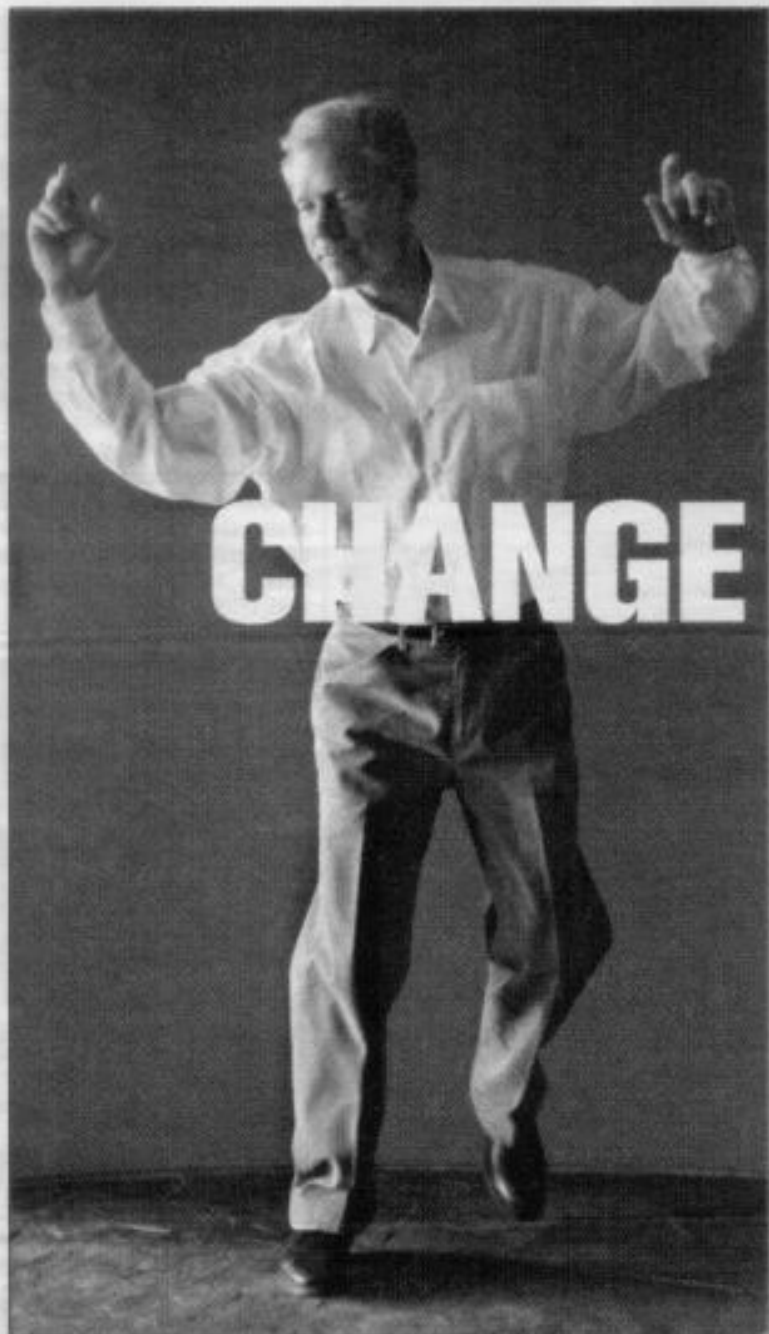


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CHANGE IS GOOD

THE CUTTING EDGE

Art Busse's Cambio



One-of-a-kind house atop the Oakland hills moves people, both emotionally and physically

By Bill Burnett

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

It's late fall of 2002, and Art Busse has been sitting for days on a rock outcropping at the top of the Oakland hills.

To his left are the last two houses he built. One is all edges and angles. The other, with its steeply pitched roof, seems to fall off the hillside.

There's room for a third house and Busse is waiting to discover what he will build. At this point, he hasn't a clue.

Suddenly, Busse explodes into motion. He strikes what only can be described as a modern dance pose — a foot rooted firmly to the earth, but the rest of him moving off every which way. With this gesture, the house he'll call Cambio (Spanish for "change") is conceived.

For Busse, 55, the creative process is, well, creative. "The first thing to do is acquire the land. Then I spend a lot of time on the site by myself, letting it speak to me. At some point, it sets me in motion. The site itself produces a gesture, and that's what the house becomes.

"Cambio is an expression of change and motion. If

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Moved to motion: Architect and builder Art Busse demonstrates the gesture that led to Cambio, his latest house. At right, the main entry leads to the dining and gathering area, with floor-to-ceiling windows and slate floor.

Photo by MIKE KEPRA / The Chronicle



MIKE KOPPA / The Chronicle

Cambio, left, is Art Busse's latest creation. It sits next to Float House, center, and Armageddon, part of which is seen at right.

House that brings art to architecture

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engenders in us the very physical sensations of movement, projection and acceleration from which the notion of change arises. This is a house meant to set lives in motion."

It's tempting to dismiss Busse and his process as Left Coast, look-at-me architecture for self-aggrandizement. That would be a big mistake.

A three-level cone

Busse, who has no formal training in architecture, has created a daring, important building that does what he meant for it to do — move us mentally, physically and spiritually.

After entering through the all-glass front door and descending the wide, curved slate stairway, the visitor is swept inexorably into a circular space that's easily 1,500 square feet.

On its two levels, the space contains a kitchen, dining and gathering areas. This all flows to another stairway that spirals down to the second level and the master suite, second bedroom, bath and laundry room.

Another short circular descent reveals a sitting area, two more bedrooms and another bath.

Cambio is built like a cone, and the pie-shaped rooms get smaller and more personal as they get closer to the earth. The farther

one descends, the more secure the feeling.

At the base of the staircase — which descends some 40 feet — Busse set a huge Tuolumne River boulder.

"We placed the boulder at the exact center of the curved point of the house. I thought of doing something with motion there, but that would be cruel. It's important and reassuring for us to know that something is stable in our lives."

Busse's favorite place in the house may well be a small light-washed space under the stairs where he has put a couple of cushions on the slate floor. "When I go there, it makes me feel like a kid again."

A builder's evolution

Busse has been designing and building out on the edge for only a few years. The first house on the Skyline site, which he calls "Armageddon," was finished in 1999. The second, "Float House," in 2001.

He's been working on Cambio for the past 24 months (6 to do all the design and engineering and get the permits, 18 to build). He lived in a trailer on site, fondly called the "crab shack," while all three were being built.

After a Princeton and Stanford education, Busse went north to work on the trans-Alaska pipeline in the early 1970s. He moved to the Bay Area from his native Chi-

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cago in 1978 and began buying and renovating fixer uppers in and around Piedmont. Before long, he was running a contracting company that employed 40 people.

"It was that go-go period at the end of the '80s," Busse recalled. "Everybody was doing second-story additions and expanding their kitchens into their backyards. It was impossible not to make money. And, it was a nice ego trip seeing a bunch of trucks around town with my name on them."

When the market cratered in the early '90s and banks started pulling credit lines, Busse decided to shutter the business rather than put up with the hassles.

He rounded up his best subcontractors and began building large houses in the Oakland fire area. "I was giving people what I thought they wanted, big Tuscan boxes"

A dangerous house

After he bought the land on Skyline, his vision began to change.

"It's nice to pay the bills, but money isn't what drives this. The motives shifted for me a couple of houses ago."

Busse calls Armageddon a "dangerous house. Its angles and geometry make it very edgy. Definitely the place for a Type A. The fact that the person who bought it sued me the day he moved in means the design was an unqualified success."

The second Skyline house was inspired by Italian architect Renzo Piano and his studio on Italy's

Mediterranean coast.

Busse named it Float House "because the house captures the hillside and allows one to float down. Also, the roof appears to float on top of the house. With lots of glass, it's a space that invites the outdoors inside, bringing a sense of calm."

Cambio, on the other hand, is not so much a house as it is an act of artistic expression.

Once Busse hit upon the guiding principle of change and motion, he was able to move ahead with the design process. He drew the plans himself.

"A lot of it happened at my sister's condo in Maui. A lot of it happened at a yoga conference in Estes Park, Colo. You can do the drawing anywhere."

Not the Guggenheim

When he went to get the permits, the first reaction of the Oakland planners was, "Oh, you're building the Guggenheim."

"Sure, this is a nod to Frank Gehry," Busse said, "but, I don't like to feel as if I'm walking around in someone else's idea. Architecture has more to do with the feelings that are induced in the person experiencing it than it has to do with the idea of the person who created it. It's more emotional than rational."

Busse has moved the crab shack from the site and has been sleeping in a room off the garage at Cambio. Soon he'll be leaving Skyline for good.

"The house says what it needs to say. Now it's time to move on to the next thing."

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Art Busse

Cambio is actually two separate buildings joined together. One is made of standard wood framing, the other of structural steel.