

## REDEMPTION IN SANTA MONICA

A CALIFORNIA TRACT HOUSE FINDS NEW LIFE

By Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Architect Marc Appleton remembers meeting his client Dr. Betty Edwards for the first time at her Santa Monica house. Staring at the dismal stucco box, he wondered what miracle could save it. "It was a proverbial sow's ear, a dumpy early-1950s tract house," Appleton says with a shudder. "It had flat ceilings sprayed with cottage cheese and aluminum sliding windows!"

Redemption, it turned out, was available in the garden. This landscaped Eden was terraced with planes of baby's tears and brilliant bursts of flowers that Edwards painstakingly changed with the seasons—white tulips in spring, blue anemones in summer. The skeptical architect was converted by the care and attention Ed-

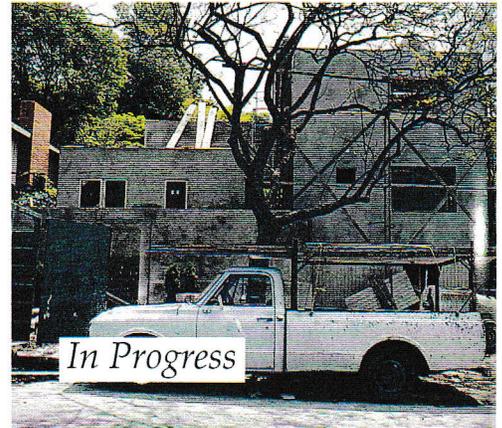
wards had lavished on the backyard. In the frankest terms, Appleton told her, "You've got the worst house but the loveliest garden. If you're game, I'll work with you to redo the house in response to the garden."

Fortunately, Edwards was the sort of client who liked her medicine straight. An author and educator

known for her best-selling book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, she realized her house was overdue for an overhaul. She had called the architect after seeing the studio and residence he had designed for Los Angeles artist Tony Berlant. Edwards recalls her meeting with Appleton with good humor: "He said it was the



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The entire renovation took place on the house's existing foundations.

Inspired by traditional Japanese and urban Mexican design, architect Marc Appleton reworked the Santa Monica house of author Dr. Betty Edwards. ABOVE: "It was an early-1950s developer's tract house," notes Appleton.

ABOVE RIGHT: The structure was partially walled off from the street and a second story was added. RIGHT: "The layered walls create a greater sense of privacy," says Appleton, who also designed the gate. The original positions of the windows were preserved.

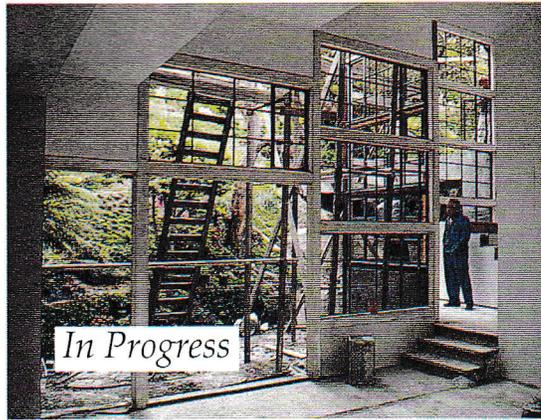


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ABOVE LEFT: Sliding doors in the living/dining room provided the only view to the rear garden. ABOVE: Appleton stepped the ceilings and devised corresponding windows that open the house up to the outdoors.

LEFT: "The remodeling encouraged an expanded diagonal view to the garden," says Appleton. "If the garden was the picture, the house became its frame, establishing a more intimate relationship between the two."

wall and a gate and behind that you regain possession," he explains. "It's a totally urban rather than a suburban notion." Appleton designed a gate of Honduras mahogany inset with a symbolic vine made of wrought iron. The street-level entrance provides an element of privacy, disguising the actual front door to the house. "She can open the house up to get cross ventilation and still have a sense of security because she's protected from the sidewalk," he says.

Once inside, a visitor is confronted with the dramatic garden views that Appleton made possible at the rear of the house. "We opened it up to the garden with a series of cascading windows," he says. The treatment of the windows signals other changes. In the living/dining room, for example, Appleton had the ceilings lifted in a sliding-step plan. The resulting tango of angles between the walls and the windows accentuates the diagonal axis of the room.

only house he had worked on that he didn't hesitate to tear into because there was nothing to lose."

Still, Appleton (working with Katherine Spitz in his office) reoriented the residence without making significant changes to the original plan. The lot was only fifty feet wide with a dramatic upslope in the back. Aside from a three-by-five-foot extension of a rear wall, the entire renovation took

place on the house's existing foundations. "This was a wonderful example for me as an architect of how much you can accomplish with section and elevation," he says.

Appleton decided to treat the structure as a town house, and, inspired by the architecture of Luis Barragán, he erected a frontal wall along the sidewalk. "In Mexico, where building up to the street is common, you have a

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"The window steps down and back in both plan and elevation," Appleton points out. "That establishes a kind of diagonal visual movement through the house rather than just a flat window smack up against a hillside. The diagonal push and pull creates a layering and a mystery. You are always aware of the garden, no matter where you are in the house. The glass is reflective, so even when you're outside looking back at the house, you see the garden."

A small back bedroom was converted into a column of glass—actually, the stair to the second floor that occupies what Appleton describes as a "double-high clerestory space." The added height in the adjoining liv-

## The studio is an airy, inviting room that runs the length of the building with garden views.

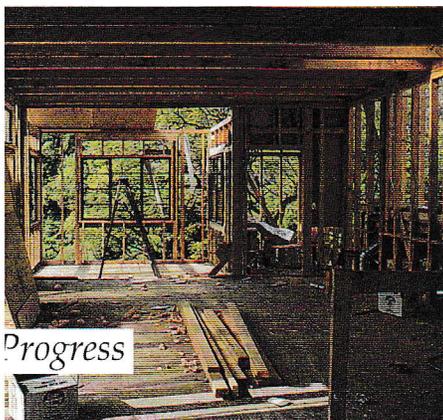
ing/dining room is emphasized by the sculptural wooden stair itself.

When Appleton first met with Edwards, she wanted to add a second story to accommodate a grand master bedroom. The architect says, "Most people have the preconception of moving the bedroom upstairs without realizing that they spend an enormous amount of time in the kitchen and living room and that those are the spaces that need attention."

Appleton suggested situating a stu-

dio and office on the second story and creating a master bedroom and bath downstairs. The studio is an airy, inviting room that runs the length of the building with garden views at the back. At the front of the studio the architect added a walled patio with folding doors that close it off from the studio in winter. "It was a way of building a piece of garden onto the other side of the house," he says.

Working around the mature eucalyptus trees in the backyard, he



ABOVE: When Edwards expressed a desire for an upstairs bedroom, Appleton suggested using the space for a studio and office. BELOW: French doors topped by a band of gridded windows open to the street-facing terrace.



ABOVE: Exposed beams and oak floors lend the studio a barnlike feeling, reinforced by a cast-iron stove and a pine worktable that serves as a desk. "It's a wonderful long room," says Appleton, "the one space that reaches through the house in a strong way." The windows at left open to catch ocean breezes.

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planned a bridge off the studio that attaches to the garden and features a twenty-four-foot-long potting bench. "It's a wonderful way of enticing her outdoors," offers Appleton.

To develop a notably different atmosphere in which Edwards would work, the architect used the model of a barn. Where neutral carpet and white rooms prevail downstairs, oak

plank floors were installed upstairs. Beams of Douglas fir support the ceiling. A series of awning windows at the top of the south wall can be cranked open to scoop in the ocean breezes. A large pine table that serves as a desk and a wood-burning stove contribute to the spare and deliberate feeling. The steel-sashed windows used throughout the house reinforce

the modernist aesthetic yet emulate the scale and shape of Japanese shoji. "It owes a lot to Japanese architecture," Appleton admits.

"Every decision on something like this involves the client. I make proposals, but it's more of a conversation in terms of our deciding on the materials and the ingredients of it."

Betty Edwards was particularly

taken with Appleton's attention to the smallest details. For example, he used Bouquet Canyon stone for the living/dining room fireplace and for the steps leading to the garden. The steps closest to the geometric architecture of the house are finished as smooth rectangles. As they proceed into the garden, they are cut into increasingly more organic shapes, marrying

with the plantings and the trees.

The house won a Los Angeles AIA award, but that is not the main triumph for Appleton. "I thrive on the dreams, predilections, prejudices, hopes, budget constraints and programmatic needs of the client and the situation at hand. It's particularly satisfying when you can transform something and give your clients a sense of pleasure about their home. There is no greater satisfaction for me than that. That's not architecture, that's just seeing what you do have a wonderful effect on a person." □

ABOVE LEFT: With its low, flat roofline and nearly windowless rear wall, the original design, explains Appleton, was "closed off from the garden." ABOVE: The architect's daughter, Kate, stands before the new stairwell, which was formerly a small guest bedroom.

LEFT: A bridge extends from the studio to the garden—the main part of the renovation that didn't occur on the original foundation. "I love remodeling," says the architect. "You're automatically challenged by the restraints."

