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GROUND CONTROL

Two design junkies move mountains—for real!—with mid-century as muse

BY ANDREW MYERS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN McINTOSH, ETHAN PINES & REINALDO SOLARES

In architecture and design, imitation too literal is less flattery than lawsuit. But for structural engineer Soheil Nakhshab, it made for inspiration resulting in a string of three houses in South Mission Hills' Spruce Canyon: one a renovated and expanded postwar modern originally designed in 1965 by San Diego architect and icon Homer Delawie, and houses two and three loosely based on that original.

Long of line, crisp in contour, stripped of ornament save luxurious building materials, a 43-year-old house is not the muse one would readily pick for Soheil, a handsome 27-year-old who knows his way around San Diego's social scene, and who with his younger brother, Nima, founded Nakhshab Development and Design in 2005. Nevertheless, the Delawie served not only as guide for the new houses' overall aesthetic, but its terraced front steps provided the solution that enabled the Nakhshabs to build on the adjacent lots. The hitch? The property's precipitous slope had been left untouched since the area's first building boom following World War II. "It had become conventional wisdom that the site, to be buildable, would need a 30-foot retaining wall," says Soheil.

But why should a little thing like tons of earth stand in his way? Soheil embraces the unconventional when addressing just these kinds of engineering conundrums. His Eureka! realization involved what he calls "natural step" construction, where the houses' different floors are built into and against the hillside, providing a buttress that reduces the physical and fiscal size of the retaining wall (Poof: it was almost halved) while increasing allowable interior square footage by more than 25 percent. "You get a lot of kickbacks because a lot of the buildings are considered basements, and shadow lines don't count as

Multi-taskers Soheil (sitting) and Nima Nakhshab confer on the patio off the living room. Nima waters desert foliage behind the custom fountain feature, which he designed and built.



part of square footage," explains Soheil, who started working in the engineering offices in North County when he was 17 years old.

Such architectural acuity was learned less through after-school or summer jobs than at his father's knee. A developer of government and high-rise residential and commercial buildings in Iran before immigrating to the United States in 1984, Sasan Nakhshab worked for the San Diego Building Department for 20 years before retiring in 2005—whereupon he came on board with his boys, bringing with him a backwards-forwards knowledge of the city's Byzantine building codes, and managing the company's consulting and design/development branches. (Mom, Mitra, who worked on the houses' interiors, completes the company as a family affair.)

Unorthodox as Soheil can be in his ability to engineer innovative building blocks, he's devout in his approach to design, as well as reverent to the iconoclastic icons who preceded him, and with whom he feels an aesthetic and philosophical kinship. Perhaps, then, it was both fate and faith that led his brother up a dead end, South Mission Hills street in 2003. "I was driving up and down streets in areas we liked, looking for sites that for whatever reason might have been overlooked or be undervalued," says Nima, who runs the company's construction projects. The empty lots at the head of Spruce Canyon, minutes from Downtown, got Nima's blood pumping, but it was the neighboring Delawie with which Soheil bonded. Sasan bonded with Bill Sigurdson, the Delawie's owner, who as luck would have it not only owned the adjacent lots, but had been trying to sell and/or develop them for 12 years, going as far as to have designs drawn up by the San Diego-based Architects Magnus.

And so a deal was struck. The Nakhshabs would renovate and expand the

Above: The third-floor master bedroom is an ocean of white shag and ipe wood (on the ceiling and the TV-storage partition separating bedroom from bathroom), and has views through the eucalyptus trees to the Pacific. **Below:** CaesarStone covers the kitchen's island, its clean lines accentuated by the wenge wood veneers and travertine floors. **Opposite page:** The staircase in the Nakhshabs' living room seemingly floats with its treads bolted into the wall.



Why let a little thing like tons of earth stand in their way? Instead, the brothers used natural step construction, where different floors are built into and against the hillside, which increased the square footage by more than 25 percent.





Delawie for Sigurdson, build one new house for a partnership that includes family members and Sigurdson, and build the other solely for themselves. Not only would the Delawie's architectural attributes—floor-to-ceiling glass windows and doors encasing flexible open-plan interiors, indoor gardens or atriums, built-in furniture, flat roofs, a fusion of indoors and out, a functional minimalism and private decks—be preserved, they would also be extended to houses two and three. Even Architects Magnus' plans for the new houses would be loosely kept. "Everything was there," says Soheil of the architects' drawings. "They simply needed to be massaged."

Changes to the Delawie original were kept to a minimum. Next to the carport, a former storage room was transformed into living space with a bathroom, kitchenette and separate entrance. In the living room, the fireplace was sanded down to bare metal, the posts and beams cleaned and repainted, and the glass and cantilevered roof left alone. The kitchen, left open to the living and dining rooms, was expanded and pushed back into a space formerly occupied by a bedroom. It now forms the heart of the new addition comprised of family room, office, laundry and bathroom, and an upstairs that includes the master bedroom and bath as well as an additional bedroom and bathroom.

In the new houses, which have similar floor plans but different facades, the Nakhshabs focused on material, finishes and detail. Woods range from ipe and wenge to walnut; countertops from Silestone to CaesarStone; stainless steel, travertine, granite and hot-rolled steel are used liberally; and living rooms in both





Above: When the living room's floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors are fully retracted, the indoor-outdoor line disappears, melding interior and exterior. **Left:** In the Delawie house, the Nakhshabs sanded the fireplace flue down to its original base metal and repainted the original beams, but left the structural elements intact. **Opposite page:** The Nakhshabs coordinated rooflines among the houses to maximize views and privacy. In the middle house, the patio off the master bedroom looks onto the interior courtyard.

homes have 18-foot retractable walls that disappear into side pockets, opening onto expansive decks with views or water features. Both homes also have solid doors; stainless steel handrails; hallways where walls of beveled glass meet seamlessly at their corners, cantilevering out toward the street and canyon; laundry rooms next to master bedrooms; and even elevators. "If you have beautiful details, you don't have to make things busy," says Soheil, looking at the architectural flashing that delineates doors in his house, used in lieu of molding that wouldn't have looked as clean and congruent.

Once finished, Delawie was brought to see the houses. Stairs and slope kept the architect curbside, but his impression? "He liked how we integrated the new houses with his original, and he liked how they all were integrated with the site," says Soheil. "I feel like a baton has been passed." ■