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Maika Monroe at  
Fernald Point.







# design for living

IT TAKES A VILLAGE  
WHEN IT COMES  
TO BUILDING  
MODERN SIMPLICITY  
IN MONTECITO



by JOAN TAPPER photographs by LISA CANDELA



**IN DESIGNING HOUSES**, as in life, making something look simple can actually be a difficult achievement, a deception that relies on talent and experience. Ask Emmy Award-winning producer Tom Thayer—a longtime collector of Houdini memorabilia—about his elegantly streamlined courtyard residence, however, and he'll insist no trickery is involved. "It's like a TV show," says Thayer. "You hire smart people, let them do what they do, and get out of the way for the most part...."

It helps, of course, if the person in charge has a clear vision of where he wants to go. A couple of years ago, when Thayer was looking for a change from his Spanish-style home in Montecito, he decided he "wanted a more contemporary house—one-story, minimal," he says.

Remembering a Thanksgiving when everyone had gathered in the kitchen or dining room, he became intrigued by the idea of an open floor plan. When he heard about a lot for sale in the hedgerow neighborhood nearby, he seized the opportunity to start anew.

Thayer turned to architect Andy Neumann—who had designed his previous house—but from the very beginning, the project was a cohesive team effort that involved Neumann's business partner Dave Mendro, general contractor Rich Coffin, job captain John Kucharski, interior designer Micholyn Brown, and landscape architect Jeffrey Gordon Smith. "Tom came up with a plan he liked," says Neumann, "basically an H shape with a big room. It was a starting point." They took into account the building site and Thayer's lifestyle, and the home's look and floor plan grew from there. "One great thing about contemporary architecture is that you're open to possibilities," Neumann says. "The design is a process of discovery."

What resulted was a house of about 3,200 square feet with 14-foot-high ceilings in the great room—a small house that "lives big," in Brown's words. Oversize custom glass doors swing or slide open for true indoor-outdoor living. Heightening visual interest is the mix of exterior surfaces—stained shingles, rugged board-formed concrete, and copper panels. "The concrete is a nice counterpoint to the more polished materials," notes Neumann. "It adds energy to the design."

On one end of the kitchen/dining area/living room is the master suite and a child's bedroom; the opposite wing includes the entry hall, another bedroom suite, and the garage. In place of a large elaborate floor plan, says Mendro, Thayer wanted something more elemental. "We went back to basics. It has everything essential for modern living, but it also has a Zen-like simplicity."

Thanks to early planning, meetings, and close collaboration ("a lovefest" Neumann calls it), construction went fast—an astonishing six months. It helped that everyone was local. And Coffin notes that working with the team as the design was developing made it easier to understand and fulfill what they were trying to accomplish. "Before we put a shovel in the ground," he says, "I knew we'd have to start building the doors." That was risky, since in constructing a contemporary house, precision is key. "But Architectural Millwork created shop drawings and came through in a big way."

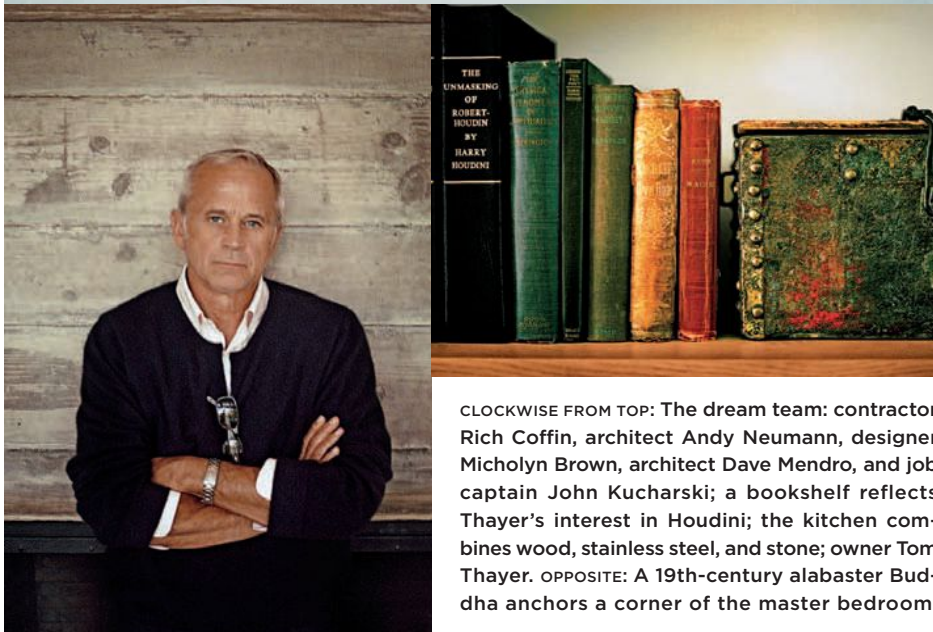
Thayer had seen a kitchen he liked in a Boffi showroom, and its sleek sculptural design—from gray stone countertops to stainless steel cabinets and an ultramodern hood—creates the focal point

OPPOSITE: Contrasts abound, indoors and out. The custom walnut dining table balances the rugged board-formed concrete fireplace, while a flower arrangement hints at patio greenery. PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT: High spirits bubble up in Thayer's daughter with a leap across the reflecting pond; glass doors open to unite the elegantly simple courtyard with the interior.









CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The dream team: contractor Rich Coffin, architect Andy Neumann, designer Micholyn Brown, architect Dave Mendro, and job captain John Kucharski; a bookshelf reflects Thayer's interest in Houdini; the kitchen combines wood, stainless steel, and stone; owner Tom Thayer. OPPOSITE: A 19th-century alabaster Buddha anchors a corner of the master bedroom.



for one end of the great room. A concrete fireplace in the center of the back wall also commands attention. Interior designer Brown took decorative cues from both, using gray-washed oak floors throughout the house and incorporating a palette of soft grays and wood tones to show off Thayer's artwork, books, family photos, and mementos. "Even though it's contemporary, the house is very warm," she says. "The place is designed not to be a showplace but personal." The furnishings are a mix of longtime possessions—like Thayer's Persian rug, two backless couches that Brown recovered, and a large wood and gilt Burmese Buddha from the early 1900s—and new pieces, such as the custom walnut dining table and two inviting French-style club chairs.

The master suite features a desk made for Thayer years ago, an antique Handel lamp, and several other serene Buddhas. "I've collected them for years," says Thayer. "I happen to like the simplicity of their faces and images." Overall, the look reflects his desire to "have less stuff." The watchword became: "Everything in the house has to earn its way in."

The master bath is stunningly simple. A hidden skylight illuminates the floor-to-ceiling mottled gray limestone walls of the open shower that are complimented by a dove-colored Caesarstone countertop and a gleaming unornamented tub.

On every side, the views embrace the gardens—a geometric arrangement of two fountain pools, sedges, turf, and an olive tree in front; or artfully placed mat rushes and reeds around the patio in back. "It's an efficient floor plan and a house we can all relate to," says Neumann. "It's easy to make a dramatic house, but after that, you have to live in it day-to-day."

Indeed, the house is a spot-on match for Thayer's taste in art and design, says Mendro, "and it finds a balance between intimacy and a large group." With no sleight of hand, the home fits one person or 100. "The house is both relaxed and sophisticated," says Brown. "You can be barefoot or in a tuxedo." ■











Streamlined elegance defines the master bath, where the gray limestone walls and floor envelop a freestanding tub. OPPOSITE: Subtle hues and varied textures add interest to the courtyard, where a gravel bed edged by senicio and wild rye sets off the gnarled trunk of an olive tree.

