HOME AMONG THE TREES

SPLIT-LEVEL DESIGN, LARGE WINDOWS BROADEN VIEWS OF NATURE

BY ALLISON KELTNER

John and Jill Lomac had been considering remodeling their home, which overlooks a canyon in Mission Hills, when a fire forced them to make a decision. The original structure was a duplex, but they rebuilt the home as a single-family, two-bedroom, two-bathroom dwelling. They turned to their neighbors and friends, Taal Safdie and Ricardo Rabines of Safdie Rabines Architects, to design and build a home "that feels like a tree house," according to Safdie.

The original structure was built in the 1950s. Although the 1998 fire didn't completely destroy the duplex, there was enough water and smoke damage that it made more sense to rebuild from scratch. But the site was "legally nonconforming," as a result of new city zoning laws and ordinances regulating environmentally sensitive lands, Safdie said. The Lomacs were only allowed to build a home that matched the previous footprint of 1,400 square feet.

Safdie and Rabines worked within the tight limitations by designing a split-level home with four levels that maximized storage space and used decks to enlarge the living space. Floor-to-ceiling glass pocket doors were installed on three walls of the living room on the main level. Two decks extend off opposite sides. The third wall, which overlooks the canyon, simply has a steel-and-tension wire guardrail across it. "When the doors are

SEE MISSION HILLS • 26

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Several decks enlarge the living space and integrate the home with the canyon it overlooks (top). Clerestory windows flood the kitchen with light (above).

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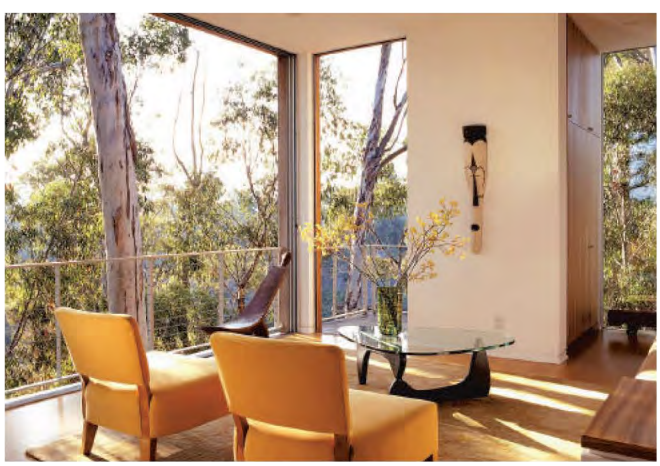
Despite the small size, it's still easy to entertain in the home thanks to multiple decks and a creative design by architects Taal Safdie and Ricardo Rabines, who live nearby.



One of the living room walls opens to a steel-and-tension wire guardrail that maximizes the views.

MISSION HILLS

CONTINUED FROM 24

open, the living room feels like a balcony," Safdie said. "The views you want to maximize are actually looking down, not out or up like most view decks. With a normal balcony, you'd have to go out to the edge to see (down the canyon). With the guardrail, you can enjoy them from within the living room."

The kitchen sits a half-level up from the living room. From the open space in the kitchen, the Lomacs can look down into the living room and out through the glass walls. Clerestory windows above let in more natural light and offer views through the eucalyptus treetops. A staircase along the outside of the house leads from the kitchen to the rooftop deck above the living room, which was one of the Lomacs' three requirements. A second was a huge cage for their blue-and-gold macaw, which is almost 20 years old. The cage is in the corner next to the kitchen, with glass walls of its own and plenty of room for the colorful bird.

The third requirement was nearly as unusual as a built-in birdcage. Jill wanted an indoor-outdoor shower in the master bathroom. Sliding doors on opposite sides of the shower lead in to the bathroom or out to another canyon-view deck. Privacy isn't a big concern, thanks to the canyon

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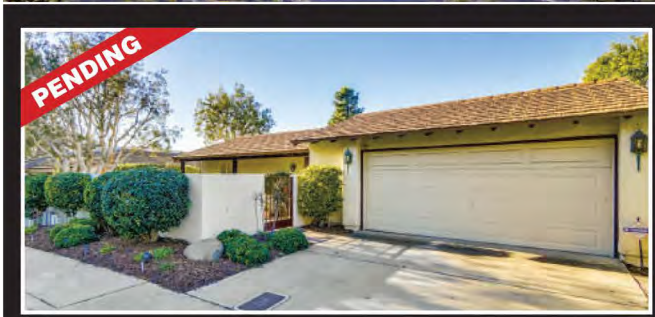
John and Jill Lomac are avid birdwatchers and have seen 50 to 60 species of birds from their home. The deck off the living room is also the perfect spot to enjoy the morning light through the trees.

and trees that surround the home. The master bedroom is on the home's lowest level, and a guest room is on the level in between the living room and master suite.

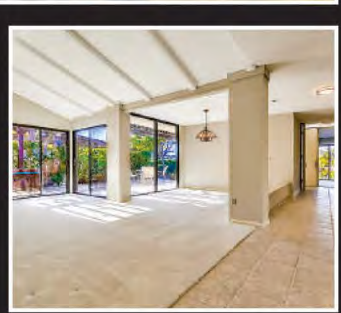
"Their needs were very simple," Safdie said. "They love nature. It was really just a matter of simple spaces, surrounded by trees and filtered sunlight. It's very small but intricate."

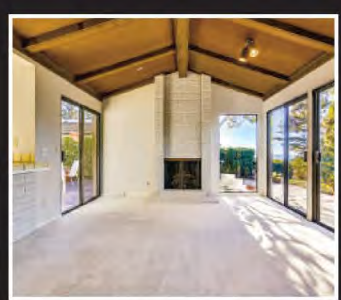
They used cedar siding on the exterior and wood throughout the home, and the walls of glass put the views of the canyon and tree center stage. To really maximize the home's efficiency, all the

SEE **MISSION HILLS • 28**



Don't miss this rare opportunity to own a single level home in the coveted Muirlands neighborhood. The three-bedroom home features sweeping, dazzling panoramic ocean and hillside views. Thanks to large windows and vaulted ceilings, the home feels spacious and open. Sip coffee on the partially-covered patio in the mornings or enjoy a glass of wine while watching the sunsets over the ocean. Nestled atop a knoll to take advantage of the views, this home offers a myriad of expansion and remodeling possibilities on a quiet cul-de-sac.





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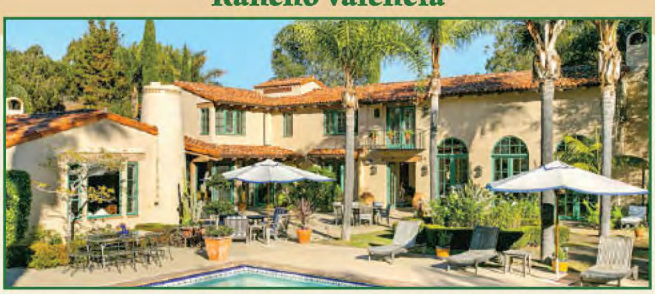

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The Lomacs wanted to use natural materials, such as the zebrawood in the kitchen, to emphasize the "tree house" feel. The house was built on the 1,400-square-foot footprint of the original home, which was a duplex.

MISSION HILLS

CONTINUED FROM 27

plumbing is in one "column" on one side of the house and all the staircases on the opposite side. The result: Spaces that feel more open and spacious than one would expect in such a small footprint.

The Lomacs faced a long design process, including multiple delays waiting for permits and applying for variances. Despite that, the couple as well as Safdie and Rabine say building the treehouse home was ultimately a positive experience. John said the couple appreciated that the architects, who live nearby, could be there every day during construction, which was completed in 2002.

"They were very trusting of our concepts, but gave us feedback, especially regarding the materials or how they wanted to live," Safdie said of the Lomacs. "It was nice to go from neighbors to friends, and then we did the house for them, and now they feel like family."

"It fits us," said John. The Lomacs, both retired, are avid birdwatchers and Jill estimated they've seen 50 to 60 species of birds from their home, including migratory and rare species. The multiple decks and glass walls give them plenty of opportunities to relax and observe – and feed – birds in their natural environment.

Allison Keltner is a San Diego freelance writer.

Their blue-and-gold macaw has its own home in a specially designed cage next to the kitchen.