



STEELING NATURE

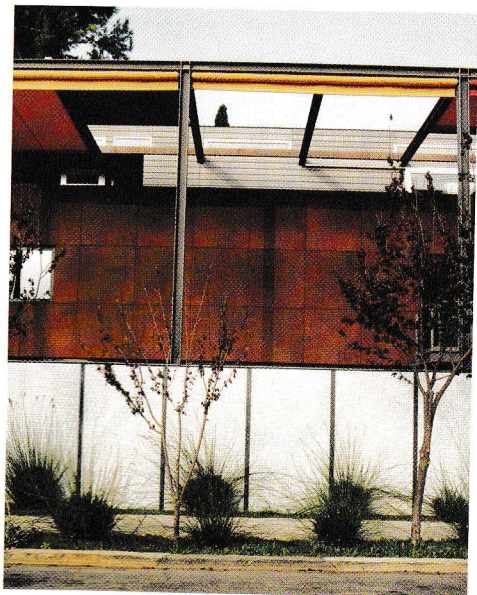
Architect **Steven Ehrlich** creates an indoor/outdoor design lab at his own home in Venice.

By Hunter Drohojowska-Philp
Photography by Grey Crawford

STEVEN EHRLICH OPENS THE WALLS OF HIS HOUSE. With a slight tug on the steel handle, the 15-foot-tall glass door slides silently into a wall pocket. The entire end of the living room opens to ocean breezes and a Jay Griffith-designed garden of smooth gray river rocks, green and yellow agaves, and a massive Aleppo pine tree.

As if that gesture was insufficiently impressive, Ehrlich walks to the front of his living room to pull back another glass door, horizontally oriented to complement the shape of the narrow lap pool terminating in a fountain. The soothing sound of tumbling water resonates throughout the house. It is quite a show, but the architect is not yet finished. With a remote control, he mechanically adjusts flat panels of





Nancy and Steven (opposite) enjoy a moment in the living room, where maple *tansu*-like stairs (below) lead to the second level. Corten steel clads part of the house's exterior (left).

sienna and ochre fabric on the skeletal steel frame at the front of his house to control the amount of sun glinting on the pool and illuminating the living room. "We are using technology to get closer to nature," he explains with a boyish grin.

Dressed in a black shirt and slacks, Ehrlich is trim and graying but very much a part of his funky Venice neighborhood. For 25 years, the award-winning architect has designed commercial and residential buildings in the area, including the loft-style housing recently erected on Brooks Avenue. To build a dream house for himself and his wife, Nancy Griffin, he chose a 43-by-132-foot lot about half a mile from the beach and designed a 3,000-square-foot house that is open to the elements yet private—within walking distance to shops, restaurants, and friends, yet as serene as a Zen monastery.

Back to those doors. Ehrlich says, "This is a minus-threshold kind of detailing." Laughing at his invented architectural term, he points out that the line of demarcation between house and garden or pool is nearly invisible. "With the doors open, it becomes an open-air pavilion, as opposed to a cozy house, which I am about to turn it back into." He



(Lawrence-Bullard, continued from page 74) by original Moroccan tiles. But ask for champagne and he opens the refrigerator to reveal bottles of Veuve Clicquot, Pink Cristal, and Dom Perignon, plus a few liters of Fiji water for good measure. (And should you be lucky enough to be invited to spend the night, don't bother to pack your jammies; perfectly pressed French *toile du jour* pajamas—in your size and matching your suite's walls, curtains, and linens—await you in the closet.)

Clearly there is little reason to stock the kitchen with perishables. Lawrence-Bullard's schedule revolves around three TV shows, including TLC's *Material World*; designing a new furniture, fabric, and home-fragrance collection; and opening a jewelry store on London's Walton Street with actress Tamara Beckwith. He globe-hops from London ("I just landed last night; we're working on Vidal Sassoon's new home") to Mexico for *Girls*

Pushing aside a delicate box to set down his teacup, the designer says, "I'm all about comfort. Things have to be lived with."

Gone Wild creator Joe Francis to New York for hip-hop's Damon Dash, and to Palm Springs for his latest project, the Colony Palms. The Spanish hacienda was built in 1935 for Seabiscuit co-owner and Purple Gang mobster Al Wertheimer. It is Lawrence-Bullard's first hotel commission. "I'm keeping the Spanish bones, but making it edgy and funky," he explains. "In fact, the basement was a speakeasy and brothel with these erotic art deco murals—which we're keeping." The owners were drawn to Lawrence-Bullard's taste for the dramatic, and encouraged the creation of outdoor sleeping areas with headboards upholstered with fabrics hand-woven in 400-year-old Turkish tribal patterns and "a Spanish side table and the odd Eames chair thrown in."

Begging apologies that he has to run off and check in at his new offices next to Fred Segal, Lawrence-Bullard glances around and says, "You know, it's gotten a little too fluffy in here. I need to be challenged, so I think I might be doing something new...." As his voice trails off, one wonders how balancing his explosive design career and international travel isn't already challenging enough. **D**

(Ehrlich, continued from page 93)

just the two of us, we sit at the table and enjoy the entire space," Ehrlich says. "We like to have people over and sometimes do parties for museum openings."

Like the living room, dining alfresco is effortless, thanks to 11-foot-tall glass doors that pivot on their stainless steel axes to open onto a courtyard. Ehrlich visited a quarry with sculptor Woods Davy, who designed the patio using Imperial gray granite for the stepping stones and sculptural bench. This outdoor room, with a mature Canary palm and another Aleppo pine tree, has a heated concrete pad with a built-in outdoor sofa, and a long table that incorporates a barbecue.

On the opposite side of the patio stands a second building with an outdoor metal staircase leading up to guest quarters. In the guest bathroom and other areas around the house, Ehrlich used Latvian plywood, a strong, inexpensive material that is pre-finished with a radiant dark surface. The ground level of the building is Ehrlich's studio, his "flex space," decorated with art by friends like Moses, whose studios he designed; John Okulick; and Don Bachardy. A photograph of Ehrlich as a long-haired adventurer stands on a shelf near the baskets and painted gourds he collected while living in Africa in the 1970s.

After graduating with a degree in architecture from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, Ehrlich became what he describes as the "first architect placed by the Peace Corps to work for the Moroccan government in Marrakesh." He remained from 1969 to 1971, then traveled and taught in Nigeria until 1977, when he moved to L.A. "In Africa, I learned a lot from seeing architecture built without architects. There, some of the most beautiful architecture in the world was done by people in tune with their environment, done with the materials available, and done with very little muscle, really. There they live delicately and in harmony."

Such ideals still affect his architectural philosophy. "The latest term I'm using is multicultural modernism, bringing in the experiences I've learned about while traveling and living in foreign lands. I learned about how a courtyard is a fabulous paradise for living. Outdoor rooms, privacy, and peacefulness—this is relevant for Los Angeles because of our marvelous climate, and through courtyard living, we can achieve greater density." A book chronicling his work and ideas, *Multi-*

Cultural Modernism (Images), will be released this fall, in conjunction with an exhibit on his work at the Palm Springs Art Museum. "This house is part of what I believe in," he says, "reinvigorating existing neighborhoods and reinforcing the community. I feel good about this house." **D**

(Phoenix, continued from page 100)

The home Phoenix created for himself is a warm, untrammelled expression of his refined instincts and disciplined energy. He designed everything from the down-to-the-studs architectural renovation to the landscaping. He raised the roofline, added gables, changed almost every door and window, enlarged rooms, and created a pitch-perfect overhanging surround to the front entry.

Inside, he masterminded a pleasantly civilized cocoon with masculine English leanings, pepped up with well-behaved exotic touches. Eschewing popular recessed overhead lighting that flatters no one, Phoenix uses lamps and sconces to set his rooms aglow. The generous, human-friendly quality of his design extends to the subtle tactile pleasures of various polished and woven surfaces and comfortable upholstered furniture. And while most "contemporary" houses leave out a formal dining room, Phoenix conjured up a haven that seats ten and feels perpetually ready for the best Thanksgiving dinner ever.

These days, perhaps more than ever before, top designers are held in celebrity-level esteem. Phoenix blithely dismisses most of the expertise that commands princely sums as "common sense." In his own living room, the walls, moldings, trim, and ceiling are painted in hues between brown and white, but he shrugs and says, "They're all just beige." It's another pleasant expression of his lack of pretension.

Since the Internet put every ottoman, rug, and damask on the market at everyone's fingertips, Phoenix says, "there are so many resources out there, you can get anything you want." But an approachable guy with terrific taste and a sure eye makes the ocean of choice navigable, and one who breezily removes the mystique from the process is invaluable. Phoenix can claim with typical deflation, "People just want you to tell them what they want," but that's no small thing. He's where he is today because clients want his uncommon "common sense" to save them from the things they think they want and to create the house they actually want to live in. **D**