

THE WORLD'S BEST HOMES,  
INTERIORS & DESIGN

ISSUE 23 JUNE 2008

# spaces

INTERIORS//ARCHITECTURE//FASHION//DESIGN//TRAVEL//ART

## THE WANDER-LUST ISSUE

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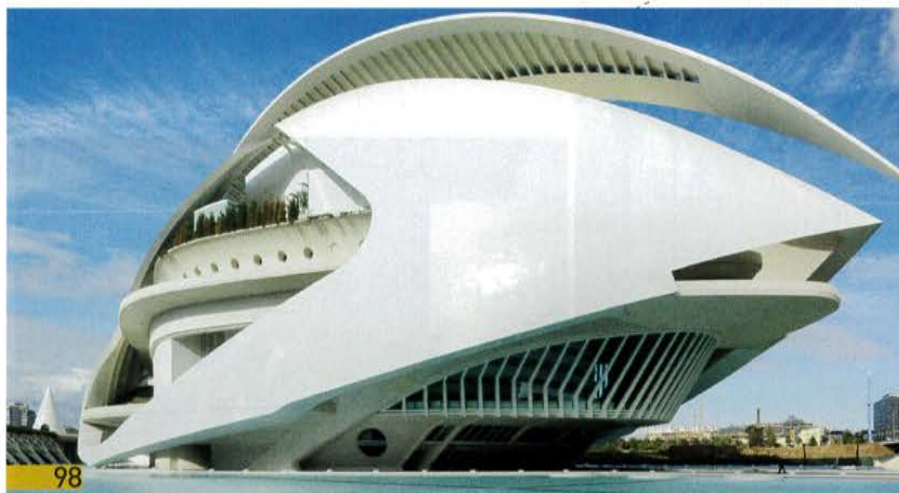
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98



88



22



118



60



108

### 10 RETAIL THERAPY

'Whoever said money can't buy happiness simply didn't know where to shop.' Bo Derek.

### 21 HE SHOOTS, HE SCORES

Spaces falls for the charms of Norwegian designer Runa Clock's playful new coat hanger, Offside.

### 22 STILLS FROM A FOREIGN LAND

Rohini Wahi gets to grips with the work of Korean-born illustrator Jeana Sohn.

### 24 ON TREND

How Andrew Martin has been making, as well as predicting the trends of the future.

### 28 BACK STAGE PASS

We invite you behind the scenes at the Buxton Opera House for our back stage fashion shoot.

### 38 BACK STAGE RIDER

Taking inspiration from Anni Ulm's elegant and exotic sense of style we've compiled her ultimate back stage rider.

### 39 SUBSCRIPTIONS OFFER

Subscribe to Spaces this month and save 50%.

### 40 HAPPY GAMPER

Martino Gamper whets our appetite with his tastiest project to date.

### 44 TREE HOUSES

We begin this month's tree houses special with Noel Montrucchio's thought-provoking feature, 'Once Upon a Childhood Dream'.

### 50 TREE HOUSES PART II

Our tree houses special continues with 'A Most Unusual Nest'.





70



28



118



112



78



50

## 60 BRIGHT SPARKS

Our bright and beautiful furniture shoot.

## 70 BIG CALM

We step inside Mark Dzielwski's relaxing retirement retreat.

## 78 THE NEW RADICALS

Why the architects at Stephenson Bell hope that one Manchester home just might change the way we think about modern architecture forever.

## 88 VILLA STORINGAVIKA

An intriguing modern home with dazzling views over Norway's west coast.

## 98 THE 'R-MAN'

Could Santiago Calatrava be the ultimate modern Renaissance man?

## 108 THE MAN WITH NO NAME ... YET

Why designer John Vugrin is poised to step out from the shadows

## 112 MAKE DO AND MEND

How Hannah Lamb's childhood button collection has evolved into a serious body of work.

## 114 MORE ROOM AT THE TOP

How the talent spotters at Heal's discovered a potential design classic in the form of John Reeves' much lauded Louis collection.

## 118 SPA GAZING

Writer Sarah Brownlee dons a towelling robe to get the inside track on the world's most relaxing spas.

## 130 END SPACE

In Pretty Pointless Lee Garland ponders the future of the phone box.

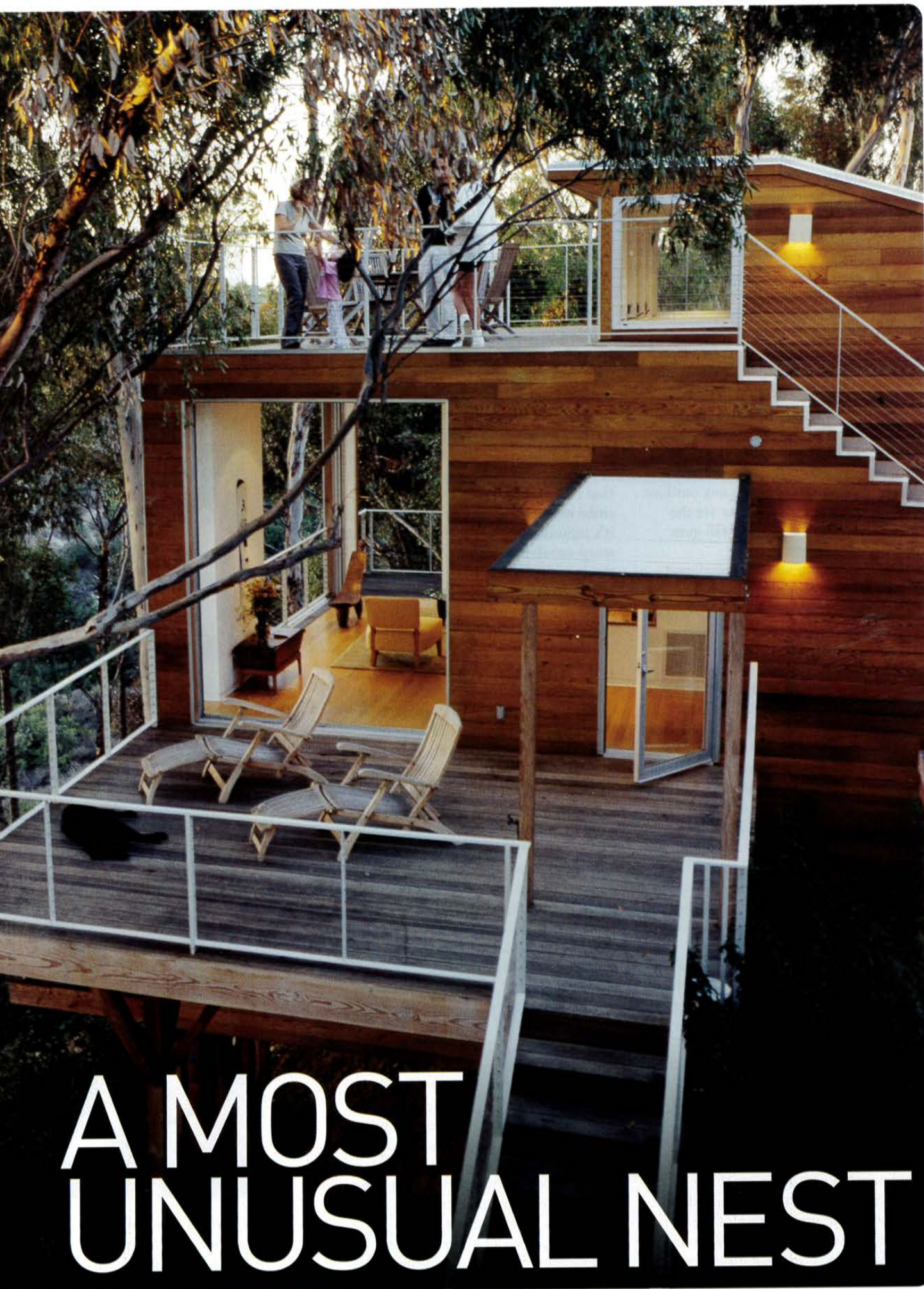


WORDS: Noel Montrucchio  
PHOTOS: Undine Pröhl



What do you do when you want to live among the treetops with the birds, yet don't have any suitable trees in which to build a proper nest? That's easy. Find a talented husband and wife team of architects from Peru and Canada, give them a difficult building site, and then load them down with all sorts of building restrictions.





# A MOST UNUSUAL NEST

51

06.08  
HOME SPACE  
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MISSION HILLS is only a minute or two's flying time by the bird of your choice from the centre of downtown San Diego. That's not much to get excited about until you put that into perspective. San Diego is the eighth largest city in the US and an economic powerhouse in the world's tenth largest economy, California. The area in question is the site of California's first Spanish mission, and two pairs of neighbours with the most unusual mission of their own. Their mission sits near the crest of a steep little canyon running down to the clogged freeways in the valley below. It is a gorgeous little 1,400 sq ft wood and glass residence surrounded by eucalyptus trees. Locals call it the Tree House.

If you want to be picky, it is not really a tree house since it's not actually built in a tree. But you would never guess that from a casual glance or the view out of any door or window or from any outdoor deck of the house. All you see are the surrounding top branches of tall gum trees and the canyon below.

This new house was commissioned by John and Jill Lomac when their original house on this site burned down. The house is located in one of the greener undeveloped natural enclaves of this otherwise semi-arid region. The Lomacs can consider themselves lucky that the entire wooded canyon didn't go up in smoke. The whole of Southern California is prone to vast fires when the hot dry Santa Ana winds blow down from the high desert every autumn. But it was concerns about ecological and environmental sensitivity rather than safety, fire and earthquakes that were the primary reasons behind the ultra-strict building codes that limited any replacement house on this site to the same square footage and footprint as the previous structure.

The Lomacs are retired now; John from the real estate business and as head of the San Diego Board of Realtors and Jill from full-time work as a software designer, although she still does the occasional freelance job. They decided to rebuild on the same spot anyway and hired their next-door neighbours, architects Taal Safdie and Ricardo Rabines, to design the replacement. One reason for their choice was that they knew the architects loved the area just as much as they did and the other was their appreciation of the partnership's work. As often happens after a dramatic event, what they ended up with turned out to be far better and

much more suited to their personal tastes and lifestyle than the original.

Taal Safdie was born in Montréal, Canada and is a second-generation architect. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with a master of architecture degree, she worked for several international firms in New York. Husband Ricardo is from Lima and had practised in Peru for five years before he too came to Penn to get his master of architecture degree. He worked for international firms on both the East and West Coast of the US before they decided to move to San Diego and start their own practice. Their firm now numbers 20 architects and designers and does work ranging from small private residences to major construction projects for commercial and public institutions.

Tree House is a two-bedroom, two-bathroom, three-story house. Actually, that description is a bit deceptive since there are actually four levels and it's mounted on stilts on the side of a steep eucalyptus-covered canyon. Both the interior living space and exterior are spread out over four half levels. Because of the orientation of the site, the narrowest part of the house faces the canyon. To maximise the usable space and remain within the allowable footprint, the rooms on the east side of the house are higher than those facing the canyon to the west. The rooms themselves are deliberately kept open to allow sightlines to flow from one room to the other and on out into the trees and canyon.

When it was suggested that perhaps this is not a two-bedroom house at all, but rather a two-and-a-half-bedroom house, Rabines answered with only the smallest hint of a smile in his rich Latin tenor. 'Yes, this is the first time I have designed a house for a bird.' The additional half bedroom in question is a royal suite of a birdcage housing a brilliantly coloured blue-and-yellow giant macaw. The Lomacs, you see, are bird people. It is obvious how much they care for their parrot to have unleashed this much architectural firepower on their feathered companion's home. The macaw suite is a very important design feature of the house and is located in the kitchen area. She is quite chatty, obviously enjoying her large custom-made cage.

But it is not just about their parrot. The Lomacs are committed birdwatchers. They have travelled far and wide in their birdwatching >>>



The views from every window, door, and deck of Tree House look through the canopy of eucalyptus trees.



It's perfect for entertaining large numbers of people.



Stainless steel and black slate work surfaces in the kitchen contrast beautifully with the rich warmth of zebrawood.

adventures. One of their reasons for rebuilding on the burned-out site was because they wanted to be able to continue feeding the birds in a canyon. They feed a lot of birds. They put out food in the morning and in the afternoon and birds fly in from all over. The woods around their home are a sanctuary for birds, wild animals and plants. The couple attract enormous numbers to the feeding stations they have set up.

A path from the road leads to a short stairway and up to a spacious mahogany porch where a long slender aluminium and wood trellis draws you to the front door. Inside, the house opens to its surroundings. The organisation of the house is simple with the plumbing on one side and all vertical circulation on the other, eliminating any need for hallways.

The large expanse of sliding glass-pocket doors, which make up three sides of the living room,

opens the home to its outdoor decks and terraces, reaching from the inside out into the trees. The house appears to float in between the branches. The feeling is one of light and spacious volumes and expansiveness without any sense of being small or cramped. Clerestory story windows wrap around three walls of the dining room bringing in light as well as views into the treetops. The windows in the adjoining kitchen are positioned low, providing views of the more or less wild gardens below. The kitchen and dining room are connected and overlook the living room a half level below. The kitchen is finished with dramatic surfaces of zebrawood (also known as Zebron), stainless steel, and a centrally located black slate island for food preparation

No air-conditioning is necessary said Safdie. 'It is cooled by cross ventilation and uses forced air heating for the occasional chilly San Diego >>>



evening. There are a series of clerestory windows in the tallest space that provide both wonderful views of the trees and can be easily opened for ventilation, letting the hot air escape.' All windows and pocket doors are double glazed, a reminder that the California building codes and regulations are among the strictest to be found anywhere in the world in spite of its temperate climate.

The two bedrooms are located on the bottom level. The master suite also utilises pocket doors, with a deck that extends to the master bathroom, which has a shower that opens up onto a deck right among the trees. 'The trees provide shade and privacy,' pointed out Rabines. 'You don't need curtains. The shower doesn't require any covering. It is a full glass opening.' The exterior wood is stained and sealed cedar. It only has to be treated every couple of years. It's quite low maintenance and ages beautifully.

Said Safdie: 'We eliminated the partitions as much as possible, making it very open, while the square footage rule applies only to interior space.' Rabines remarked: 'We may have interpreted the code a bit liberally in our favour.' But in his own defence he added: 'The inspectors didn't challenge a thing. We certainly didn't impact on the canyon in any way that the original house hadn't.'

The architects have deftly managed to double the usable floor space while strictly adhering to the permitted interior square footage required by the codes and local building ordinances. With 1,400 sq ft of interior space, the house hardly qualifies as enormous. But then it's not tiny either.

In spite of its incredible growth in the last several decades, San Diego and its surrounding communities seem exceptionally aware of the environment. It often seems that building codes are designed as much to protect the remaining open and green spaces and their many species of wildlife and plants as it is to protect against unsafe building practices, fires and earthquakes. This approach to development has led more or less to the creation of official sanctuaries for wild animals, birds and plants scattered throughout one of the country's largest and most populous cities. It has been suggested that the presence of the city's world-famous zoo and precedent-setting Wild >>>





Animal Park with its successful breeding programmes to re-introduce endangered species has done much to raise the environmental awareness of San Diegans. The owners of the Tree House and their architects have created their own Wild Animal Park in the middle of the city.

Because the architects could rebuild, but not increase the square footage or the footprint of the new house on the site, it proved to be quite a challenge. Safdie noted proudly: 'One of the ways in which we were able to make a more expansive space was to make it into both an indoor and outdoor house. The actual usable space is almost double that of the interior when considered as a whole.' What they have achieved is a design that accommodates a new lifestyle and is much more modern and simple. One's first impression of the house is that it is indeed a tree house and fits perfectly into the wooded canyon. The design, while not actually supported by the trees is so well integrated and an integral part of the forest that it may as well be a tree house, perched as it is in the eucalyptus canopy.

By taking advantage of the natural vertical nature of the project, the architects designed what amounts to a three-story structure that violates neither the letter nor the spirit of the strictly enforced building codes. 'We took advantage of everything we could,' admitted Rabines. Placing it high in the treetops and using lots of outdoor decks and spaces and even making the roof usable space for enjoying the outdoors gives the house a generous quality, while at the same time maintaining its cosiness. It's perfect

for entertaining large numbers of people in San Diego's famously beautiful weather. This is important because the owners are renowned for their annual Easter party when as many as 150 to 200 guests circulate through the interior and exterior spaces. The exceptional use of all available floor space and volumes means that even with this many people in and on the house, it easily accommodates them. Guests spill out onto the rooftop deck, yet another space to experience the suspension amid the trees. The house has yet to feel jammed full.

Deer no longer live in the canyon, so packs of coyotes and families of skunks reign supreme, making their presence known with their singing to the moon or the not-so-gentle scents that waft on the evening breeze when a black-and-white striped 'pussycat' takes offence to an insult and fights back with overwhelming olfactory force. 'We live on the canyon and we love the sound of the coyotes singing at night,' said the husband. 'But we could do without the skunks, thank you very much,' added the wife quickly.

One of the main successes of the house has been that it gives you a sense that you are actually in the trees. 'We really wanted to achieve a feeling of floating in the trees over the canyon,' said Safdie. From this bird's eye view, they have achieved their goal remarkably well. ●

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In this tree-top eyrie,  
the giant macaw is  
truly the Empress is  
of all she surveys.