



NEW EDITION

ARCHITECTURE: SPF:A TEXT: MICHAEL WEBB
PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN LINDEN AND ROLAND HALBE

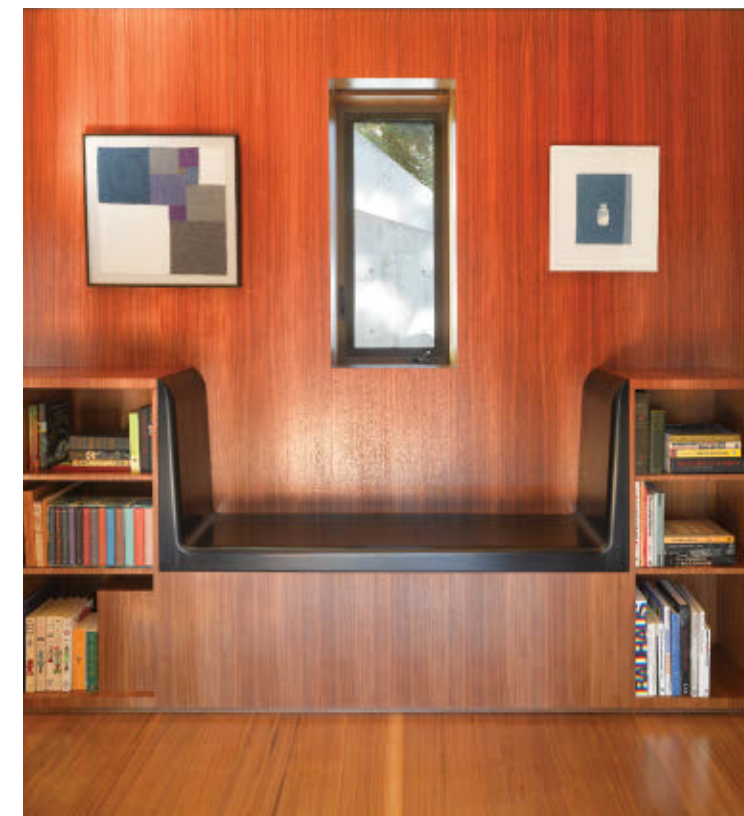


Southern California in the 1920s was a fruitful time for residential architects, who enjoyed a steady flow of commissions, an abundance of inexpensive building sites and untrammelled freedom to create whatever the client desired. Few seized the opportunities more eagerly than Wallace Neff (1895–1982), a virtuoso of Spanish Colonial Revival. He grew up in a Pasadena mansion, had Beaux Arts training at MIT under the renowned Ralph Adams Cram, and made his reputation with Pickfair, the now-vanished home of actors Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks in Beverly Hills. In 1926, he built the Petrifils house on a hillside in Los Feliz, and in 1929, when the second story was destroyed in a fire, he returned to remodel the first floor.

Little changed over the next eight decades until Margaret Morgan and Wesley Phoa, an Australian couple with a teenage daughter, bought this period jewel and decided they needed a little more space, notably a library for their large book collection. He's a mathematician, she is an artist and they commissioned SPF:a to create a balance of precision and craft, enriching Neff's work with bold additions that he might have applauded were he living today.

The Morgan Phoa library and residence is another triumph for the firm that Zoltan Pali and Judit Fekete established in 1990. Best known for their inventive modern houses and offices, they earlier restored the Pantages Theater in Hollywood and remodeled the Beverly Hills Post Office to serve as the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. Working with historical consultant Matt Dillhoefer, SPF:a developed several alternative schemes for approval by the Office of Historic Resources, which supervises changes to listed buildings.

Taking their cues from the picturesque massing of the residence and its axial plan, they placed the library over a capacious new garage, extending along the north side of the entry court at right angles to the house. The two levels are linked with a perforated screen of bronze anodized aluminum, water-jet cut in a pattern inspired by Neff's concrete window grilles, and crowned with a pitched roof of the same red clay tiles. Shutters swing open and the screen casts a constantly shifting pattern of shadows across the interior while baffling sunlight. The effect is similar to that of the moucharabies that the Moors brought to Spain and were then exported to the New World. At night the whole building becomes a fretted lantern; by day it serves as a visual link between the guest house and residence. A similar, freestanding screen behind the house flanks the new pool, which is rimmed in patterned tiles salvaged from George Washington Smith's Jackling House.



A wooden staircase leads up between walls of Venetian plaster to the walnut-paneled library, which incorporates a reading room, sitting area and a full bathroom concealed within the core of bookstacks. From here, you can look back to massive concrete retaining walls and vistas of mountains to the north and the city to the south.

The architects made an equally inspired intervention within the north side of the house, sweeping away the ill-considered improvements of a former owner, while opening up the kitchen and family room to the pool. The flat ceiling has been replaced with a cross vault of white plaster that is modeled in light and amplifies Neff's signature arches. This luminous canopy plays off the original quarry tiles and complements the formality of the heavily beamed dining room. Simple sofas and polished-wood furniture maintain the period flavor of the house as successfully as do the modern furnishings in the library, which include a Reid sofa paired with U-Turn chairs and a Saarinen table surrounded by Eames chairs, all from Design Within Reach. The fortunate owners can alternate between two eras, a few steps apart. ■

SPF:a, 310 558 0902, spfa.com

