

California Houses

Creativity in Context

Michael Webb



Thames
&Hudson



Casa per Amici Santa Monica

MICHAEL KOVAC DESIGN STUDIO

Los Angeles is full of mundane houses that occupy extraordinary sites but fail to exploit their potential. They face away from views and have little space for outdoor living. Many were thrown up during the post-war boom when undeveloped land was still abundant and cheap, construction costs were low, and newly married arrivals were in a hurry to put a roof over their heads. Art and Pat Antin, a couple who moved from New York to southern California, bought such a house on the side of Santa Monica Canyon and lived there for 20 years while raising a family. They met Michael Kovac through a mutual interest in the great outdoors, became friends on a cycling trip to Europe, and invited him to freshen up their house. "I explained to them that they could spend a lot of money on improvements, and it would still be deficient," recalls Kovac. "Finally, they agreed to start from scratch."

The new house was limited to two floors above ground to stay within the 32-foot (9.8 m) height limit, so the hillside was excavated to accommodate a basement. Initially, the program was quite modest: living areas at entry level, a primary suite upstairs, three small guest bedrooms, and recreational facilities downstairs. But, as they discussed the design, the owners' wish list grew to include a screening room, golf simulator, billiards room, wine store, and cushioned bleachers with a pull-down screen in the basement; a pool on the living-room terrace; and twin offices, bathrooms, and walk-in closets on the upper level. The size increased to 6,900 square feet (641 m²).



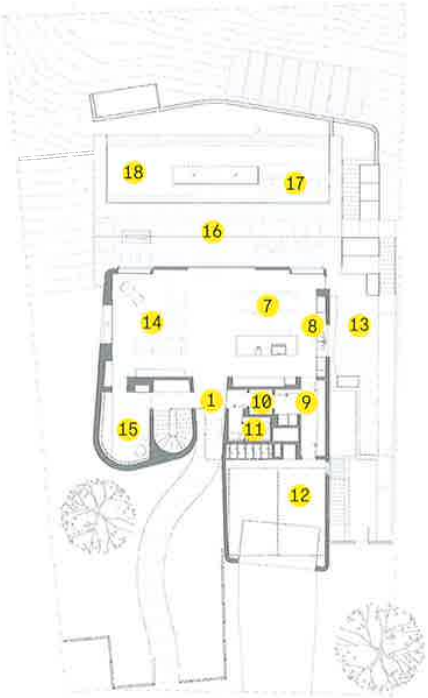
That challenged Kovac's team to break up the mass of the house so that it would not overwhelm its neighbors and to satisfy the wife's desire that it be warm and friendly. The house is set well back from the street, with a wooden walkway winding through a landscaped front yard beside the garage. A softly curved bay and boundary wall of smooth white plaster complement a chamfered bay clad in thermally treated ash boards. From the entry you look through pocketing glass sliders that open the living areas to the terrace and a panoramic view over the canyon and out to the ocean. A motorized glass rail can be recessed into the ground.

Kovac is renowned for his refined use of materials, and here he had an opportunity to display his creativity to the full. Rift-cut oak cabinetry enhances the hand-troweled plaster walls, as well as the white oak floor and ceiling panels. During construction, the steel structural frame reminded the husband of industrial lofts in New York, and he urged the architect to leave it exposed. Kovac thought that full exposure would be messy, but he carved out three rounded openings in the plywood, exposing steel members and wood joists while incorporating down lighting over the leather-textured quartzite kitchen counter, the dining table, and the sitting area. The spiral staircase linking the three levels is balustraded in a ribbon of blackened steel.

- 1 Entry
- 2 Office
- 3 Closet
- 4 Bathroom
- 5 Terrace
- 6 Primary bedroom
- 7 Dining area
- 8 Kitchen
- 9 Pantry
- 10 Elevator
- 11 Powder room
- 12 Garage
- 13 Barbecue deck
- 14 Living area
- 15 Den
- 16 Pool deck
- 17 Spa
- 18 Pool
- 19 Game room
- 20 Golf simulator
- 21 Theater
- 22 Bedroom
- 23 Laundry
- 24 Wine cellar
- 25 Outdoor covered courtyard



BASEMENT PLAN



FIRST-FLOOR PLAN



SECOND-FLOOR PLAN







Casa per Amici lives up to its name. It is tactile and full of natural light. There is an oculus over the jacuzzi opening off the husband's bathroom, and a butterfly roof incorporates clerestories over the main bedroom. A lap pool bridges the lower-level terrace, and a slot window of triple-laminated glass at its base pulls light into the subterranean spaces. Wind off the ocean provides natural cooling, while sustainable features and battery back-up systems are fully integrated within the structure. The house works equally well as a belvedere for gazing out and as an elegant and restrained oasis of calm, enriched by well-matched tones and textures.

