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PREMIERE ISSUE

MARK BRADFORD / PAMELA BURTON / KERRY JOYCE
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CASE STUDY REVISITED

MICHAEL BOYD AND LAUREL BROUGHTON UPDATE
CALIFORNIA MODERNISM IN MALIBU'S SHED HOUSE



By Michael Webb / Photography by Eric Staudenmaier

The Shed House in the Malibu hills is deceptively simple. A long bar of rooms clad in gray-stained boards intersects a white stucco block to form a T. Both wings have monopitch roofs that tilt up to reveal tree-tops and mountains, and down to frame the ocean, a quarter-mile away. They give the house its name and impart a sense of motion. The Shed House is a fusion of architecture and nature, rooted in the luxuriant landscaping, and an instructive contrast to the showy mansions that erupt from neighboring hilltops.





David Ash

Laurel Broughton and Michael Boyd

“Modernism is a philosophical approach based on rationality and reality,” declares Michael Boyd. “It grew out of the visual chaos of the nineteenth century in a quest for honesty, simplicity and an emphasis on materials.” This is the first ground-up house Boyd has designed, working with Laurel Broughton, another versatile Los Angeles designer. They play to each other’s strengths. Boyd had a career as a successful composer before devoting all his time to collecting and designing furniture and infusing midcentury modern houses with new life. Broughton has a Master of Architecture degree from SCI-Arc and worked for the firm Johnston Marklee before opening her studio, Welcome Projects.

For venture capitalist Harry Hopper and his wife, Maria, it was a huge leap from their historic house in Alexandria, Virginia, although they had often summered beside the Pacific. Inspired by an article on a Craig Ellwood house that Boyd had restored, they decided they would enjoy a change of style and scenery, so they asked him if he could find them another modern classic in Malibu. It proved a fruitless quest and they grew tired of waiting. As Boyd recalls, “One evening Harry said, ‘Why don’t you design it yourself?’ And after a moment of doubt, I said, ‘That’s a great idea.’”

Boyd found a run-down 1950s bungalow on a gently sloping acre of land and fixed it up as a temporary retreat for the Hoppers. Meanwhile, he and Broughton developed their ideas for the 6,000-square-foot house that would replace it.



“Before we tore the bungalow down, we saw how well it was sited, and we located the new indoor-outdoor fireplace at exactly the same point to preserve a memory of the old,” says Boyd. He raised the pad about 18 inches to give the new house a better view of the ocean and decided on a T plan, similar to that of the Oscar Niemeyer house he restored for his own family in Santa Monica.

Inspiration came from the Case Study houses, a project that helped define the free-spirited lifestyle of Southern California in the two postwar decades. “I wanted to capture the soul of that program and its many variations, from the rigor of Craig Ellwood to the wood-siness of William Wurster,” says Boyd. “I tried to push the ideas in those houses even further, stripping down and adding warmth. I was also thinking of the iPhone: My brother is a professor of electrical engineering, and we share a love of elegant solutions.”

Harry Hopper gave the designers a free hand but stipulated that the roofs should slope. “I grew up in a small Michigan town, living in a flat-roofed house, and I soon discovered that they are prone to leak—even in a dry climate,” he observes. Boyd accepted the challenge, and the complementary angles of the roofs on each wing create a lively dialog.

The entry is recessed to reveal the freestanding fireplace, which serves as a marker and is clad in shimmering Heath tiles. It draws you into the living room and out through glass sliders to the pool terrace on the south side. The master suite looks over the pool to the ocean, and guest bedrooms occupy the north and west ends. Throughout, there’s a sense of openness, of spaces flowing through the house as freely as the ocean breezes.



*“THROUGHOUT, THERE’S A SENSE OF OPENNESS,
OF SPACES FLOWING THROUGH THE HOUSE AS FREELY
AS THE OCEAN BREEZE.”*





Anticipating a delay in securing permits, Boyd installed new plantings at the outset. In his own house and commissions across the city, he has honed his skills in creating green architecture, using trees and shrubs as organic sculptures, strategically placed to complement windows and walls. Richard Neutra described his white cubic houses as “machines in a garden,” and Boyd has developed that idea, drawing on the exuberant landscapes of the Brazilian master Roberto Burle Marx. Mists from the ocean nurture palms and bamboo, birds of paradise and other subtropical shrubs, which blur the boundaries of the site. Brightly colored steel sculptures emerge from dense plantings in the kitchen garden like tigers in a Rousseau painting.



“BUILDING ON THE INNOVATIONS OF THE PAST CAN BRING US RENEWAL FOR THE FUTURE.”





Varied textures and tones enrich the simple forms. The gray cladding boards are sandblasted and wire-brushed, and the sand finish of the white stucco catches the light. Floorboards of stained French oak scattered with rugs complement the narrower oak boards of the ceilings, which are parchment-glazed in the main block and silver-gray in the flanking wing. The walls at either end of the living room are painted aluminum, and the study niche at the mid-point is clad in grasscloth.

Designing the interiors spurred Boyd to create his own furniture. He transformed salvaged sliding doors made out of old-growth Douglas fir from the bungalow into the first Plank chairs, and that was the seed of his PLANEfurniture line, which now comprises a hundred variations on 25 basic designs. Most are chairs, and they range from the austere minimal to the organically rounded. They are inspired by classic designs of Jean Prouvé, Gerrit Rietveld, Gio Ponti and other architects he admires, with a few references to African wood sculpture.

In the Shed House, PLANEfurniture alternates with a few vintage American and European finds, as well as Maria Hopper's growing collection of contemporary art. The sparseness of the furnishings makes every detail stand out clearly. For Boyd, this is a manifesto. "In the deluge of choices that confront us today, editing is a viable option for creation," he explains. "Building on the innovations of the past can bring us renewal for the future." ■