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OPEN DOOR POLICY

ARCHITECTS TAAL SAFDIE AND RICARDO RABINES LIVE ABOVE A LUSH CANYON TEEMING WITH LIFE. DESIGNING A HOME WITH BORDERS THAT DISSOLVE INTO THE LANDSCAPE WAS THEIR NATURAL NEXT STEP.

BY CAROLYN KENNEDY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY UNDINE PRÖHL

Above: The two-storey building “steps down” to street level, as the architects describe it. The privacy of the home is enhanced by the mediating presence of a small courtyard off the kitchen/living area that is protected by a garden wall and hidden by the ample plantings the couple has established on the street face. Four of the home’s five bedrooms have their own balcony, including the one off a second-floor room (at right) where architect Ricardo Rabines is standing. Here, a fringe of bougainvillea fills the long planter box over the garage; in spring, much of the front of the house is covered in the fragrant vine.



The architects planted fruit trees—apple, pomegranate, fig, guava—in the front of the property; a variety of others, including avocado, grow in the back. “It’s like an urban farm,” notes Rabines. “We eat a lot of our own fruits and make our own juices.” The lower patio sits just where the steep slope of the canyon begins.



Two walls of the dining room are formed by a series of metal-framed glass doors that open the space to the backyard. Slate tile with a slightly rough finish, from India, was used throughout the house and in the courtyard for continuity and to further blur the boundaries. The large chunks of greenish stone shot with gold streaks provide a neutral natural backdrop to the brightly coloured decor. The bull's eye painting is by Carmelle Safdie.

● The city of San Diego is spread over a series of hills and canyons—like fingers reaching out, as architect Taal Safdie poetically describes them—sprinkled with wildlife preserves that are home to cougars and bobcats, coyotes and mule deer and more than 100 bird species. Zoning rules require that homes be built at the top of the canyons, allowing the verdant, abundant life below to continue uninterrupted though ever-changing, pocketed between the neighbourhoods in a captivating long-running nature film.

When Taal Safdie and Ricardo Rabines designed their San Diego home, the first they had built new as both architects and clients, the brief they assigned themselves grew out of the steady appreciation for nature and the outdoors that they've acquired over the nearly 25 years they have lived here. "When we first moved here, the places were all



Opposite: Architect Taal Safdie stands on the balcony off the master bedroom, which has a sweeping view of the canyon and wildlife preserve below. Gardens can establish fairly quickly in a place where “winter” means temperatures of about 50 F to 60 F. All of the lush, almost jungle-like planting has been done since the couple moved in two years ago.

very enclosed, like a midwestern city,” Safdie recalls. The collective mindset has shifted now, she says: “I think there’s more appreciation of having that seamless relationship between indoors and outdoors.” The pair has a particular affinity for this part of the city: over the years, they’ve designed four homes for clients nearby, all the while continually remodeling and adding to their own home. So when the opportunity arose to buy the property next door, complete with a small older house, they had an easy familiarity with the place’s potential. Two hundred feet long by 50 feet wide, the rectangular lot, like much of the city, sits on the top of a green canyon. And although it is located only three minutes from downtown San Diego, it offers views down into a rich wildlife preserve that will remain undisturbed by urban development.

Two considerations were key to the design of the home. “We wanted to bring the canyon through the house to the front,” Rabines says. “The house is a series of rooms stepping down to the street, with views directed to the canyon and to the street.” This careful framing of the

Left: The art is “all in the family,” Safdie notes, which may be another way of saying that sometimes talent runs in the genes. The architectural work over the fireplace was painted by Carmelle Safdie, Taal’s younger, New York-based sister. “That white wall above the fireplace was empty for over a year,” Safdie says. “We wanted something with the colours of the house—bright and warm. Then we saw this—on Carmelle’s website!” The piece to its right is by Taal’s aunt, Sylvia Safdie.

Below: Although Safdie says they have “always liked a lot of colour,” particularly oranges and reds, the palette in the house came together in a casual fashion, due to some serendipitous finds. The saffron-coloured fabric used to cover the sofa ties in almost seamlessly with the eucalyptus kitchen cabinetry, which is a reference to all the eucalyptus trees in the canyon. The partition wall provides a bit of separation between the kitchen work zone and the living area. The large work on the partition wall is by Sylvia Safdie.





The narrow lot size restricted the width of the dining room, so, for a time, the pair looked for a painting to hang “because half of the table would have to look at a wall,” Safdie explains. Instead, though, they covered the wall with a long mirror, so “you can always see the canyon.”

views achieved the second goal: privacy. There are no sightlines into the house from any of the neighbouring homes. The original, Spanish-style house on the property was built, in the way of its time, without visual connection to the landscape; the laundry room faced the site’s most compelling views. In the new house, Safdie says, “Sitting here, we feel like we are *in* the canyon. It was most important to be able to experience the garden at all times.”

It sounds intuitive—it would certainly seem perverse now to build a house in such a landscape that isn’t as open as it could possibly be to its surroundings—yet a pair of architects designing a home for themselves can still face a few stumbling blocks along the way. “It’s more difficult to design for yourself,” Safdie admits. “As an architect, you try to break a client out of their preconceptions—we all have them, but we can be more objective on behalf of others. You get caught up in what you’re used to and can’t break yourself out of it. And you drown in the details—what kind of wood should we use, should we use any wood—there are too many choices,” she says, with a laugh. Even so, she describes the project as fun, and, in fact, the two are considering their next personal house project, again looking to the lot next door.

At 2,800 square feet, the house offers ample space for the couple’s three grown children when they visit. It was designed for “extended-family moments,” Rabines notes. “But when they’re not here, the house and the rooms are not too big just for us.” The house is broken into zones: two bedroom suites and a powder room are on the main floor, behind the living room and to the right when you enter the house; three more bedrooms are upstairs, including a large master suite, and all but one have their own balcony. A eucalyptus floor in the entryway leads three steps down into the public areas: the living/kitchen/dining spaces, which are open to each other, and, in turn, to the courtyards beyond. There is always access to the outdoors, wherever you are in the home. “The house is more about the garden,” Safdie says. “We like to live outside.”

Safdie is a Montreal native; with Rabines, her husband and business partner of 23 years, she heads the San Diego-based firm Safdie Rabines Architects. Taal is the daughter of Moshe Safdie, and she spent some of her teenage years living in Habitat 67. But the lure of California style has held both her and Rabines for the past almost quarter-century. While the partners have accumulated a wide range of projects in their portfolio over the years—recent projects include a desert courthouse, police and fire stations, student housing and a series of pedestrian bridges in Doha, Qatar, on the verge of completion—their love for the natural beauty of their home base has only continued to grow. Being part of the life of the canyon, Safdie says, is certainly her favourite aspect of the house she and Rabines built. Rabines says, “We often have beautiful, dry weather in San Diego. We open up all the connecting doors, and the breeze comes through. It’s almost a staging—it feels like the house is performing. So, when we have those days, we just want to stay at home.” ●

For floor plans, see page 80