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Warm welcome: Sunlight dapples the limestone entrance of a home in Northern California.

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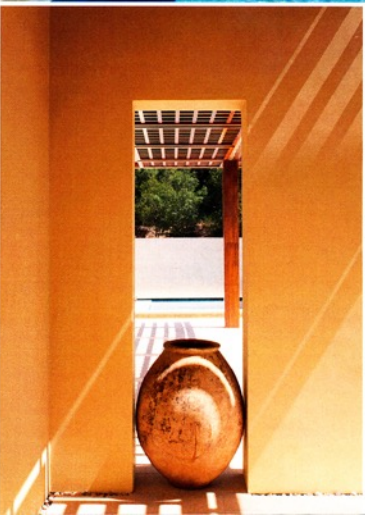
CROSSING BORDERS

Combining bold horizontal volumes and serene earth tones, architects Howard J. Backen and Loren Kroeger adapt Mexican modernism for a Northern California house offering seamless indoor-outdoor living

TEXT BY PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER DAVIES PRODUCED BY HOWARD CHRISTIAN

Vintage Michael Taylor-designed sofas anchor the living room of the Woodside, California, residence of Anne and Edward Storm, which was conceived by Backen, Gillam & Kroeger Architects, with interiors by April Powers and landscaping by Andrea Cochran Landscape Architecture. The fireplace wall is lined with Texas shell stone. The floor lamps are by Chakib Richani, and the sisal is by Restoration Hardware. For details see Sources.





Finding love again can be a golden opportunity—a chance to avoid past missteps, to explore new possibilities, and in the case of Anne and Edward Storm, to plan entirely fresh, forward-looking surroundings.

“Modernism is all about the future,” says Edward, a commercial real-estate developer, as he talks about the rigorous yet inviting residence he and his wife, an English professor, commissioned six years ago in Woodside, California, shortly after they wed. “The same is true of our relationship.”

Set on four rolling parklike acres punctuated with magnificent live oaks, the two-bedroom house the couple built for their life together—previous marriages and child-rearing behind them—is a retreat where golden light meets silver shadows, and solid surfaces give way to liquid accents. The creative team that Edward and Anne turned to, Howard J. Backen and Loren Kroeger, principals of Backen, Gillam & Kroeger Architects, was loosely inspired by the clients’ love of Mexico (they married in the Mexican highlands) and their admiration for the modernists Luis Barragán and Ricardo Legorreta, masters of sharply geometric houses that embrace their natural settings. For the Woodside project, Backen and Kroeger took into account the property’s geographical features, namely staggering views of the forested Santa Cruz Mountains.

“Where you are matters,” remarks Backen, a contextualist who is something of a Northern California stylist, especially to the winemaking elite of Napa Valley. His firm’s client list includes actor Robert Redford, film producer Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Bill Harlan, the owner of the Napa Valley Reserve, a private wine estate executed in the sophisticated rural vernacular that is Backen’s signature—an aesthetic that will be on glorious view in a Rizzoli book about the architect’s work being published next fall. →

Clockwise from top left: A gnarled wood side table accompanies a vintage Michael Taylor sofa in the living room, where the floor is paved with limestone. With its sliding glass walls tucked away, the living room melds with the terrace; the chaise longues have cushions covered in a Sunbrella fabric. Off the living room, a wood brise-soleil shades a seating area furnished with armchairs and ottomans by Restoration Hardware. An 18th-century French ceramic vessel is displayed in a slot between the porch and the living room terrace. Pivoting teak doors mark the main entrance of the house; the window at far left offers a glimpse of the dining room.

Going modern—albeit a sensuous brand of modern—is somewhat unusual in Woodside, a pastoral community some 30 miles south of San Francisco, where Silicon Valley tech stars mingle with patrician equestrians. Although the Storms are drawn to buildings with a sculptural presence, they wanted their home to be unmistakably welcoming. “Barragán can be a little monastic, and Legorreta’s work is a little bunkerish,” Anne allows. “We like the feeling of structure and geometry but wanted something warmer.”

Where the midcentury Mexican modernists often employed planes painted in eye-popping primary colors, Backen and Kroeger utilized neutral hues and earthy materials: floors of parchment-color limestone, doors made of polished teak, and walls variously composed of stone, wood, and creamy Venetian plaster. Interior designer April Powers—she worked at Backen, Gillam & Kroeger before striking out on her own in 2009—created a complementary furnishing scheme. In the living room vintage Michael Taylor sofas clad in ivory monk’s cloth seem to blend into a wall tiled with Texas shell stone, while the dining room’s natural wicker chairs surround a table whose cast-concrete base appears as if it grew out of the limestone floor. The few works of art on display conform to the natural palette as well, such as a sepiatone collage by Joan Brown in the master bedroom.

Light and shadow are major players in Backen and Kroeger’s architectural plans, echoing the lessons of Barragán, who once observed that all mammals need a bit of protection from the sun. Gridded wood brise-soleils that emerge from the rooflines of the master bedroom and living room cast checkerboard patterns onto and inside the building, and rectilinear slots in the interior and exterior walls coax shafts of sunlight deep into the simply decorated rooms. As Backen explains, “The light animates the stone, which can seem cold.” Another enlivening element is the house’s interaction with its verdant acreage. Floor-to-ceiling glass doors—most of



Clockwise from top left: London plane trees shade the poolside dining area; the director’s chairs are by Janus et Cie, and the tables were custom made by Buddy Rhodes Concrete Products. In the dining room, a Michael Taylor Designs table is grouped with vintage Wicker Works rattan chairs. Bulthaup cabinetry outfits the kitchen, which features a Gaggeneau cooktop and ovens; the light fixture and slipcovered bar stools were custom designed by Powers. The kitchen opens onto a terrace arranged for dining.

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them 11 feet tall—slide into wall pockets to open the house to blue sky, billowing trees, and rustling terraces. Limestone floors extend outward to become terraces for dining, living, and relaxing, fusing the natural and man-made environments.

“Howard’s houses have such a respect for California, but they never tiptoe around,” Edward observes. Particularly bold is the main entrance. At the end of a long stone walk, cantilevered stairs ascend to broad stepping-stones that cross a pool of water and lead to a sun-dappled porch with monumental teak doors. Water reappears on the porch, filling a basin set flush with the floor. It also courses into a wide channel that skirts the living room’s grand L-shaped terrace and cascades into the sparkling infinity pool—the water feature that happens to be the favorite of the couple’s seven grandchildren.

The constant presence of water gives the Storms’ residence an ethereal quality, as if it were floating on a pond. That feeling increases during the winter, when a pearly mist rises off the swimming pool, and the landscape, seen from the comfort of an armchair, grows more stark as the temperature drops. “You are constantly stimulated by the outside elements, but there is a secure feeling,” Edward says. “You feel safely aboard.” □

Clockwise from top left: In Edward’s bath, the shower is equipped with Dornbracht fittings; garden views can be enjoyed from the cushioned bench and contiguous tub. A Boffi limestone tub with Dornbracht fittings graces Anne’s bath. The master bedroom takes in a vista of the Santa Cruz Mountains; the throw and cushions are made of a faux fur by Saico. A collage by Jean Brown overlooks the custom-made bed; a Rose Cumming silk upholsters the bed and is used for the coverlet and pillows.

