A Young Firm with Fresh Ideas
Feldman Architecture

Jonathan Feldman might have been an astronomer. He might even have been an English professor. After all, those were his undergraduate majors at Amherst College in Massachusetts. But luckily for the world of architecture, those were only starting points in a young career that has more than its share of successful, award-winning projects. Feldman has begun to create a unique design presence in a very crowded world of small firms doing residential work in northern California. His firm has grown from a one-man office operating out of his basement in San Francisco to a 16-person firm in the toney North Beach neighborhood. Feldman’s work is a good fit for his urbane California clients. It is modern, sustainable, individualistic, and quirky. He creates an architecture that challenges the imagination and gives us something warm and familiar at the same time. Whether it is roofs that become gardens or building shapes that squiggle like caterpillars, the firm’s work is always refreshing and new.

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Feldman started life in New England and spent his formative years in Palo Alto, California. When time for college arrived, he chose the coziness of a small liberal arts education in New England over the large, factory-like institutions in California. He studied astronomy and English and jokes that astronomy has become very useful for designing buildings. Knowing what the sun’s angles are on any particular day can be a key design consideration. After college, he migrated to Los Angeles and did a stint in the film industry working as a production assistant. He soon realized that he could only make it in that business if he lived in Los Angeles—a problem, since he did not like that city. On a backpacking trip in Utah, he met some architects working in a small town. It was an epiphany—here was a career that one could practice and not be in a major metropolis. He applied to the architecture school at the University of Oregon and was accepted into their master’s program. He says that Oregon was a good place to be because there was no overarching design philosophy, just a healthy variety of design cultures. “I left Oregon with no answers, just good questions,” he says. Returning to the Bay Area, Feldman began working for a series of smaller firms where he learned the everyday basics of running an office. In 2003 he started his own firm in the basement of a house he remodeled. He got some recognition from this first residential project and his firm grew from there. By 2007, he had enough work to move out of his house and into a conventional office.

Feldman says his approach to architecture is “holistic.” He loves working on everything from the overall design to the smallest details. Insisting that he doesn’t have a style per se, he strives for a consistency in his work. He enjoys working on an older building in an urban setting as much as creating a new building on a pristine rural site. His design values are rooted, however, in basic Modernist concepts: having structure express itself, simplifying forms, integrating inside and outside spaces.

Feldman says that working on lower budget projects forced him to think creatively and design economically. “If it looks simple, natural and easy, then that is probably the best design,” he says, a big fan of some modern regionalist architects who have labored to tie their work to the site and adapt to the environment.

Just by looking at his work, it is hard to put a label on the architecture of Jonathan Feldman. He is clearly a regional Modernist, but his work goes beyond that simple label. It is infused with a delicacy and individuality that is uncommon in the genre. He is a young architect whose firm has created some memorable buildings. One can only speculate that he has a bright future with his best work yet before him.
Caterpillar House

Caterpillar House is sited in the Santa Lucia Preserve, a spectacular bit of open-space development about 150 miles south of San Francisco. Unlike many of its more conservative neighbors, this house is neither pretentious nor large. In a development of mostly very large Spanish-style homes on huge lots, the Caterpillar House is the exception. Its inspiration was drawn from the Modernist ranch houses of the 1950s and 1960s. It truly is an homage to economical and ecological building. To say that the house is “built into the land” is an understatement. The house’s rammed earth walls come from the earth that it sits on. Its roof catches rainwater that is stored in large cisterns and used for landscaping during the long California dry season. The fenestration is designed to passively heat in the winter and cool in the summer. The house has moveable sunshades that extend in the summer months and contract in the winter. The house’s sinuous shape contours to the hill’s undulations and was Feldman’s way of translating the owner’s desire for a curved house. Integrated photovoltaic panels enable the house to produce all of its energy requirements without compromising the graceful curve of the low roof against the hill.

The Caterpillar House is proof that ecological design can be both practical and beautiful at the same time.

Photography by Joe Fletcher