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TREADING LIGHTLY ON THE LAND

A modern home honors the timeless beauty of the Carmel Valley

Mary Jo Bowling, Special to The Chronicle

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For San Francisco architect Jonathan Feldman, giving a thank-you gift grew into one of his most challenging, and ultimately satisfying, projects. After he and his wife, Lisa, were married, they gave his parents a trip to Carmel Valley as a token of appreciation.

"When they went, they fell in love with the area all over again," Feldman says. "When my brother and I were kids, we often spent family vacations down there. My parents decided to start looking for some land to buy."

Perhaps starting family traditions with a new generation was on their minds when Sandy and Dan Feldman of Palo Alto found a 60-acre piece of property in the Santa Lucia Mountains. "My dad kept saying, 'It's Yosemite, it's Yosemite,'" Feldman says. "He thought the land was stunning."

His love of the land translated into one of the guiding principles for the project: Everything should be as Earth-friendly as possible. "My dad has always been interested in recycling and the environment. Building a green house was important to him," Feldman says.

Apart from green design, the other decisions about where to site the house and even what kind of house to build were initially unclear. "At first, my mom wanted a Mediterranean house with stucco and a terra-cotta tiled roof," Feldman says. "And we drew up plans for a house like that, but it just didn't seem right."

How they got from Mediterranean to Modernism is a tale of evolution. "We drew many, many plans for the house," Feldman says. "Initially, Mom resisted Modernism. But slowly we all came to agree that a modern house would be the most compatible with the land."

Not only is the new house compatible, it's almost indistinguishable from the land. Because the house is tucked into the side of a hill and topped with a grassy, camouflaging sod roof, it blends in beautifully.

"We decided to dig it into the side of the hill rather than perch it on top of the hill, which is a flat area and the loveliest spot on the lot," Feldman says. "Now, you walk through that area as you approach the house. It's like an outdoor room under a canopy of trees."

The house itself, actually a compound of three small buildings -- a larger public space for gathering and dining and two smaller bedroom units -- can best be described as "warm modern." Scored concrete floors and walls, steel fireplaces and exposed I-beams are warmed up by the natural beauty and grain of clear-sealed Douglas fir. Although the back of each unit is below grade, they all have expansive floor-to-ceiling windows that embrace the views of hills, and oak and manzanita groves.

The division of the house into three units and the pervasiveness of wood is a nod to his parents' fears of a modern house. "Mom has a phobia about being underground. She was very skeptical about the idea of digging the buildings into the hillside. To make sure it wasn't dark, we covered the three exposed sides of the buildings with windows," Feldman says. "My father was concerned that all of the concrete would seem cold, so we used a very warm-colored wood to warm up the space."

Another nod to his parents' wishes are the green aspects of the house. Most noticeable are the photovoltaic panels on the roof, which are visible on the interior ceilings. Most architects try to hide the panels, which convert sunlight into electricity. Here, they are treated as a design element rather than a dirty secret.

Much of the wood is sustainably harvested and certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, a nonprofit that specializes in responsible forest management. The glass the wood surrounds is made to capture and retain heat, thus naturally warming the space. Also providing green, clean and efficient heating is insulation made from recycled denim, radiant heat pipes under the floor and the thick sod roof.

Nature makes its presence known in subtle ways as well. "We used the colors of the land in the house," Feldman says. "The rusty red manzanita color is in the fireplace surrounds, the gray blue of the tree lichen is in the concrete floors, and the silvery color of the tree bark is in the weathered-looking cedar siding on the exterior of the house."

It all jells to make a house for today and tomorrow. The parents have claimed one of the bedroom units for themselves, and the other is given over to Feldman and his growing family, which now includes young Sasha Feldman and Feldman's brother, Dave. "We always had in mind that this would be a gathering place for the whole family," Feldman says.

Although his parents were skeptical about modern design, they've become wholehearted converts. "It was hard for me to envision," Sandy says. "But now I love it. It's a light, warm and inviting house."

Details

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