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THE FLORA COMES FIRST AT A LEAFY ENCLAVE JUST MINUTES FROM DOWNTOWN PALO ALTO.

Recently retired and ready to downsize, Paul and Melanie Brophy found a lot in Palo Alto that gave them the chance to start fresh. Their glass, concrete, and wood residence, designed by Feldman Architecture, seems to dwell among nature.
The house was a “fall-down,” the lot long neglected. But as soon as Paul and Melonie Brophy saw the towering old oak out front and the tangle of overgrown plantings inside the fence, they imagined a green sanctuary just a few blocks from Palo Alto’s vibrant downtown. While most of the plants would eventually be removed, the Brophys knew it was the landscape that made the property an oasis, and the sense of discovery they’d felt after passing through the gate would ultimately inspire the design of their new home.

The quarter-acre property, which the couple closed on in 2012, was large enough to include several gardens. “We wanted to take advantage of the Bay Area climate with indoor/outdoor areas,” says Paul. With the gardens a priority, the Brophys took the unusual step of hiring a landscape architect before selecting an architect to build a new house. Through a friend they found Bernard Trainor of Ground Studio Landscape Architecture in Monterey and were taken by his expertise in creating private spaces from public ones. “We liked the idea of going further into the garden amid plantings for privacy,” adds Trainor. Granite boulders and persimmon, Japanese maple, and oak trees lend what he calls “a California-Japanese feel.”

Steps lead from the master bedroom balcony to a spacious deck. “Situating the deck away from the house gives it the feel of a gateway,” says Trainor, who worked on the project with colleague David LeRoy.

“I LOVE AN UNORTHODOX PLACEMENT OF TREES—SOME OF THE BEST TREES YOU’LL FIND ARE IN SPOTS WHERE YOU’D LEAST EXPECT THEM.” BERNARD TRAINOR, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

Walnut and Formica cabinetry, Neolith basalt counters, and concrete floors make up the kitchen’s minimal palette (above left); a large clerestory usher natural light into the main living area (above right), which is clad in weathering yellow cedar.
“From anywhere in the house, you have a sense of the outdoors,” says Melone, “and yet it’s very protected. Ikegami agrees. “The building was really about the landscape—it can dissolve into the background,” he says. In the master bedroom, Japanese Tansu chests from the couple’s previous home flank a Duxiana bed (opposite). The full-height windows and swing door are from Western Window Systems.

“LIFTING THE BUILDING OFF THE GROUND EMPHASIZES ITS HORIZONTALITY AND MAKES THE MOST OF THE FLOOR-TO-CEILING GLASS.” TAISUKE IKEGAMI, ARCHITECT
became clear that all involved sought a departure from the standard house with a yard on each side. “We had this idea: What if the building could be broken apart?” says Trainor, who worked with partner David LeRoy on the project. “We could end up with these unexpected yard moments and views from the house.”

Avoiding the oak, its sprawling root system, and two other major trees, Ikegami’s composition of glass, board-formed concrete, and naturally weathering yellow cedar floats on stilts and piers. Instead of one solid rectangle, the house is made up of three pavilions. The first contains an office and guest bedroom, the second a dramatic 40-by-20-foot great room with a retractable wall of glass doors, and the third the master suite. Each has its own garden view. “All of these intimate moments are landscape moments,” Ikegami explains.

The spirit of discovery that inspired the design begins at the curb, where the oak acts as a buffer between the sidewalk and the house. Reaching the entrance requires walking along the building’s side, where a corridor of bamboo arches over concrete stepping stones. Straight ahead is one of several Japanese maples, causing visitors to turn. “It’s about moving from the street, walking on this axis with a terminus at the end,” says Ikegami. “It’s about meandering through the site, which is what we felt when we visited initially.”

Instead of brightly flowering perennials, the gardens emphasize foliage with textural and sculptural qualities—dogwood trees, an existing persimmon tree, juncus rushes—all set against a muted backdrop of concrete pavers, gravel, and granite boulders. “We worked hard to make it subtle,” Trainor says. Inside, Ikegami continued the use of concrete, only here it’s polished and used as flooring. “We tried not to make it too matchy,” he says, describing why he chose black plastic laminate and walnut for the kitchen cabinetry instead of the yellow cedar used elsewhere.

The Brophys worked with Lindsey Theobald, head of Feldman’s interiors team, to select furnishings that mesh with the clean-lined design and all the greenery visible through the glass. “It’s a truly harmonious integration of house and landscape,” says Melonie.

“When you’re in our yard,” says Paul, “you don’t have a sense of being in an urban environment at all.” Adds Melonie, “It’s beautiful to be in a space that’s so tranquil. It’s a respite from the world.”

Derek Gray of Bay West Builders made the entry bench from wood earmarked for an unbuilt breakfast bar (above). Radiant-heated concrete floors offer a polished counterpoint to the board-formed walls outside, and overhangs provide shade (opposite). “We wanted to make sure the house was comfortable,” says Ikegami. “We tried not to make it too matchy,” he says, describing why he chose black plastic laminate and walnut for the kitchen cabinetry instead of the yellow cedar used elsewhere.

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