Architect Jonathan Fisher designed his family’s vacation home to make the most of its spectacular setting amid the 30,000 acres of Carmel’s Santa Lucia Preserve.
INTO THE WOODS

A CONTEMPORARY, ECO-FRIENDLY COMPOUND IN CARMEL IS TESTIMONY TO THE COOPERATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF ONE SAN FRANCISCO ARCHITECT’S FAMILY.

BY SARAH LYNCH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL DYER
As you approach the residence that architect Jonathan Feldman has spent the last four years working on, it's difficult to spot the house amid the property's tall grasses and gnarled coastal oaks. But that's the point.

Tucked into a narrow ridge, camouflaged by a materials palette inspired by the landscape and topped with a living roof covered in wildflower beds, grasses, strawberries and succulents, the 2,900-square-foot house is almost indistinguishable from its pristine surroundings in Santa Lucia Preserve—a 20,000-acre "development" in Carmel Valley in which 90 percent of the land will remain untouched. Some 300 homes and a designer golf course occupy the remaining 2,000 acres.

Says Feldman, "We fell in love with the land and knew instantly that the house we built had to enhance its natural beauty." It's a popular refrain that served as a guiding principle not only for the architect and his clients but also for the design committee that must approve all homes built within the preserve. Looking at the completed house—with its low profile, wide windows and board-formed concrete walls—"it's hard to imagine structure more adapted to its site. But initially, not everyone involved was convinced that a contemporary house would suit the property.

Luckily for Feldman, the clients in this case were the most supportive kind: his parents. Sandy, an attorney, and Dan, a physician, live in Palo Alto and had searched for years for a weekend getaway in Carmel. As added incentive, the house was intended as a retreat for the entire Feldman clan—including Jonathan, his wife, Lisa, and their young daughter, Sasha, as well as his East Coast–based brother, David. Jonathan's personal stake in the project fueled his desire to experiment, but working with family demanded added diplomacy.

"I wanted an ecologically sound house and one that didn't detract from the land," says Dan. "I wanted people to blink and ask, 'Is there really a house there?'"
One of the living room’s main features—and a dramatic exterior element as well—is the fireplace made of Cyp-Tex steel, a naturally oxidized metal. A four-foot grid pattern (most obvious in the concrete floor) and almost imperceptible recessed elements define only the spaces. “That’s what helps it have such a warm atmosphere for such a contemporary house,” says Sandy.
"I wanted a house that was light and cheerful and warm and inviting," says Sandy, who first envisioned a classic, tile-roofed Spanish hacienda, the style preferred by the preserve's developers. "There were a lot of little details that I'd always wanted to try," says Jonathan. "With this project, I had the time to work on them. And I could usually talk my parents into them."

And so it began, with the first round of discussions focused on the site for the house. Preserve rules dictate that only a small portion of each parcel may be built upon, and any construction must respect the views from the road. With its dramatic slope and several thick groves of oaks, the Feldman's 49-acre plot limited the options. "One of the first designs was just a glass house in the middle of the grove," says Jonathan, "a sort of room within an outdoor room."

The decision to build into the ridge capitalized on the views and created an unassuming outline with an approach leading right through the trees. "Scooping the house into the hillside diminished its visual impact," says Jonathan, who designed three compact pavilions rather than one large structure for the same reason. "It not only breaks up the house's overall massing but also enables light to penetrate three sides of each pavilion," he says. The floor plan includes a central, double-height kitchen and living area, a master-suite pavilion and a pavilion housing two guest suites. "Additionally, the spaces between the pavilions become usable outdoor rooms," Jonathan says.

Jonathan's choice of materials formed the basis of another debate. Integral to all of the many versions of the design was an exposed construction using building elements that are traditionally concealed. "I wanted to show the layers of structure," says Jonathan, "so you could see how the building is made." This meant revealing the Douglas fir roof beams and steel I beams as well as the concrete retaining wall that spans the house's entire length.
"There were a lot of little details I'd always wanted to try."
"This is our favorite room to stay in," says Ioannides about one of the two suites in the guest pavilion. "It's just amazing to wake up with the fog rolling down there. The Douglas fir ceiling beams throughout the house were treated with a lime-wash finish."
ABOVE. The concrete retaining wall—which was formed and textured using sandblasted wood boxes—and the floating Douglas fir staircase were the first elements built on the property. $83,000. In the master bath, the same retaining wall became the key design element, extending all the way into the shower.
"I had a lot of trouble with the amount of concrete he wanted to use," says Dan. "I was afraid it would make the house very cold."

The design committee had similar concerns. "Understandably, they didn't want concrete and rusted steel marred the landscape," says Jonathan. "But we created a sample palette to show them how closely these materials came to the color of the trees." The concrete and exterior paint colors were matched precisely to the deep gray and silvery green of the lichen-encrusted oak trees, and the rusted steel used for the two chimneys matches the color of the bark on nearby manzanita trees.

"The committee eventually came around. As for my dad, I just needed to appeal to his conceptual vision," says Jonathan. The exposed-concrete walls and large windows work together to facilitate passive solar heating, one of Dan's primary directives. For the windows that make up most of the southeastern walls, Jonathan selected a special glass that lets heat in while still insulating the interior. Solar panels were installed over the skylights for added energy conservation and to appease the committee's concerns about shafts of light disturbing the night sky.

Perhaps the most significant struggles focused on the interiors. "I had never lived in a contemporary house before, so it was very hard for me to picture—and very hard for me to furnish," says Sandy, who enlisted the help of her friend, interior designer Susan Carey. The house is lightly furnished with a few clean-lined pieces, but the built-ins, surfaces and fixtures are what make the interior sing: The steel fireplace and chimneys are finished in mottled rust, the concrete wall is sandblasted with a wood pattern, and modern pendant lights and ceiling fans draw the eye upward.

"I was prepared to be fairly forgiving," says Dan. "I know that when architects build for their parents, some of them suffer. While there were moments of stress, it's really been a great family project."
The space between the main pavilion and the guest rooms creates an outdoor living area complete with a fireplace. From here, it's easy to see how the lines of the three-foot grid directly influence the way the buildings open onto lawns and paths laid out for a sunny day walk. From the approach, the glass roof and the house's slings make it difficult to distinguish between the existing landscape and the structure.