

CARPINTERIA

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Design. Build. Sustain.

BY PETER DUGRÉ • PHOTOS BY FRAN COLLIN





A powerful gust of dry wind sends crispy oak leaves skidding across the pavement of a twisting Toro Canyon Road just down the driveway from architect Barton Myers' house, a total revision of what a luxury home can be in the American Riviera. On the upper stretch of the rural foothill drive, roomy Tuscan villas—stucco walls, red-tile roofs—hide behind towering rows of eucalyptus. The homes, tributes to a different time and place, make no sense to Myers, whose residence balances pragmatism and style.

Myers' place, a regular on the pages of architectural publications as one of America's finest specimens, is fire retardant among those crunchy oak leaves, dry winds, and constant threats of an inferno. Visually the minimalist design scores points with sheer angles and a metallic gloss that so starkly contrast the rolling hillside.

He calls the more typical foothill homes "terrible Tuscans." His place isn't austere; it's smart. The genteel 79-year-old architect, a professor and developer, has logged decades in the field redesigning urban centers, building theaters, museums and homes, and in the classroom thinking about architecture's important role in society.

"I think it should be a requirement that everyone take some sort of architecture appreciation course," he says. The home exhibits Myers' school of thought, which considers context, circumstance, and conditions as central to design. "It's looking at a place and trying to understand its context. If architects appreciated the context, their architecture would be better," he says.

More than one lizard has roamed freely into Myers' home since it was built in 1998. The glass and steel walls



OPPOSITE PAGE, architect Barton Myers received his Master of Architecture degree from the University of Pennsylvania and subsequently worked with Louis I. Kahn, one of the most influential architects of the 20th Century.

THIS PAGE, TOP, three terraces make up Myers' residence, with the main living quarters on the middle terrace.

THIS PAGE, ABOVE, steel shutters protect every opening in the Myers' home against wildfires.





are roll-up doors. Most days, there's hardly a barrier between inside and out with all the walls drawn and views overlooking the valley and then the Santa Barbara Channel and the islands.

The property contains three similar structures terraced into the hillside. A lower-level guesthouse stands below the main home on the middle section, and on the upper level is the office, to which Myers recently relocated his firm, Barton Myers Associates, from Los Angeles. Each building has a pool of circulating water on its roof. From the main house, the water on the roof of the guest house—fitted with a lane for lap swimming—gives the illusion of bringing the distant ocean into the front yard.

Liquid rooftops are more than ostentation; water is fireproof. And the walls, which when open allow the dining room to stretch onto the patio into the garden and onward to the unending views, can be fortified by a roll-down layer of steel. The steel cocoon, a 20-minute job to put in place, could withstand a wildfire until it was nearly knocking at the door and baking the structure at 700 degrees Fahrenheit.

"This is the first house that I know of, other than a concrete bunker buried, that reasonably tries to deal with living in a very dangerous area," Myers says. He laments the rebuilds after the three recent Santa Barbara area wildfires that simply resurrected residences that were torched in the first place.



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, the dining area; a rooftop reflecting pool combats fires; and Barton Myers and his wife, Victoria, in the studio, situated on the upper terrace.

THIS PAGE, TOP, like the entire home, the kitchen provides spectacular views of the ocean and surrounding area.

THIS PAGE, ABOVE, built to coexist with its natural surroundings, all structures on the property are open and take advantage of ocean breezes.



Transformable walls seem futuristic but Myers considers the overall design of his home a throwback to the California Mission era. Spanish settlers built California homes as indoor/outdoor living environments, where the garden was as important as the home itself. "I wanted to reconnect the California home to the garden," he says. Mission Era homes were very simple with big porches giving way to dirt plazas like the Presidio on Cañon Perdido in Santa Barbara.

"You lived off of what you grew," Myers says. On hillsides, he grows olives, blood oranges, cactus fruit, and grapes—strategically planted to limit the amount of fuel in case Toro Canyon lights up for the first time since the 1960s. Of the retractable walls, Myers comments that about the only life incompatible with the Santa Barbara area are houseflies and other nuisances; their absence allows a walls-optional lifestyle.

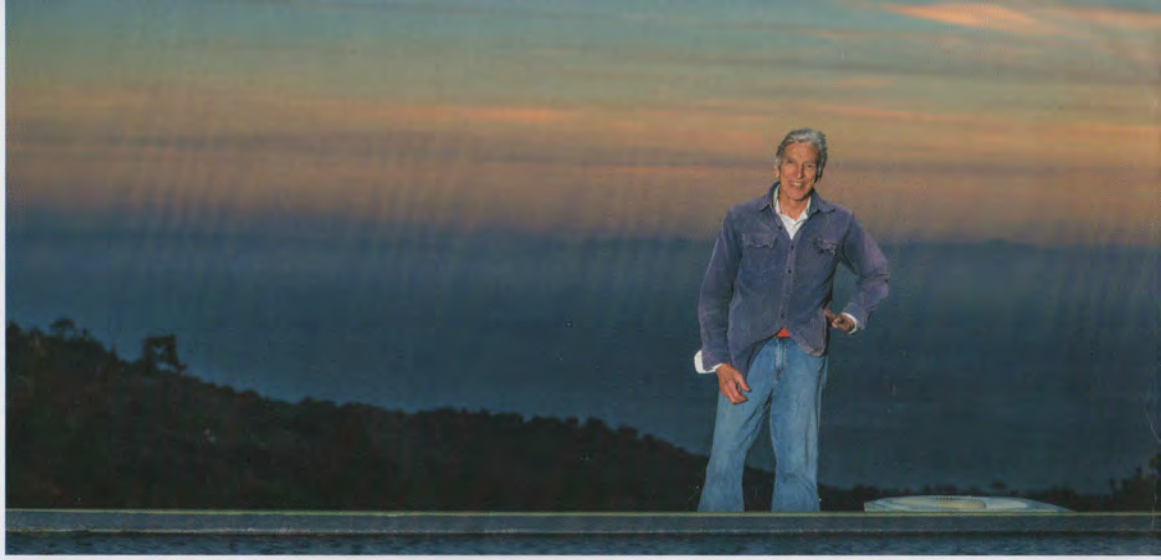
EYES ON CARPINTERIA

Although you can't see Carpinteria from Myers' home, it's evident the architect has been musing about the city that lies southeast of his view corridor. Plans laid out on the drawing table in his 10-computer onsite office contain CAD mock ups of what could be built on the Carpinteria Bluffs if he had his way. He proposed building an office and homes with million-dollar views in the empty lot next to S&S Seeds, the last undeveloped sliver of the area known as Bluffs II, but was met with an emphatically lukewarm "not now" from city officials at a November 2013 pitch meeting before the Carpinteria City Council and Planning Commission.



TOP, the garden and surrounding vegetation help stave off destruction from wildfires.

ABOVE, a shallow reflecting pool serves as fire barrier, also. The recirculating water sounds like a creek.



Decision-makers seemed more impressed by the pitchman who has a contagious way of using the word “wonderful” than with plans to erect residences at a place in the city that had historically been built with corporate offices and light industrial workplaces. At the meeting, he had said, “I live right next to you and want to build a stunning project for you.”

Councilmen came away from the meeting with an amenable attitude toward the proposal, but the consensus was that overall zoning and city visioning would have to change in order for Myers’ project, which includes seven homes and 26,000 square feet of office space, to fly.

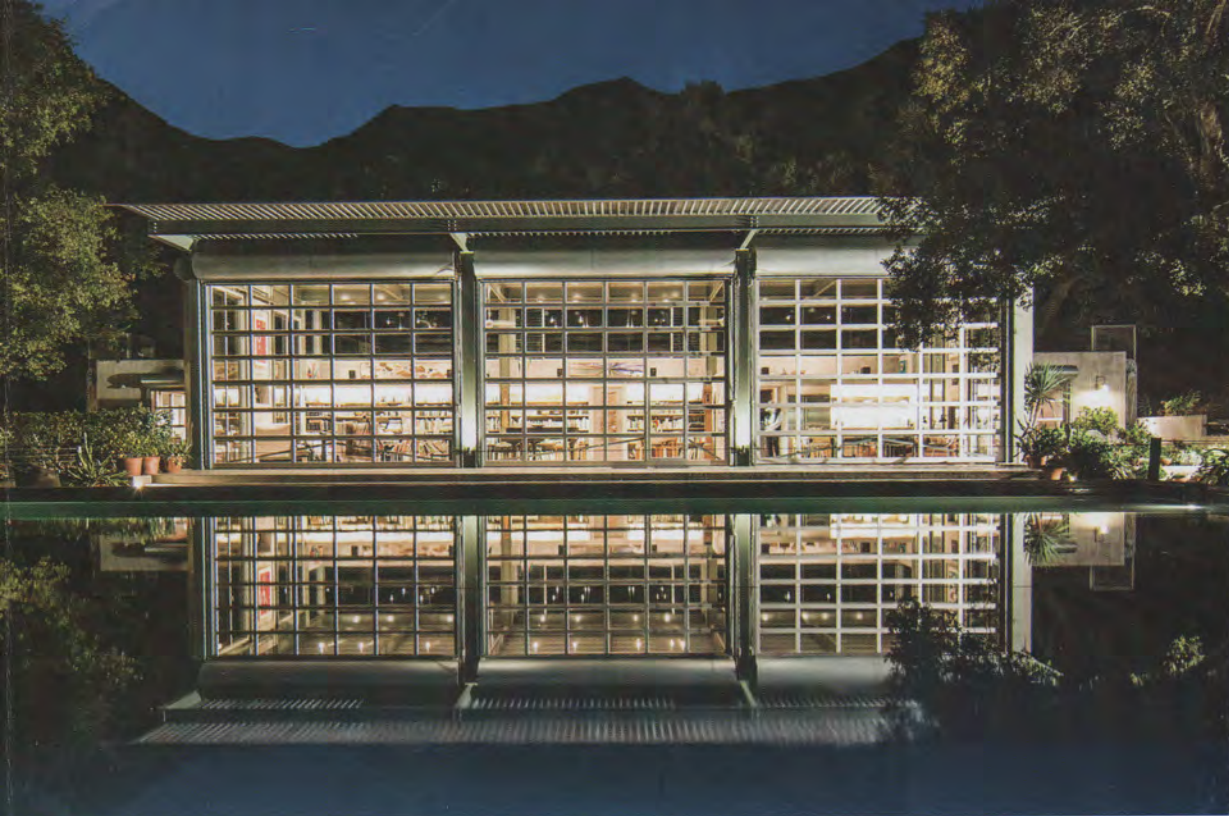
Big-time moviemaker Ivan Reitman owns the property with a business partner, and, in order to turn a buck, homes would have to be part of the deal, Myers said.

Reitman had acquired the Carpinteria parcel with an eye on building a post-production studio there and had gained approval for the design in 1998 before a multi-movie deal fell through and the Montecitan no longer needed a studio.

TOP LEFT, a pulley system opens and closes steel doors.

TOP RIGHT, in his design work, Barton Myers is committed to the connection of house to nature. In 1994 he received the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Gold Medal, and in 2002 he received the AIA/Los Angeles Gold Medal.

ABOVE, the Toro Canyon residence uses roll-down steel shutters as a defense against wildfire.



LEFT, Myers' Toro Canyon residence has been honored with several awards including the AIA PIA "Innovation in Housing Award." It also has been the subject of television programs and featured in numerous national and international publications.

Slow to no-growthers in Carpinteria consider the Bluffs hallowed ground. Myers values the space for other reasons. He talked up the live/work potential at the city meeting. Office space next to housing creates a vital environment befitting Carpinteria as a living place, Myers argued, but city planners did not buy the line of thinking that office workers would be likely candidates to occupy 2,500-square-foot houses built on a bluff top. Houses likely to start at \$1.5 million aren't workforce housing, contended councilman Fred Shaw. Myers has been scaling back the original plans to resubmit to the city for review but like other developers before him, he was dubious of the possibility to get anything built.

Still, he contends that Carpinteria's desire to retain its small beach town character matches his intent. He's the one to pull off balanced development. "As great a place as Carpinteria is, it doesn't really have the wonderful project the area deserves," he says. The Bluffs, he says, are one of the worthiest blank canvases for an architect in Southern California.

EARNING HIS STREET CRED

Born into the Navy in Norfolk, Va., Myers graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, joined the U.S. Air Force, and trained with top gun fighter pilots in the late 1950s before completing graduate work in architecture at University of Pennsylvania. His firm set up shop in Toronto in 1968 and became a big name in Canadian architectural circles. Urban redevelopment was his thing. "I've spent most of my life trying to remake cities and towns in a smarter way," he says.

He gained notoriety for a functional, student-owned housing and marketplace building, Housing Union Building, at University of Alberta in the early 1970s, a pretty radical 1,000-foot-long building, which he says

taught the students "benevolent capitalism." In 1994 he received the Gold Medal from the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and had his hands on many university, museum and theater designs in Canada.

Having been conferred professor emeritus status at UCLA, where he began teaching in 1985, Myers now delivers guest lectures, and his work still takes him all over the country. When he spoke with Carpinteria Magazine, Myers had just returned to his Toro Canyon home from a visit to Newark, N.J., where he had designed the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in the late 1990s. He earned a Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Renewal for that design.

The following day he would leave for Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he was scheduled to deliver a guest lecture in the classroom of one of his former students. He would likely hammer the importance of "regional contextualism" into students' brains. "Some architects build the same white house whether they're in Santa Barbara or Manhattan," he bemoans.

The firm is currently building Dr. Phillips Center for Performing Arts in Orlando, Fla., the largest theater building under construction in the United States. "Theaters are marvelous places. They're like meeting places nowadays," he says. Myers spent considerable time behind a podium talking down the Granada Theater when that was being redesigned in Santa Barbara. Among many other issues, he contends the balcony is too low and close to the stage and destroys the acoustics.

In his home office space, Myers has a map of the Carpinteria Bluffs. In the space where Tee-Time Driving range sits, he has a round theater drawn into the 27-acre expanse.

Next fall, UCSB's Art, Design and Architecture Museum will host a retrospective of Myers' work. ♦