**RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE** 

## The Strata House by Kovac

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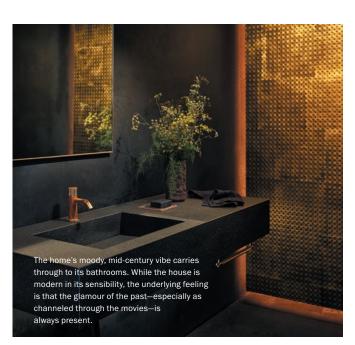


The motor court highlights the contrast between the home's shou sugi ban-clad top and the white plaster exterior of the ground level, which connects it to the home's existing glass-walled pavilion.









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 glasswalled 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

prospective client found a property

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

dinners to extravagant fundraisers.





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



walnut-paneled dining room, Flos's reedition of Gino Sarfatti's Model 2065 ceiling light dangles above a custom table with a top created from arctic ice Quartzite with a



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



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





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





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.

