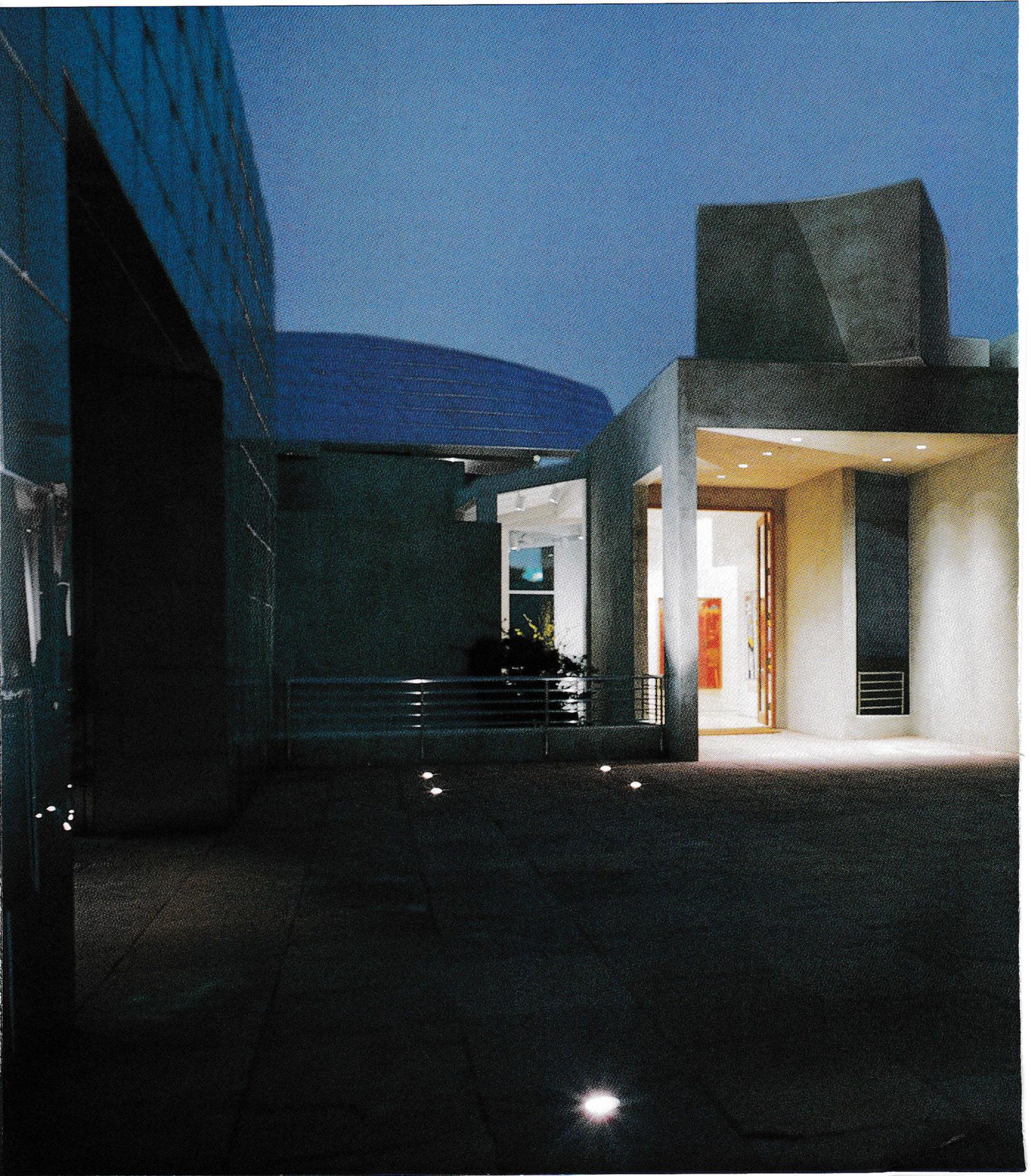


ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST - MARCH, 1996

A CONTEMPORARY EDGE

KINETIC COMPOSITION FOR A LOS ANGELES COLLECTOR



EXECUTIVE ARCHITECTURE BY LANGDON WILSON INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE BY POLSHEK AND PARTNERS
TEXT BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAIME ARDILES-ARCE



"A significant work of architecture that we could live in" was what a couple sought for their Los Angeles hillside site. They initiated the design with architect Frank Gehry; the firm Langdon Wilson completed the building. From the entrance court, a stucco portal leads to the public spaces. The private quarters are between the glazed kitchen and the stainless-steel-clad garage, at right.

I believe that architecture on a residential scale can become art," says a prominent industrialist, who, with his wife, has dedicated the last twenty-five years to collecting modern and contemporary art. Behind an anodized-aluminum gate, midslope on a steep hill in Los Angeles, he has built a house that embodies his beliefs.

A long landscaped drive leads to a massive courtyard paved with Indian-red sandstone and bordered by bold geometric forms clad in stainless steel. There, a large stucco cube frames the entrance to the house, which is essentially a 12,000-square-foot cluster of stucco boxes crowned by a roof of stainless-steel wings.

The owner, who is chairman of a financial services firm and cofound-

er of the largest multinational home builder, serves on several museum boards and is a founding chairman of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. He conceived the structure as the culmination of his and his wife's commitment to architecture and art. "My interest in architecture predates my interest in collecting art," he says. "Our housing firm gave the public what they wanted but not what I thought was great architecture. Art and architecture go together in my mind.

"We began thinking that we should design a home that would fit our current lifestyle," he adds. "Our children had grown, our collecting had vastly changed. We had started with the Post-impressionists and had subsequently moved into art of the fifties, sixties and

seventies, the eighties and nineties."

During their five-year search for a location, the couple honed an aesthetic based on a willingness to take chances and to reach for something new.

"With this site, we decided to really go for it, and going for it meant hiring Frank Gehry as the design architect," he says. "We had visited many of Gehry's houses and were impressed with their sculptural value, the materials he selected and, especially, the siting. Part of our motivation in approaching him was that we were interested in the creative process."

The couple were also attracted to Gehry's affinity for contemporary art, which they experienced firsthand in 1983 when he renovated a warehouse as a temporary exhibition space for



"The complexity is in the arrangement of the pieces," Langdon Wilson project architect Doug Robertson points out. "There's a lot of architecture that you don't see." OPPOSITE: The living room is crowned by a free-form, 55-ton stainless-steel-clad "flower" roof that contrasts with the house's geometric lower volumes.

Art conservation figured prominently in the design of the building. ABOVE: In the entrance hall, and throughout, skylights incorporating a special interlayer filter out harsh sunlight. An untitled 1991 work by Jasper Johns hangs above Scott Burton's rolled-steel *Semi-Circular Table*, 1993. The living room lies beyond.



The mill-finished metal of the living room ceiling—complete with craftsmen's crayon notes indicating where the parts should line up—was sealed with epoxy to prevent rusting. Variations in color caused by welding of the seams contribute to its strong physical presence. Robert Moskowitz's 1979 *Flatiron (For Lily)* defines the fireplace wall; a 1984 Jasper Johns is to the left. Stark sisal carpets. Manuel Canovas green pillow fabric.

the Museum of Contemporary Art. (That space, dubbed the Temporary Contemporary, proved so successful it was later adopted as a permanent annex to the more polished, Arata Isozaki-designed MOCA.)

Although Gehry did not complete the house, it bears his inimitable style. At his suggestion, the firm Langdon Wilson, which has since worked with him on other projects, was brought in to refine the design and execute the working drawings. C. David Robinson and Amy Eliot of Polshek and Partners designed the interior spaces and much of the furniture; Mark Rios created the landscaping. "It was a collaboration," explains the owner.

One of the greatest challenges was

the three-acre lot, whose topography inhibited development. But some thirty years in the construction business had given the owner, who acted as his own general contractor, the experience, contacts and nerve necessary for the task. The site was graded and terraced. Storm drains and power and telephone lines for the entire neighborhood were moved. Nearly three hundred thousand dollars was spent on fees for permits alone.

The couple, whose art collection is internationally recognized, did not want a bunker full of paintings and sculpture. "We wanted a house that would show art well but that wasn't just a bunch of galleries," he says. "We thought, How can we display a fair,

not huge, number of pieces and have a house with all the other qualities of livability? We went with white walls, windows and lots of light—in a style of architecture that would work for us and wasn't cold. Sometimes modern design becomes too precise. I think we achieved a blend."

The spare but dramatic entrance hall introduces the couple's collection with a 1966 Roy Lichtenstein (*I . . . I'm Sorry!* is one of the owner's favorite paintings—he waited fifteen years to purchase it). A Jasper Johns hangs over a steel table by Scott Burton. A painting from Richard Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series reflects an aspect of the view of the Pacific as seen from the expansive windows in the living room.



"No area of the house was designed to support any particular piece of art," says the owner, who periodically rotates his collection. ABOVE: Anselm Kiefer's *Zweistromland (Mesopotamia/Tigris & Euphrates)*, 1985–87, dominates a sitting area of the living room; a Kiefer photographic work, *Das Balder Lied*, 1977–78, is at left.

OPPOSITE: The center of the floor plan—where the axes cross—is the dining room: "Ground zero," says C. David Robinson of Polshek and Partners. "The circular ceiling marks the conceptual core and establishes a symmetry to the adjoining spaces." *Vermeer: Portrait of the Artist in His Studio*, 1968, is by Malcolm Morley.

The interior of the house is as non-conformist as the exterior. In the living room, the steel wings of the roof reverse to a dark and seamed underside of concave and convex forms. Weighing fifty-five tons, the roof was constructed after consultation with shipbuilders and water-tank manufacturers; it was such a production that the owner commissioned a video

of the process. The finished product lends a Gothic quality to the room that has proven complementary to the art.

"We didn't design the house with any specific works in mind," says the owner. Still, the main wall of the living room serves as an ideal backdrop for Anselm Kiefer's epic *Zweistromland (Mesopotamia/Tigris & Euphrates)*, a mammoth black painting collaged

with wires and battery innards whose mass balances the daunting ceiling.

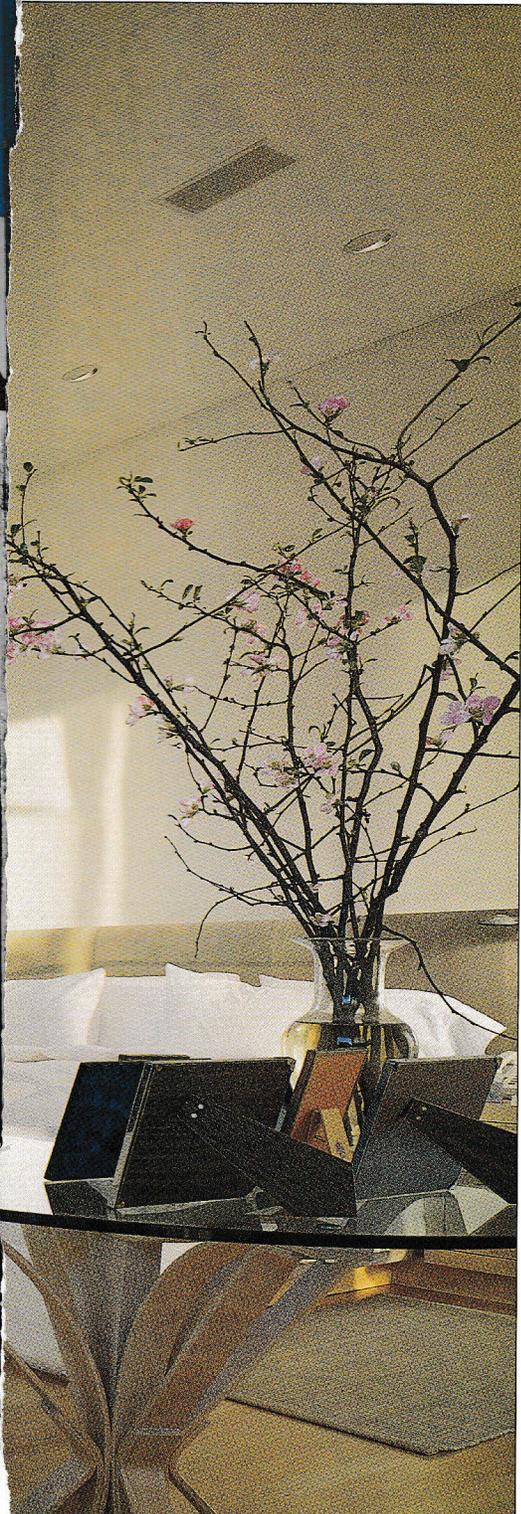
Other paintings in the room are almost as large and are equally somber in color. A dramatic depiction of New York's Flatiron building by Robert Moskowitz towers next to the fireplace; an untitled 1984 Jasper Johns composition hangs at the end of the room.

"Every consideration was given to



preserving the art," says Langdon Wilson project architect Doug Robertson. "Special glass absorbs the ultra-violet rays, and what does come in is a gentle light—not cold, not warm. Gehry is a master of using yellow light from the south and blue light from the north to great effect."

Though seemingly complex, the floor plan of the house is actually quite



"Our challenge for the interior was to respect the architect's original concept and preserve the framework, while crafting a fresh approach to the detailing," remarks Robinson. LEFT: Roy Lichtenstein's *Reflections on Interior with Girl Drawing*, 1990, is displayed in the master bedroom. Edelman Leather headboard suede.

A complex series of forms and openings "energizes the space but doesn't work at cross-purposes with the art," observes Robinson. "It's a strategy used with success in museums." ABOVE: An untitled 1975 Jasper Johns painting and a fireplace anchor the lower wall in the master bedroom. The sisal carpet is by Stark.

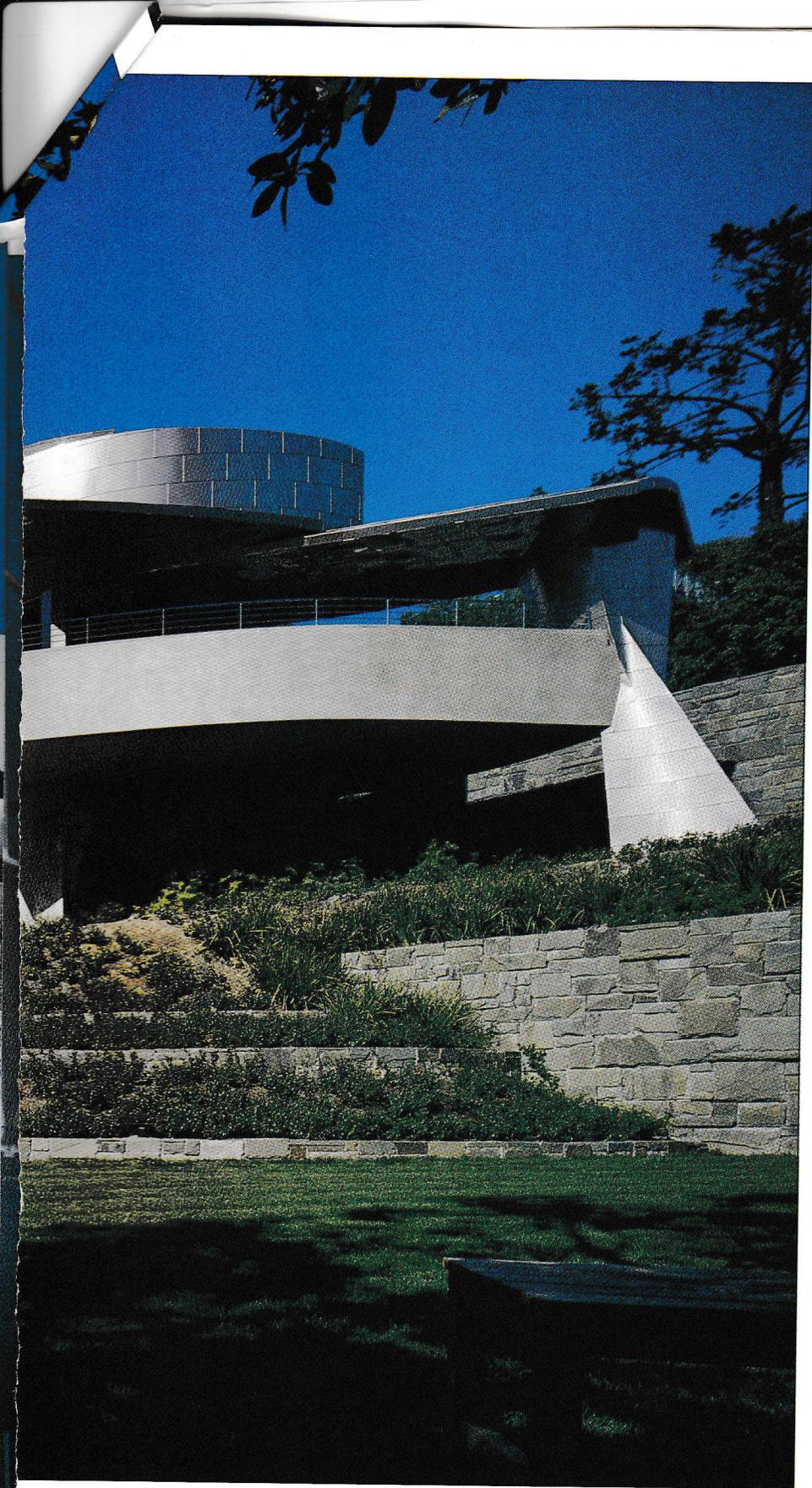
straightforward and practical. The living and dining rooms and the kitchen, office and master suite are arrayed on a single level, the second floor. "We wanted things close," says the owner. "We didn't want to have to walk a thousand feet to get from one end to another or to go up and down stairs every day. The house is really very compact."

Sculptural volumes dominate the upper reaches of the spaces. For instance, while the dining room is marked by a round black-marble dining table flanked by Malcolm Morley's 1968 *Vermeer: Portrait of the Artist in His Studio* and a 1969 Cy Twombly painting

from his *Bolsena* series, a circular ceiling punctured by a large square window is the commanding feature.

From the entrance hall, a bluestone stair with a steel rail leads to the first floor, where glass doors open onto the main art gallery (there are two). It contains an enormous Richard Serra drawing and a painting by Lichtenstein as well as sculptures by Burton and Bruce Nauman. The owner estimates that, even with the additional viewing space, only a quarter of his collection is ever on display at one time.

Outside the gallery, bluestone rectangles form a path across a man-made



ABOVE: A ziggurat of bluestone alongside the guesthouse, which is lower in grade than the two primary levels, was designed as a cascading pond. The living room, at right, sits above an art gallery.

"The hardscape and planting participate in the formation of a sculptural whole," notes landscape architect Mark Rios. RIGHT: A stainless-steel plane juts off the living room to shelter the adjacent terrace.

pond to the guesthouse. Beyond this waterscape, Rios created the effect of a timeless sylvan valley by importing some three hundred mature trees and planting the hillsides with native California plants. Below the house lies a lawn dotted with ficus and enclosed by towering eucalyptus and oak trees. On the south side of the lawn is a swimming pool; a stand of greenery conceals a tennis court. "The powerful scale of the architecture required that the landscape respond with a strength of its own to avoid a trivializing kind of decoration," Rios says.

The owner maintains that years of collecting art has prepared him and his wife for the house's architecture. "Clearly, if you're a collector, your eye and interest keep changing and moving in time," he says. "You might start with Impressionism, and that's nice, but then you progress to what I call the acquired taste for contemporary art. I didn't appreciate Lichtenstein twenty-five years ago. But you sharpen your eye—and the same thing applies to architecture.

"The design of this house isn't only important today, it will be important tomorrow," he continues. "I wasn't about to go back in style to Regency or Colonial. For me, that's like collecting the Impressionists." □

