ART INVENTION HOUSE

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Rizzoli

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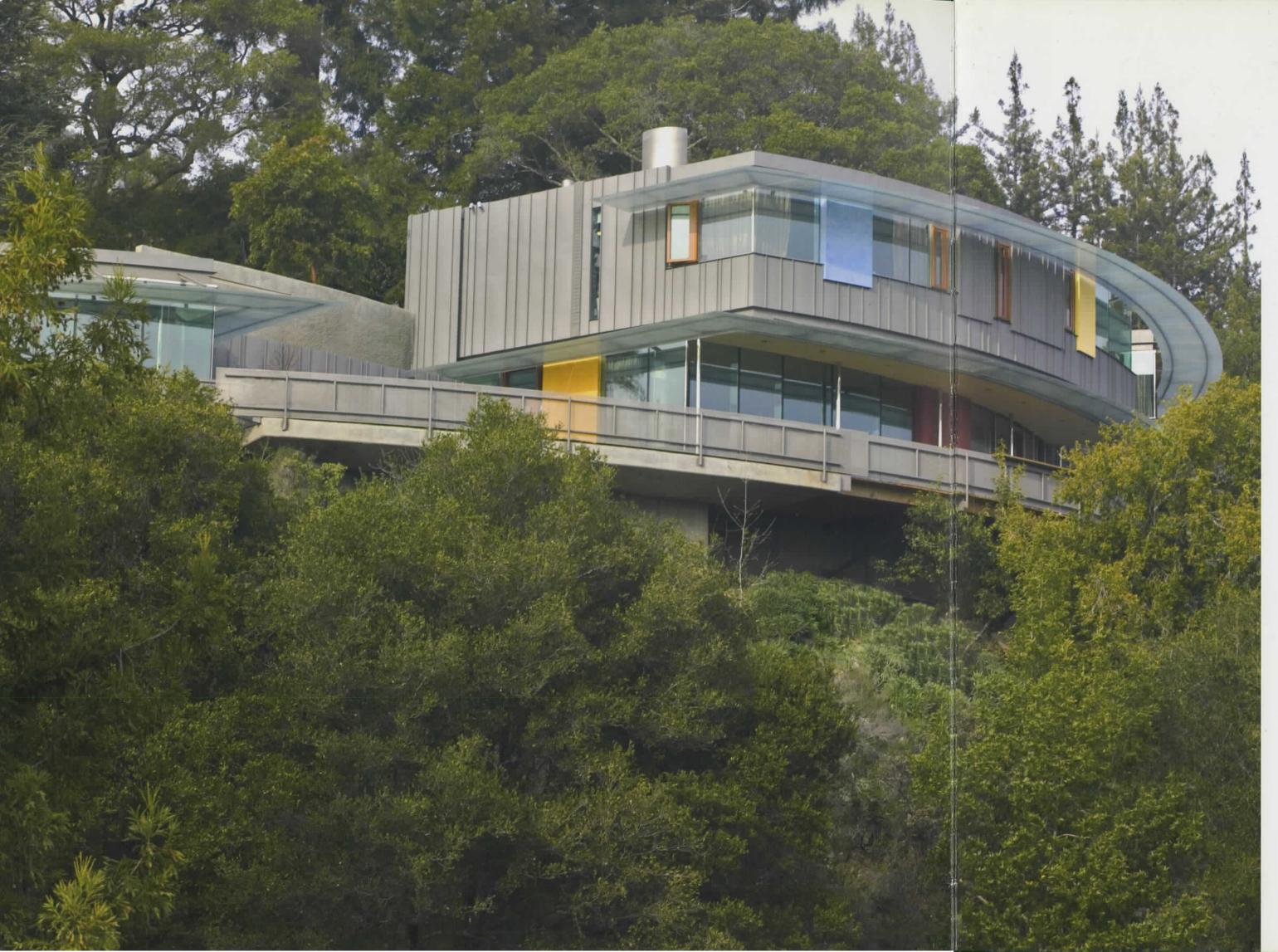
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WILL BRUDER ARCHITECTS SKY ARC HOUSE MARIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

The San Francisco Bay Area is a hotbed of liberalism in politics, but freedom of architectural expression is constrained the minute you step outside your own front door, especially in Marin County. This project had everything going for it: a passionate client, an architect who respects context and knows his Esherick and Maybeck, plus landscaping by Lawrence Halprin, who lives down the street. Will Bruder and project architect Ben Nesbeitt immersed themselves in the site and the owners' lives, and designed a house that hugs the contours and recedes into the shadows of oaks and madronas. That didn't stop the county or the homeowners' association from fighting to block construction - until the planning commissioner declared, "This is what every hillside house should be," and granted a permit.

Bruder, an art major who moved from Wisconsin to Arizona to apprentice with Paolo Soleri on his visionary Arcosanti project, opened his office near Phoenix in 1974, and became a mentor to other aspiring architects. Form-giving, materiality, and the manipulation of light are the hallmarks of his public buildings, and still more of his tough, boldly sculptured houses. Each is a departure from the last, and represents a commitment to the client and the community.

This commission came by chance. A software inventor sold his company to Microsoft and decided to move to Marin with his wife, a graphic designer. He remembered the house Bruder designed for his cousin in Phoenix, twenty years before, and chose him to create a reticent but enduring 4,600-square-foot residence where they could raise their children and welcome grandchildren. They met in Seattle, toured modern houses in Los Angeles, and spent time on the site — a double lot spanning a shared driveway. Bruder decided immediately that the decrepit 1950s house would be cleared from the gently sloping ground to the left of the drive to create a play area, and the new residence would step down the steep slope to the right. The owner remembers him calling to say, "I got up at 3 last night and designed your house."

The crescent plan echoes the swelling of the hill and jogs to save mature trees. The original plan included a separate guest house, but this seemed too bulky and was dropped. Halprin created a woodland garden with a granite fire pit made from fragments of the hearth in the old house. As importantly, "he was involved in site strategy and the way of living in that place, to

achieve a seamless engagement of landscaping and architecture," Nesbeitt explains. From the drive you see only the garage, a recessed guest wing, and a canopied entry tucked in between. Two children's bedrooms are concealed behind the garage. A skylit staircase leads down from the entry to a great room, which opens onto a cantilevered wood deck and is flanked by the master bedroom, and a studio for the wife on the far side of a grassy court. All these rooms open up to sweeping vistas of the Bay and the Richmond bridge, Mount Diablo, and Talmais, or intimate close-ups of the hillside. "It's all about taking views away at the top, and giving them back below," says Bruder. He and Nesbeitt plotted each sight line and knelt on the floor to capture the viewpoint of a small child.

A few materials are used consistently throughout. Concrete poured into random formwork evokes redwood bark, and slate gray zinc with irregular standing seams also catches the watery light and shadows from the trees. Awnings of aqueous fiberglass shade both levels from easterly and southerly sun, and dematerialize in the mists like soft halos. Sections of boldly colored Venetian plaster pop out as the zinc recedes. Floors are slate or mahogany, and birch cabinetry divides the kitchen from a play area. Slender columns of polished stainless steel support ceilings that are clad with fibrous tectum — an old-fashioned material that absorbs sound but is usually concealed. Glass mullions in the bowed glass wall cast rainbows across the floor. There are few straight lines, and the architects orchestrated the curves in every detail of the furnishings and soft-toned fabrics.

A stepped tunnel gives the children fast access to the yard and the husband to his state-of-the-art recording studio. He grew up playing music, and this is a dream fulfilled. Bruder describes it as "an origami fan in a concrete box," and designed the folded plaster in the performance area and control room with acoustician Michael Blackmer to diffuse and reflect sound as the facade does with light.

