We gaze back at the 250-year-old house, decoding its structure, thinking about where things might go without disturbing its soul. We take in the sun's angle, the flow of winds, the migration of light down the walls. We talk about what we saw in the marketplace today, or some fiesta observed, or our recent travels. This rich contemplation of experience is the very wellspring of House + House's architecture, what sets it apart. The Greek architect Aris Konstantinidis, a favorite of theirs, has said: 'Here the landscape comes near us, it comes into the building, not so much because we see it with our eyes, but more because we know it exists, we capture its existence with our senses, we embrace it with our body and soul.'

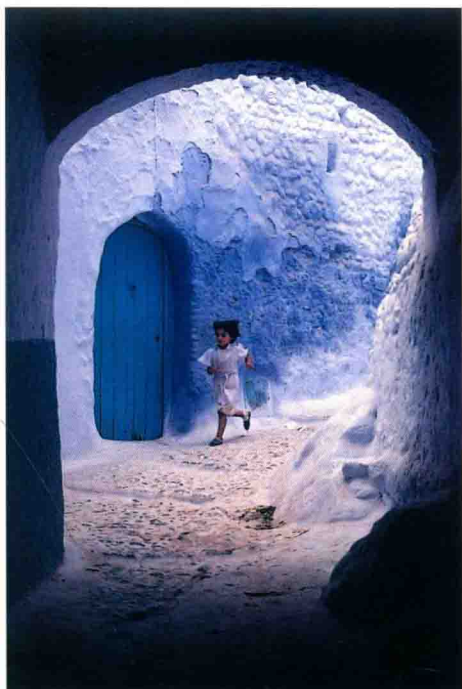
Opposite:

Color, composition, light
San Miguel de Allende, Mexico
Photography: Steven House

CHOREOGRAPHING SPACE

by Cathi and Steven House

Our journey into awareness began with our travels. After finishing our formal education, we took time to live in Greece. There our lives spun onto a path we could not have imagined. Opening our eyes for the first time on the island of Santorini, we saw the morning sun raking the rough texture of a stucco wall. The power and beauty of it took our breath away and solidified our concept of architecture. Since then we have looked to our travels as a source of inspiration and personal growth. It is during those times that we are renewed in our work, our visions, our selves, and are able to let go of preconceptions, see the world with open eyes, and explore new ways of thinking. In one of those special moments that can change you forever, we happened into the open door off the roof of a little chapel. In that tiny space we discovered a stair that amazed and delighted us. So unique was the design that it taught us we must question everything, never make assumptions, and that we must always search beyond our imagination. To create magic—



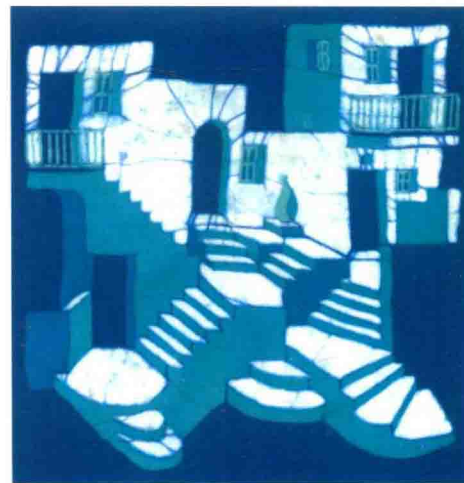
2

to amaze and delight our clients and give them breathless moments—is a goal that has guided our firm's work for the past 16 years.

Wandering village paths revealed to us how space can be choreographed. The excitement and anticipation is overwhelming as you turn this way and that, always aware that something new is about to unfold. The path widens, the wall becomes a seat, you move like a dancer up meandering stairs, through a colonnade, around a fountain... We learned to see not just with our eyes but with our souls. As we shape buildings, we often talk of choreographing space, composing and relating spaces and materials to enhance the journeys through the daily rituals that each home contains. We think of movement—spiritually, visually, emotionally, as well as physically—and search for the same quality of experience in the trip from the bedroom to the kitchen as one finds in a stroll through a little Italian village. The journey must address each aspect differently to achieve that magic and mystery.



3



1

Color, texture and light are powerful tools in shaping the environment. Studying patterns in old stone walls, the shimmer of morning light or layered tones of colored washes, has taught us that color, texture and light are inextricably intertwined. How we use them differs with each project. Sometimes it is a search for unity, a link to nature, a reference to history—to sculpt form, to focus a view, to invite passage. We may use them to define space, enrich a material or highlight a detail. We often blend color with light to create a mood by casting a wash of color or a shimmering glow. Understanding color begins with the site—the rocks, branches, bark, leaves, grasses, lichen, moss and soil. They change from sunrise to sunset and with the seasons. Selecting building materials is a search for the palette that will complement the land and embrace the clients and their possessions. We celebrate each material and work closely with the craftsmen who form them.

We look for moments of pause in the homes we create, those spaces that are not programmed—the surprises—and in each home they are different. That moment when you are between spaces, between thoughts, between activities—in which you can take a breath, remove your coat, change your mind—is incredibly powerful. We never know where they will surface, but we are always searching for their potential development.

When we are designing, we imagine how our clients will feel as they move through their lives within their home. Composition, proportion, movement, focus, vistas, color, textures, light, touch, reflection, pause, glimpse, surprise, wonder, joy—these are some of our tools. We take great pleasure in discovering how to use them in new ways with each client to create homes which embrace and celebrate their lives.

- 1 *Batik - Stairs in Mykonos, Greece*
 - 2 *Movement - Chechaouen, Morocco*
 - 3 *Texture - Atlas Mountains, Morocco*
 - 4 *Composition - Miranda, Italy*
 - 5 *Sketch analysis of progression - Assisi, Italy*
- Images: Steven House (2,4,5); Cathi House (1,3)



4

'Architecture...is not only buildings, but all the works that man makes with his hands in the course of his daily occupations.'

HEIDEGGER

'...it will be better, not for the streets to run straight, but to have them wind about like the course of a river. Besides appearing so much longer, they will conduce very much to beauty and convenience. Moreover, this winding of the streets will make the passenger at every step discover a new structure, and...in the winding of the streets there will be no house but what, in some part of the day, will enjoy some sun; nor will they be without gentle breezes; and yet they will not be molested by stormy blasts, because such will be broken by the turning of the streets.'

ALBERTI

'When one has completed the necessary one comes immediately upon the beautiful and pleasant.'

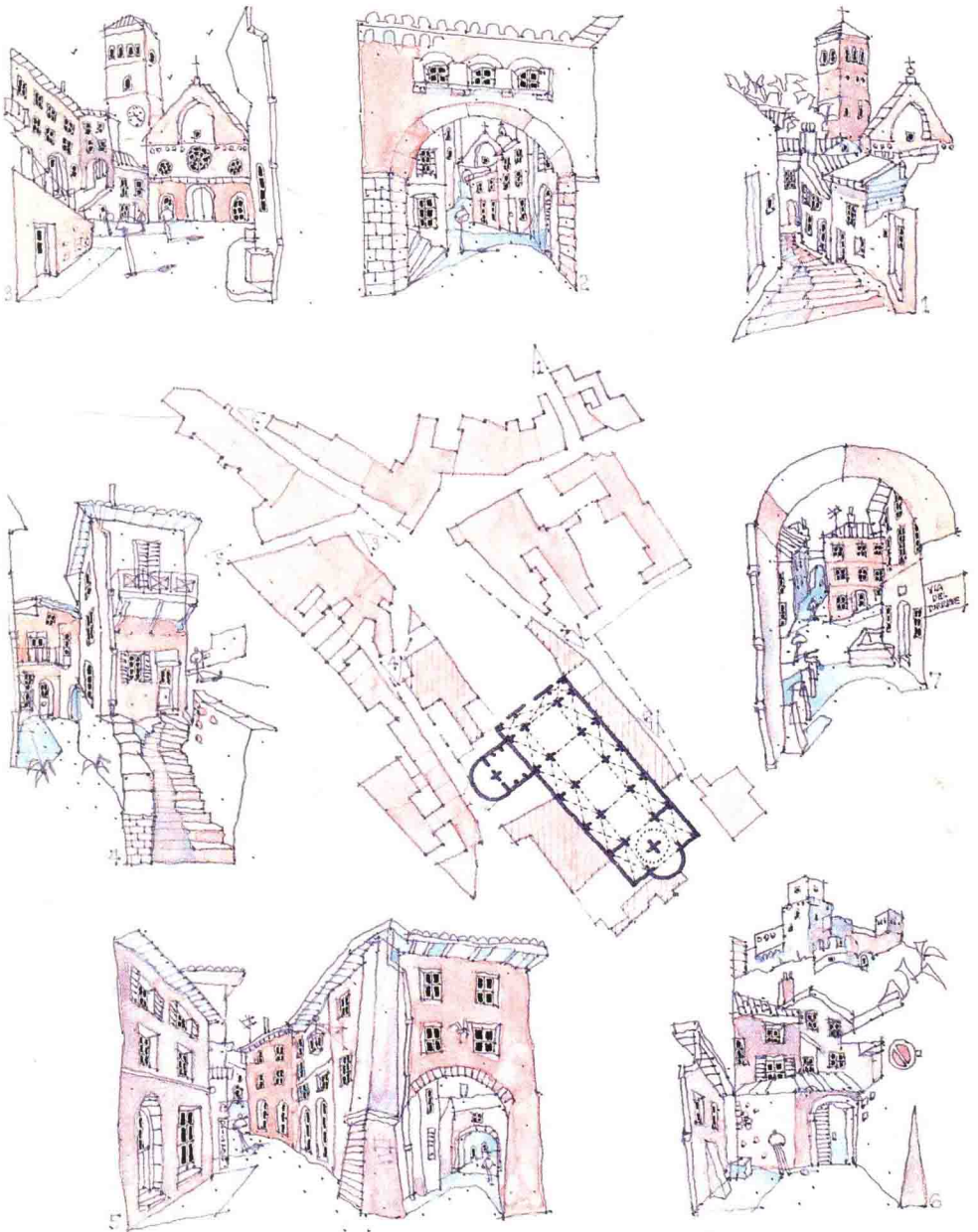
VOLTAIRE

'The ideal house is one that does not contain anything superfluous and that lacks nothing necessary.'

PLUTARCH

'The true work of architecture is not a monument but a receptacle of life.'

ARIS KONSTANTINIDIS



5

TELEGRAPH HILL RESIDENCE

San Francisco, California, USA
Design/Completion 1992/1994

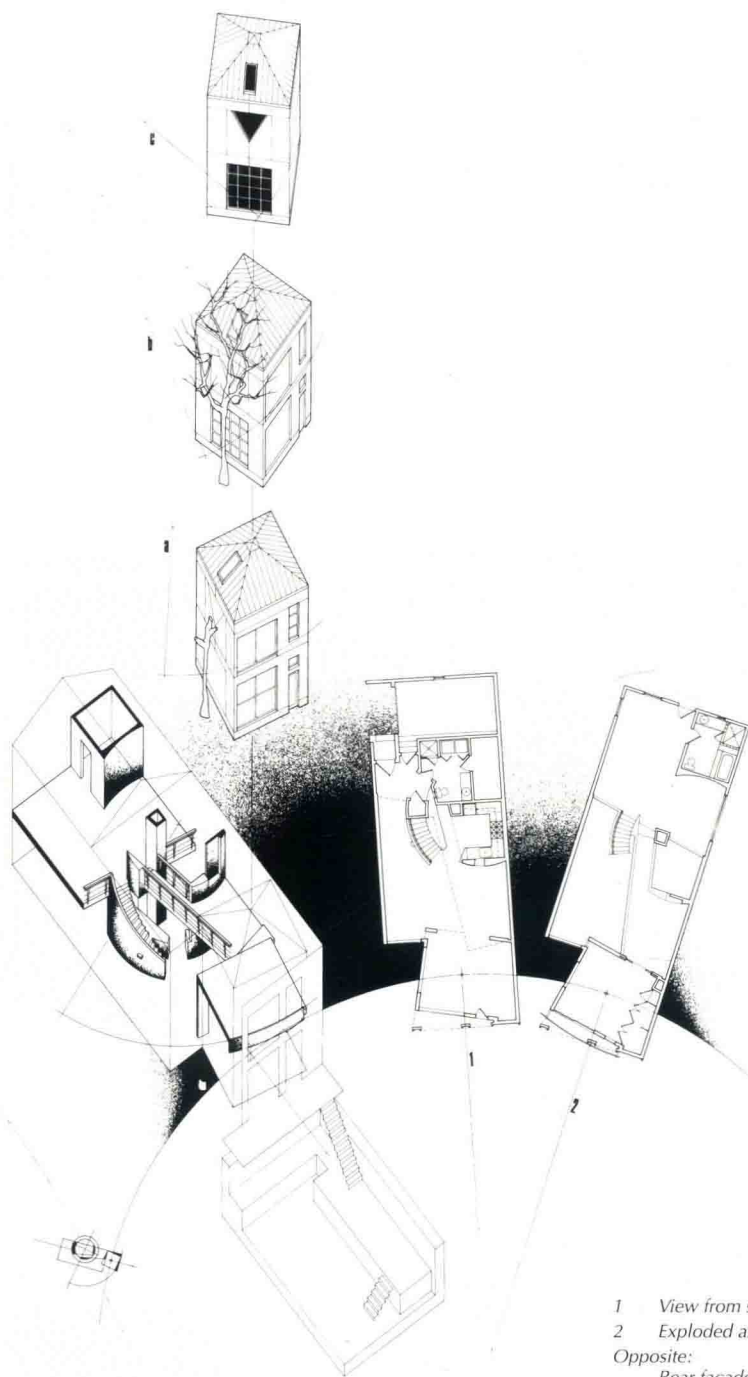


1

A tiny 1906 earthquake relief home nestled at the end of a narrow alley on Telegraph Hill had been remodeled in the 1930s and expanded in the 1950s. The home had an awkward plan, low ceilings, dark spaces and an array of odd materials. Positioned in the center of the block, this is a distinctly urban setting, yet is surrounded by its neighbor's gardens. Directly behind the home stood a large Japanese maple tree. Preservation of this beautiful tree became a focal point for the new design.

The addition was demolished, the remaining structure gutted and 400 square feet added. It is still a tiny bungalow from the street that gives no clue to the surprise contained within. Carefully skewed geometry allowed the tree to be incorporated into the center of the home, framed by a soaring grid of windows. A curving stairway wraps the bar, defining the kitchen and connecting to an open bridge flying above to the master bedroom. Cabinets are dyed purple, continuing the color of the carpet. Black knobs, appliances, sink and laminate counters complete a composition which begins with the black hex-concrete bar counter. Swirls ground into the aluminum facing sparkle at the foot of the stair. An arc of perforated steel at the master bedroom deck recalls the forms inside, screening for privacy while filtering sunlight. Radiating lines scored into the rose colored concrete further accentuate the rigorous geometry. Sculpted walls shape the space and form niches, each washed with light from geometric fixtures and carefully aligned skylights. A rhythmic procession of steel angles and cables is capped with turquoise stained maple railing at the flying bridge above.

The living room opens onto a spacious deck connected to the garden below where old, stone paving, lemon trees, and foundations of an old church recall the site's history. Smooth plywood siding stained gray and turquoise provides crisp form on the exterior, at once in scale with the neighborhood, while denying scale altogether.



1 View from street
2 Exploded axonometric with floor plans
Opposite:
Rear facade from garden





4



5



6



7



8

4 View to stair with bridge above
 5 Kitchen
 6 View to living room from second floor
 7 Master bathroom
 8 Detail of stair at bar
 Opposite:
 View of living area from entry

