

RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

# *The Strata House by Kovac*

By ABIGAIL STONE Photography by ROGER DAVIES



The motor court highlights the contrast between the home's shou sugi ban-clad top and the white plaster exterior of the ground level, which connects it to the home's existing glass-walled pavilion.



The expansive living room is made intimate by a sunken center that holds two of B&B Italia's Tufty-Time Modular Sofas by Patricia Urquiola and Gubi's 2.0 Coffee Table. Pierre Paulin's Ribbon and Groovy chairs congregate in one corner.



The kitchen, designed to embrace the family, is dominated by an island that feels like it was carved out of one solid piece of stone. "We very carefully designed how it was cut so that it wraps around and creates this monolith, even though there are drawers," says Thomas Schneider.



Nicknamed "the Brazilian Terrace," the covered dining area was inspired by that country's outdoor pool and gathering spaces.



The home's moody, mid-century vibe carries through to its bathrooms. While the house is modern in its sensibility, the underlying feeling is that the glamour of the past—especially as channeled through the movies—is always present.

**A** prospective client found a property located in the heart of L.A.'s legendary Bel Air neighborhood that was perched on a promontory of the Santa Monica mountains.

It included a rundown mid-century modern glass-walled pavilion that framed a breathtaking view of the contradiction that is at the compelling heart of living in L.A.: the juxtaposition of its wild and rugged terrain with the rigid towers of its modern structures. At the suggestion of friends, he enlisted Kovac to architect his dream of a welcoming hillside retreat that would serve as both a family home and a space that would support anything from intimate dinners to extravagant fundraisers.

Founded in 1988, L.A.-based firm Kovac is known for their high-end, detail-rich residential and commercial spaces and their people-forward approach. "We fervently believe that each space has its own sensibility—one shaped by people, place and



The curved brass bar and a handful of Astele's Reeves swivel bar stools are illuminated by a twinkle emanating from a 36-bulb vintage brass Sputnik-style light fixture.



A custom sunken sectional swathed in Opuzen's Venice Velvet in Coffee Brown surrounds a quartet of lacquered coffee tables in the indoor/outdoor family room.



materials," explains Michael Kovac, its founding partner and creative director, who had refined his sensibilities under noted modernist architect Jerrold Lomax before launching his own firm. "Through attentive listening and close observation, we are able to create spaces that connect our clients with their surroundings and with those around them." Adds Thomas Schneider, the firm's managing partner: "We design buildings that breathe and grow; experiential spaces that evolve with our clients' way of life. We aim to create spaces that engage their senses and elevate their everyday."

While there was no doubt that the setting and the view were visually stunning, the narrow site had substantial issues that needed to be addressed. It didn't offer the large flat expanses where the client envisioned his children playing. Where would the



In the milled walnut-paneled dining room, Fios's re-edition of Gino Sarfatti's Model 2065 ceiling light dangles above a custom table with a top created from arctic ice Quartzite with a brass inlay.





The home's glass-lined atriums were designed to reveal glimpses of nature, cementing the interior's connection with the exterior.



The home office's private interior courtyard is lined with Japanese maple trees.



A glamorous lounge that doubles as a state-of-the-art screening room showcases the client's love of mid-century modern's sinuous shapes, vibrant colors and plush textures.

pool be situated? The firm began by studying the property's existing pavilion, imagining ways in which they could increase its space to support the client's dream while maintaining the essence of the original structure. "We landed on the concept of a home organized in three layers—or strata—hence the name of the project," says Kovac. "Through the addition of both retaining walls and cantilevered lawn space, we created new grounds bordered by the magnificent existing oak tree canopies on one side and the home on the other." These modifications paved the way for the home's unusual stepped appearance and allowed it to capture the full spectrum of the client's desires.

The lowest level shelters the wellness area by offering a gym, a sauna, a cold-plunge, a hyperbaric



The shou sugi ban-clad home office cantilevers off one corner.





Another angle of the home's corner office captures its view of a cluster of Century City towers sparkling like Oz in the distance.

chamber and changing rooms. Carved out of the hillside and clad in battered stone walls, it's anchored at one end by a glamorous infinity pool that enjoys a postcard-perfect view of the city. The main ground level showcases the home's spellbinding public areas, including a state-of-the-art screening room, a dining room, a bar and, sprawling across that glass-walled pavilion, an expansive living room. "While we fully renovated the structure to bring it up to code, it remains largely as it was designed in 1964 by John B. Parkin, a Canadian modernist architect," Kovac points out. "The client was enamored of the richness of the property's history and loved that it would be a touchstone for the project." The home's uppermost level accommodates the family's private quarters. Clad in shou sugi ban and cantilevered over the perimeter of the lower levels, the imposing, delicately balanced blackened timber boxes are symbolic of the home's transformation into a modern residence.

The drama of the exterior is countered by an impressive interior inspired by the client's love of the way movies and television, from *Mad Men* to the



The impeccably organized primary bedroom closet illuminated by a skylight mirrors the milled walnut walls and brass fittings found throughout the house.



The wellness area's shower is lined in a dramatically veined marble.





The shou sugi ban-clad residential level hovers above the battered stone wellness level created from Lichen limestone rubble.

*James Bond* franchise, have depicted the glittering and glamorous world of the '60s and '70s. "We used his favorite films to create fictional stories for each room," says Schneider. "Coupled with the clients' predilections for rich color, these narratives served to guide our decisions on materials, furniture, and fabrics." The result, which represents the firm's first foray into the world of interior design, is especially noteworthy given the home's sprawling square footage. Despite clocking in at a staggering 14,500 square feet, the rooms never feel oppressive. Instead, the firm's considered use of texture and shape, like the patterned wood that lines the dining room's walls, the lounge's curved bar, or the decision to sink the center of that elongated living room, brings intimacy to these expansive spaces.

That thoughtful sense of scale is underlined by the home's connection with its environment. "We are incredibly proud of how the home and its surroundings are woven together," Schneider says. There's the way the architecture rises from a landscape that still occasionally offers a glimpse of wild deer, the Japanese maple trees that line the office's courtyard and the surprise of a green rooftop. These glimpses of nature are a visual daily reminder of the home—and the city's—connection to Mother Earth in all of her powerful, terrible, vibrant, inspirational and humbling beauty.



The geometric stepped architecture of the home mimics the incline of the earth, with the home's glamorous infinity pool positioned to take advantage of the site's compelling view.