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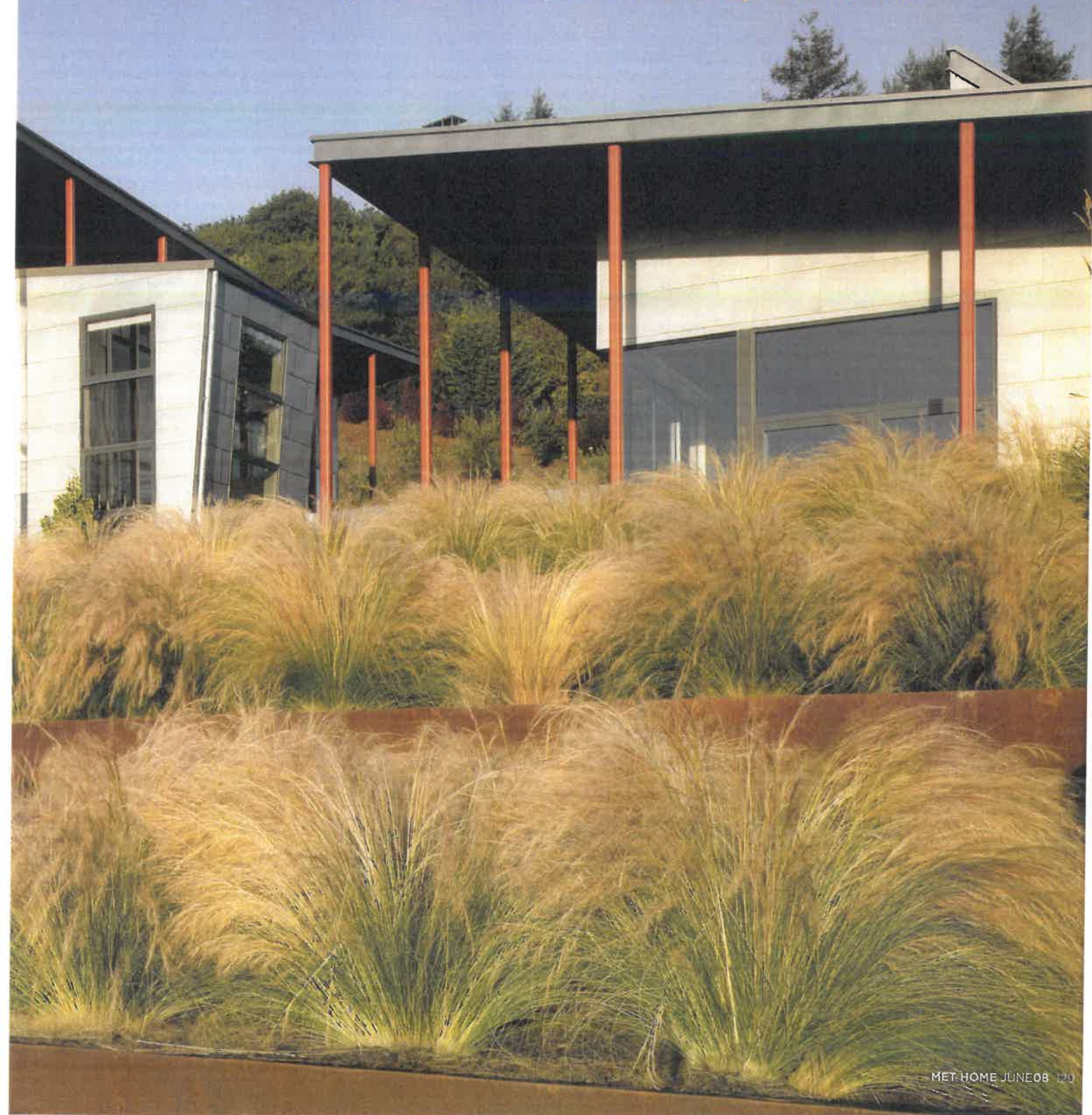
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Winged Victory

Architect David Wilson found the poetry in precision, order and industrial materials for the two-part, nature-loving house he designed in **Berkeley, California.**



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For a Home That
Honors Its Hillside
(BERKELEY, CA)

From the street below, the bedroom (left) and living-dining-kitchen wings of this house on the Berkeley hills appear to be two separate buildings—with zinc cladding, red-painted steel columns and gently angled roofs lending a powerful contemporary presence. Terraced beds of Mexican feather grass extend the architecture into the landscape.





In Berkeley and Oakland, California, where a fire destroyed thousands of houses in 1991, the replacements haven't always been improvements: Some owners, with newly treeless lots and large insurance settlements,

put up shapeless behemoths. With this house, high up in the fire zone, architect David Wilson took a very different approach.

Wilson divided the building into two sections—one containing a living room, a dining room and a kitchen, the other the bedrooms and bathrooms—joined by a 32-foot-long glass corridor. By separating the parts of the house, he ensured not just that it wouldn't look bulky, but that being inside the house would feel surprisingly like being outside, with bits of the striking exterior always in view. And the glass corridor would turn the backyard into an outdoor room with the same dramatic views of San Francisco as the front yard. The owners can sit out back, in their sheltered hot tub, and see city lights twinkling in the distance.

Longtime Bostonians, these new Californians moved west in 2004. The lives they were shedding included traditional New

England architecture. When they saw a house by Wilson on the market, the wife recalls, “we knew we had to have it.” So refreshing was their experience of living in what she calls “a knickknack-free zone” that after a few years they decided to have Wilson design this place just for them. While the first house was contemporary, it had some traditional details, the architect says. This time, the couple encouraged him to go all out.

||||| This page: A hot tub and a lap pool conceived as decorative elements add drama to the open spaces between the two wings of the building. Opposite: In the living room, a sofa and chairs by Walter Knoll and a Leolux coffee table (all of them from the Magazine, a furniture store in Berkeley) share the stage with a wall unit of walnut, steel and rippled concrete panels, designed by David Wilson. Ceilings are bamboo.

PRODUCED BY SUSAN TYREE VICTORIA. PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW MILLMAN. WRITTEN BY FRED A. BERNSTEIN.





The living room wing, as large as some houses (1,400 square feet) and twice as high (18 feet), could have felt overwhelming. Wilson was determined to divide it into zones with individual

identities. In the living room itself, he chose to “raise the emotional temperature” with walls of integrally colored plaster. After agreeing to his choice of a deep blue, “we held our breath,” the wife reports. (Luckily, she and her husband call the color Wilson chose “perfect.”)

Designer Brian Ogan helped the couple choose furniture that reinforced the architecture—including sofas with low backs, so the fireplace (part of a wood, metal and concrete wall by Wilson) is visible from the dining table. Above the table, a Prandina “chandelier” in the form of a gently curved glass tube punctuates the view.

For the ceiling, Wilson decided on bamboo, both for its warm appearance and for its sound-absorbing qualities (essential in a house with concrete floors and floor-to-ceiling windows). Two-by-four-foot bamboo panels were machine-grooved into eight-inch squares; he was determined that every speaker, sprinkler, light fixture and sensor would land in the center of a square. That meant the clients had to pick precise locations for furniture and lights before Wilson could finalize the ceiling plan. “There was a lot of tape on the floor,” recalls the wife. For Wilson, the ceiling, with exposed hardware that adds further geometric complexity, was just one of many challenges. In a typical house, he says, “there may be one or two elements that we take to a ‘furniture level’ of detail. Here, nearly every element required that level of precision.”

■ This page (clockwise from top left): Architect David Wilson (seated) and his associate, Chris Parlette; the ceiling over the living and dining areas is made of bamboo panels (the stair rises to the husband’s office); dining furniture includes a *Ritz* table by Bross and Walter Knoll *Jason* chairs. Opposite: The kitchen is a muted Mondrian-esque composition of California walnut, stainless steel and polished concrete.





The environment, local and global, was never far from the architect's mind. True, the house requires more energy to heat and cool than it would have were its rooms huddled together in a single

volume (because a house divided has more surface area). But Wilson and the owners incorporated a number of energy-saving features. In winter, solar energy warms the house's "thermal mass"—its plaster walls and concrete floors; at night, that warmth circulates through the 4,000-square-foot house, reducing the load on its heating system. It helps, too, that the walls are filled with cellulose insulation, "a very green product," says Wilson.

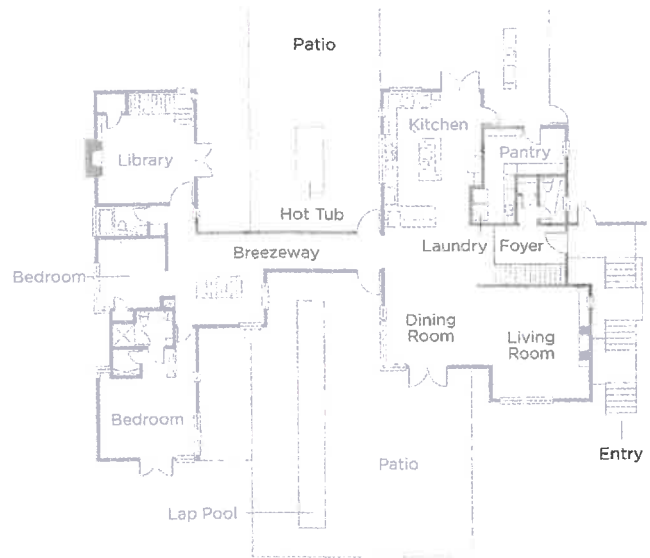
Far more complex is the house's geothermal system, consisting of six tubes that loop 280 feet below the driveway. Water pumped through the tubes emerges at around 62 degrees, perfect for heating or cooling, depending on the season. There are also two solar energy systems arrayed on the roof: Photovoltaic panels provide 30 to 40 percent of the home's electricity, and glass collectors heat water for the house (including the radiant heating system in the concrete

floors) as well as for the pool and the hot tub.

As for the immediate environment, Wilson was also the landscape designer. The clients aren't gardeners, he says, so he decided to avoid fussy flower beds in favor of "big moves," rows of grasses that, with their simple repetition, seem almost agricultural. By giving the landscape a rigorous geometry, he was able to ensure that the surroundings would be as architecturally compelling as the house itself, and that plantings wouldn't interrupt views of—and through—the building.

■ This page: One end of the glassed-in hallway that connects the two pavilions, with its *Tsunami* rug from Current Carpets, culminates in a wall of red-tinted plaster that marks the entrance to the bedroom wing. Opposite: The sculptural steel-and-walnut stairway to the master bedroom, which Wilson designed, is as carefully crafted as the antique Korean chest that stands nearby.





What the Pros Know

In the master bathroom, Wilson envisioned a countertop and shower bench that merged into a single unit; for that, he chose concrete, a material that can form almost any shape. The piece wasn't fabricated until everything it would touch (including glass partitions and even wooden drawers) was finished and in place. Then Concreteworks, an Oakland company, made paper templates on the site. The templates were used to produce a wooden mold. Before the mold was filled, Concreteworks made color samples for Wilson and his clients; concrete can come in almost any shade, and pebbles, shells or recycled glass can be added to the mix, multiplying the choices. The molding process is tricky: if a pebble finds its way to a corner, it can prevent concrete from filling the entire mold. It's no wonder, Wilson says, that even the most experienced fabricators sometimes throw pieces away and start over, which is one reason custom concrete components are pricey.



Details

[1] The stainless steel front gate provides a preview of the house behind it: The cutouts are based on the building's H-shaped floor plan. Except for a few walls of gray-green stucco and an entry area of rough concrete, the exterior is sheathed in zinc, which Wilson considers a "green" material because it is expected to last generations.

[2] An antique desk from Switzerland, which graces the entry hall, is part of a collection of vintage pieces that the owners brought with them from Massachusetts. The stairway leads to the husband's balcony office, which overlooks the dining room and kitchen. A scientist, he was involved in choosing and programming the house's high-tech features, including a system that lets him monitor the building from anywhere in the world.

[3] A second-floor terrace was designed in part to make it harder to see into the bedroom windows (which are high above the street). Deep overhangs, supported by red-painted columns, shelter the outdoor spaces.

[4] The bedroom wing includes several guest suites behind sliding panels. The panels are made of two sheets of acrylic filled with pebbles (from 3Form).

[5] A dining area behind the house is shaded by an olive tree; the smaller trees are Japanese maple, and the ground cover is lavender. Wilson, who designed the landscaping as well as the house, chose plants that are drought-resistant and fire-retardant.

[6] The wife insisted on dark wood for the kitchen cabinets, because "the room was so light and airy, I was afraid light wood would disappear," she says. Wilson complied, choosing a veneer of

California walnut so rich in color and grain that it didn't need stain (just varnish). All of the veneer in the room is from a single tree with a particularly picturesque grain, says Wilson. When his clients found a drawer pull they liked on an old dresser, Wilson had it copied in anodized aluminum.

[7] The homeowners wanted a pool, but only if it didn't look like one (since it would be visible from the street as well as from most of the house). "We thought of it as a water feature," says the wife. With that in mind, Wilson designed a minimalist rectangular basin, 50 feet long and about 5½ feet wide, and worked to bring the water as close to the edge as possible (to heighten the reflecting-pool effect). Skimmers, normally placed about six inches from the top of a pool, were his nemesis, Wilson says. But he performed a "bunch of somersaults" (which included using steel plates rather than thicker masonry) to support the coping over the skimmers, which let him raise them about three inches higher than normal.

[8] In a powder room near the main entrance, Wilson left one concrete wall exposed and covered another in tiles from Heath Ceramics (a renowned Sausalito company that has been in business since the 1940s). The trough sink was custom-made of concrete with a concealed drain assembly.

[9] Behind the living room wing, an open breezeway—similar to the house's main connector but without the glass—connects the house to its garage. Above the garage is a complete apartment. If the owners ever need live-in help, they say, they have the room. ☼

See Resources, last pages.



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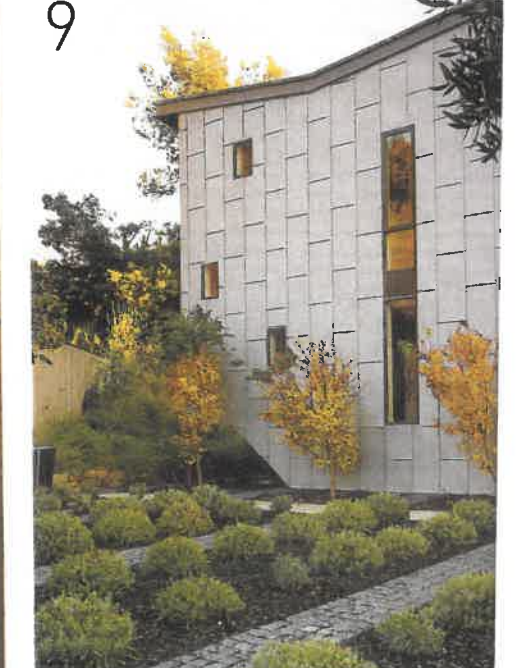
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