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2006 LEADERSHIP AWARDS

## rising star: taal safdie and ricardo rabines

whatever they set their sights on, safdie rabines treats the site with utmost sensitivity.

By [Meghan Drueding](#)

### RISING STAR: TAAL SAFDIE AND RICARDO RABINES

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Spaces that must have four walls and a ceiling don't deter them—they just use pocket or accordion doors to achieve the effect of being outside.

Even their office building, a former residence built in the 1920s, features a lush garden and patio out back for company barbecues and al fresco coffee breaks. Rabines created it himself; he and Safdie dream of someday bringing landscape architecture in-house.

**design education** Rabines has enjoyed the benefits of a warm climate for most of his life. Born and raised in Peru, he attended architecture school at Universidad Ricardo Palma in Lima. One of his professors and eventual employers, the architect Juvenal Baracco, encouraged him to pursue further studies at the University of Pennsylvania. There Rabines met another mentor, Adèle Naudé Santos, FAIA, and Safdie, his future wife.

Safdie grew up in Montreal, spending several years of her childhood living in Habitat '67, the groundbreaking apartment complex designed by her father, Moshe Safdie, FRAIC, FAIA. "It was a really great place to live," she says. "You're surrounded by water, you have terraces, views, light, air. It's wild-looking and sculptural." During her senior year at Vassar College she decided to go to architecture school, choosing Penn partly because of the legacy of Louis Kahn, for whom her father had worked in the early 1960s.

After graduate school, Safdie and Rabines married. Both worked for well-known firms—Safdie in New York City for Pei Cobb Freed & Partners and Kohn Pedersen Fox Architects, Rabines for Santos' firm in Philadelphia and Davis Brody & Associates (now Davis Brody Bond) in New York City. The pair moonlighted on a few small projects together and realized their divergent working styles complemented one another. "Taal is an early [-morning] person, I am more of a late person," Rabines says. "One of us has more emphasis on certain parts than the other. For example, Taal is much more detail-oriented than I am. I rely on her for that and she relies on me [for] different things." The couple moved across the country in 1990 when Santos, tapped to head the newly formed architecture school at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), moved her practice to the area.

But the school folded after a few years, and though Santos went north to UC Berkeley and relocated her firm to the San Francisco Bay Area, new parents Safdie and Rabines decided to stay in San Diego and start their own firm. "I never had any doubts they'd work it out together," says Santos, a self-described "informal family member" to the couple who now serves as dean of MIT's School of Architecture and Planning. "They can take a really difficult site and are smart enough to figure out what to do with it."



**bridge to the future** Like most young firms, Safdie Rabines started with small residential projects. A pedestrian bridge at UCSD, for which Santos had suggested Safdie, helped the architects diversify their repertoire. They aspired to eventually achieve a consistent mix of residential and institutional work, but it's a goal they've met already with a current 50/50 split between the two project types. Small additions and remodels turned into new houses and major redos, and the little bridge led to bigger bridges, often done in partnership with engineering firms. All the while, Safdie Rabines was hiring more people and expanding its office building down into its canyonside setting.

The firm teamed with Moshe Safdie and Associates in 1998 to design UCSD's Eleanor Roosevelt College—an \$80 million, 455,000-square-foot mixed-use complex encompassing dorms, a dining hall, offices, computer labs, meeting areas, and parking facilities. The project felt pivotal to Safdie and Rabines, who were eager to prove they could handle large-scale public work. "It was good to wait until our firm had established itself before working with my dad," Safdie says of the partnership. "That way we weren't just learning from him—we were also contributing." Though the commission was a coup for Safdie Rabines, its considerable scope also put unprecedented pressure on the firm. "Especially when we first started with my dad at USCD, I felt like I couldn't breathe," she recalls. "It was fun, but I felt like I couldn't do all of it and have a family too."

It turns out they could rise to the challenge, though, and they continue to do so. Safdie and Rabines entrust their capable staff with plenty of responsibility, which keeps employees happy and the couple sane. They don't bring design work home with them, because "it's not fair to the kids," Rabines says. And they try to take a couple of family vacations a year, no matter how busy things get.

But their seeming mastery of the live/work conundrum doesn't mean they limit themselves professionally. They're currently finishing up buildings as diverse as The Cairo, a 16-unit condo building in San Diego's Hillcrest neighborhood; a San Diego police station; and a 10,000-square-foot house in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. Work in the design phase includes the Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook in Culver City, Calif.; a student center at UCLA; the Robert Paine Scripps Forum at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UCSD; a structural engineering building, also at UCSD, in conjunction with The Miller/Hull Partnership in Seattle; and various houses and small-scale condo projects. Winning the UCLA and Baldwin Hills commissions over L.A.'s deep talent pool signified a particularly big turning point for the firm. "We went crazy when the phone call arrived," Safdie says of the moment they learned they'd won the UCLA job.

No matter what the project type, the firm always has the same ultimate objective. "We try to respond to the site and the client's needs in a way that makes the project unique," Safdie says. Some of their buildings—especially the houses—perch delicately on the land, while others (like The Cairo, whose developer, John Bertsch, calls it "a voluptuous building") possess a curvy, appealing muscularity. "They have a great sense of how a building relates to its site and neighbors," says Craig Curtis, AIA, one of the Miller/Hull partners working with Safdie Rabines on the UCSD engineering building.

Indeed, Safdie and Rabines' work never appears showoff-y or trendy, and that sense of restraint may be the architectural quality they value the most. "We want to do things that are very elegant and timeless," Rabines explains. "That is one of those things I constantly think is lacking in architecture—there are a lot of nice-looking things but not a lot of elegance. It could be very calm or refined or simple. It could have a very low budget and still be elegant in a way. If we accomplish that, I am pleased."