

ART BUSSE

...transforming the way you feel through inspired building design



4-Square

This house design began as an exercise in geometry. I was interested in the simplicity of the square, and its attending stasis - the way two sets of walls at right angle to each other create equal and opposite reflective forces, balancing and canceling each other, creating a stillness born of invisible tension. Life, messy and irascible, being held in place by form. And more - how one square invariably leads to replicated other squares. Once there are four squares, all and everything thereafter are immediately subsumed in the contextual uber form of The Grid, which, extending forever in all directions, lays claim to the right to define reality, vanquishing the imagination.

Scary stuff in a box. I had to find out more

I played with the idea over a number of years before going forward with it on a down slope lot at the top of the Berkeley hills overlooking the San Francisco Bay. As is often the case when working with essential design elements, the form can be brought up through detailing into any number of different architectural styles, including the many vernacular styles, without compromising the operative concept. I did it conceptually in the starkly modern, the quaintly rural,

Scandinavian summer home, Midwestern barn and a few others before deciding upon a modern take on American Southwest.

Looking down on the floor plan from above one sees one large square divided into four equal smaller squares. The two view facing squares opposite the entry are rotated 45 degrees outward, away from each other, adding more interest without losing the sense of replicated spaces. One of those four squares comprises the entry and stair atrium, with the stairs, landings and catwalks hugging the blank walls on the periphery while the center opens up and down from the roof with four square skylights to the sloping landscaped hillside captured at the bottom with a big beautiful tree filling the three level volume.

It was a little unusual and daring to assign 25% of the floor plan to an atrium space whose function was drama, nature and transportation. Once built, it was a knock-out and easily the most exciting aspect of the house. When changing floors or answering the door one essentially 'took a trip' through an enchanting space and saw the rest of the house from a number of different angles and elevations.

Walking in through the front door was a bit like Alice's fall through the rabbit hole. You opened the door carrying all your usual and unconscious expectations of some sort of entry hall and instead found yourself leaning over a railing and being 'pulled' down and into a most remarkable space. Slightly vertiginous, and the violation of expectation makes the experience of the house fresher, more immediate, and open.

The feeling on the lowest level of bedrooms, study and bath that looks back into the sloped landscaped hillside contained at the bottom of the atrium is very pleasing and natural. It feels cloistered and secluded but open and airy with light streaming down from above. This is a recapitulation of the 'tool shed' religious experience that started my design approach described elsewhere on this web site.

Overall this house has quietness, almost a stillness, to it that balances the excitement of the big San Francisco Bay view, and the steep hillside site.

P O Box 1060
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956
415-663-8575

copyright © 2007 ArtBusse.com