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Walking the Line

A Narrow Lot Gives Way to Luminous Spaces in Los Angeles

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"To thine own self be true" was the sound advice given by Polonius in *Hamlet*. It's sometimes easier said than done, however. The first time architect Zoltan E. Pali, a principal at the Los Angeles firm SPF:a, met client Scott Oshry, Pali was trying to sell Oshry and his young business colleagues on a new office design he thought they wanted—not something he was all that excited about building himself.

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This was back in the late 1990s, the salad days of the New Economy, when it seemed as if every enterprising 20-something in America was starting a company, taking it online and, before the wheels of their Aeron chairs had even worn a groove in the carpet, calling in designers to remodel their work spaces in accordance with the newest dictates of cool. One of Oshry's employees, an acquaintance of the architect's, had blithely described to Pali what the company was looking for, using language more suited to discussion of an MTV video. ("He said they wanted a cool, wild, hip thing," Pali recalls.) And so he arrived at that first meeting bearing some over-the-top plans that he supposed filled the bill, given this briefest of briefs.

"At the time, my firm needed the work," Pali says of his willingness to please. "So I came to Scott and his business partner without even knowing that they, like me, were lovers of traditional modernism. And the first thing Scott asked me when I showed him my idea was, Um, where did you say you went to school?"

Oshry picks up the story from there. "I told him that in fact we were really more minimalist, that the modern-ism we loved was traditional modernism," he remembers. "And Zoltan said, That's what I do! And I said, Well, then why the hell are you showing us this?"

"After that it was all very easy," says Pali. "We understood each other."

Their kindred spirits thus revealed, architect and client embarked on a happy relationship that has most recently resulted in Oshry's house in the Bel-Air section of Los Angeles, on a steep hillside with views of the Santa Monica Mountains and the Stone Canyon Reservoir. This high above the city, one's neighbors are as likely to be hawks and coyotes as they are movie stars and music moguls. Urban stress and anomie don't get up here very often; there's too much peace and quiet for them to get any work done. When Oshry bought a plot of land near the end of a winding road, he knew that Pali was the architect to build him a house that would, in the best tradition of modernism, reflect the tranquillity of the natural surroundings while proudly declaring: This is man-made.

There was just one problem: The plot was tiny. More specifically, it was narrow, a rectangular swath of land on a hillside ledge between the street and the property above it. The entire site was smaller than most Bel-Air front lawns. It didn't take long for Pali to determine which form would serve as his motif. "Aside from the fact that I love the bar as an expression of architecture, in this case it made tremendous sense," he says. It was a supreme irony: With nature's vast expanse all around it, the residence could nevertheless be built no wider than a Manhattan town house.

Pali was undaunted. The house he designed for Oshry is a triumph of economy, a relatively small house that manages to evoke a compound, thanks mainly to the architect's decision to divide it into two discrete units connected by a bridge hovering over a central courtyard. On the north end are the main living quarters, comprising the kitchen, living room, dining room, family room and master suite. At the south end is a second unit made up of guest rooms, an office, an exercise room and the garage. It's easy enough to get from one to the other by simply walking outside at ground level, past the courtyard and an isthmus of bright green lawn ("the perfect size for throwing a baseball," says Pali). But here is an instance where it is advisable to take the trouble of climbing stairs. At their summit is the house's most transcendent feature: a glass corridor that pretends to be about utility but is in fact all about wonder.

"It's more than a hallway—it's a place where you can stop and think for a moment and look out, a place for contemplation," says Pali. At dawn, a person can face the northeast from within this transparent skyway and have the sensation of floating in the air, summoning the sunrise. A chair has been placed along the wall; one has the feeling that this piece of hallway furniture, unlike most, is well used.

Since both Pali and Oshry confess an allegiance to minimalism, there is an austerity underlying the beauty of the dining room, where the table, slot window and fireplace wall combine to form a study in horizontals. Adjoining it, the sparsely furnished living room, with its double-height volume, offers a dramatically vertical response. But minimalism, like most other isms, works much better as guideline than doctrine. Thus the warm touches throughout the house that rescue it from cold theory—the rich maple floors, echoed in the solid planks of the staircase; the thick limestone louvers on the east façade, individually heavy as boulders but collectively suggesting diaphanousness; and the paintings on the wall, a mixture of unusual portraits and anachronistic, antiques-store landscapes that charge the atmosphere with mystery.

Modernism has always addressed the tension between civility and daring, and a pair of elements on opposite ends of the house—architectural bookends—capture this dynamic. From the roof off the master bedroom, a long but seemingly purposeless beam extends over the deck. Pali explains that it was designed to hold a yet-to-be-installed outdoor curtain; when drawn, it will provide a degree of privacy for Oshry and guests using the deck, which is directly below the neighbors' house farther up the hill. When pulled back, however, the neighbors' equally majestic view will remain unobstructed, a goodwill gesture that can't go unnoticed. Way over on the other side of the house, Pali guides a visitor to a narrow balcony off a guest room. The aluminum grillwork beneath one's feet doesn't look nearly as sturdy as it is; stepping onto its delicate lattice requires an act of faith.

"The grillwork was a good solution, drainage-wise, but step out onto this, and it's also kind of neat to have to think a little bit," he says, smiling mischievously. "You can see all the way down to the ground below you. There's a brief moment of disorientation." Standing on the balcony, looking not unlike the captain on the prow of his ship, Zoltan E. Pali takes in the impressive view. He's right. Beauty, serenity, tranquillity—they're all worthy architectural goals. But it's also kind of neat to have to think a little bit.

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