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Barton Myers's ingenious rooftop pools of water cool and insulate the pavilions that comprise his home in the hills above Santa Barbara. The water also helps to protect the structures from brush fires that often beset the area.

THE BARELY POPULATED oak-covered hills above Santa Barbara have a rugged beauty, enjoy the near perfect California climate, and offer breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean. "It's paradise, but paradise with a lot of things going against you—earthquakes, mountain lions, and scorpions, to name a few," says Los Angeles architect Barton Myers, who recently completed a house for his family there. "Brush fires make it very hazardous. We knew that to live up here, we'd have to be smart about it."

To begin with, the 6,000-square-foot house in the township of Montecito is about as fireproof as they come. Made of steel, glass, and concrete, the house is actually comprised of four separate pavilions that step down a steep slope. The uppermost is Myers's 1,400-square-foot architecture studio; below sits the three-bedroom main house; farther down are a guesthouse and the garage. In a community known for Spanish colonial architecture, the structures make a rare modern statement, with a look very like urban lofts, sliced from a factory building and set in the chaparral.

The pavilions are faced with sectional, industrial glass doors that roll up under the ceiling, like garage doors. Steel shutters can be lowered over the glass doors for shade, security, and even more fire protection. Most ingenious of all,

IN THE COASTAL HILLS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, ARCHITECT BARTON MYERS BUILDS

WATER

BY WENDY MOONAN

A HOUSE THAT CELEBRATES THE ELEMENTS

SHED

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROBERT POLIDORI STYLED BY MICHAEL REYNOLDS



Myers's house can embrace nature or shut it out, thanks to walls that slide up like garage doors. Galvanized steel security panels from

“THE SITE IS SO BEAUTIFULLY FRAMED BY HILLSIDES TO THE EAST AND WEST, I REALIZED THAT MY ‘WALLS’ WERE ALREADY THERE” —BARTON MYERS

the roofs do double duty as pools, with one for swimming. The water insulates against heat in the summertime and further hinders fire.

Surrounded by groves of olive and orange trees and waving *Vetiveria* grasses, the simple structures have a poetic beauty. Made with off-the-shelf industrial materials, the house cost only \$200 per square foot. Small wonder that, in just two years, the Myers house has become a stop on the California pilgrim trail for architecture mavens.



Lawrence Roll-Up Doors, Inc., L.A., also act as fireproofing. The table on the terrace is a modified Le Corbusier design.

Myers certainly had the academic training to design memorable work. After graduating from the United States Naval Academy and serving out his commission as a jet pilot, the Norfolk, Virginia, native took up architectural studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. There he learned from and later worked for the great architect Louis I. Kahn, designer of three of the acknowledged masterpieces of brawny American modernism: the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas; the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven,

Connecticut; and the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California. Myers set up his first practice in Toronto in 1967, then moved to Los Angeles in 1985. There, he drew inspiration from the work of local architects like Rudolph Schindler and Charles Eames as he developed his own style, which he calls “a brand of modernism conditioned by Kahn, Carlo Scarpa, and Pierre Chareau.” It’s also a brand of modernism that has drawn high praise from peers and critics—for his designs of such recent civic buildings as the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark. ▷

For all its openness, the living area has a snug air. Myers decorated with an eye toward classics, from the Steinway grand piano to the sofa and cocktail table by Eileen Gray and the cane Marcel Breuer armchairs.

Myers is very traditional in some ways. He married his childhood sweetheart, Vicki, and the two have one child, Suzanne, a New York filmmaker. Vicki serves as chief financial officer of the architectural firm and head gardener at the family home. The couple looked for land in the Santa Barbara area for a long while before finding 40 pristine acres near the top of one of the highest hills in Montecito. "I was reviewing early modern houses with walls and gardens for inspiration," Myers says. "I realized that the site here is so beautifully framed by hillsides that my 'walls' were already there. I decided to do pavilions and save the trees."

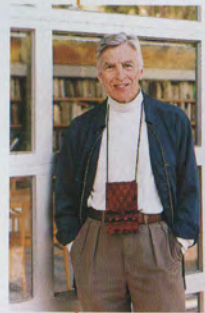
The rooftop pools were inspired by visits to the Alhambra palace in Spain and gardens in Marrakech. "Islamic gardens celebrate water," Myers says. "Once I thought about using water on the roofs, it struck me that you are always looking over these reflecting pools toward the Pacific in the distance. It's a way of connecting the site to the ocean."

In the interior, steel, glass, and cement are tempered by Tony Scherman paintings in primary colors, vintage Afghan and Turkish rugs, walls lined with books, and a mix of antiques and modern classics like Marcel Breuer cane chairs and a vintage Eileen Gray couch. A steel Duray restaurant kitchen is warmed by an early-nineteenth-century English grandfather clock, an antique Canadian pine refectory table, and a 1912 Steinway grand piano. "The house has been an amazing experience for us," Myers says. "We pinch ourselves and ask, how did this happen? It's getting harder and harder to go to L.A." >



Who is Barton Myers?

background As a sixth-generation Virginian, Myers was an unlikely bet to embrace the L.A. ambience. A member of a prominent Norfolk family, his forebears have distinguished themselves in business, politics, the military, and even arts and crafts. (One cousin, colonial New York silversmith Myer Myers, was the subject of a recent exhibition at Yale.) "Each generation contributed in its own way," says Myers. "But we're so intermarried that we're crazy. I had to get out."



influences After a stint as an Air Force pilot, Myers studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and worked with the great Louis I. Kahn, designer of several iconic buildings of American modernism. "Kahn was such an amazing teacher—he was a modernist who realized that architecture is evolutionary and you need to know something about the past," Myers says. "He brought back an understanding of materials like concrete, travertine, wood, and stainless steel."

commissions After leaving Kahn, Myers first worked in Toronto, then set up shop in L.A. in 1985. Today he oversees a staff of 30, while also serving as a professor in the UCLA school of architecture. Recent acclaimed projects include the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark and the Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts outside L.A. In Beverly Hills, Myers has designed recording studios for Madonna's Maverick label and a studio for film director Ivan Reitman.



The kitchen, right, is simple and clean. Hoffmann chairs from Thonet circle a Le Corbusier LC 6 table. The stainless-steel cabinetry is by Duray J. F. Duncan Industries, Inc., Downey, CA. The gas range is by Bosch. ■ A portrait of Myers's grandfather surveys the studio, above. Myers designed the conference table. His drafting table is lit by a Luxo lamp. Sources, see back of book.

