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Fortress of Solitude

The best small building in decades—in all its inaccessible glory



REFLECTING POOL:
The library by De Jarnett
and Kapeller, as seen
from the backyard

On the back side of an ivy-covered 1925 Tudor mansion in Hancock Park, a modest addition pushes its way out from the concrete walls. The new room, a library, is a rare piece of architecture. Wrapped almost entirely in dulled zinc sheeting, the extension appears to be extruded from a solid ingot of gray-blue metal. The 14-foot-high, 33-foot-long box is a continuous flat field divided by standing seams of varying heights, laid out like the ivory and ebony keys of a piano.

The library is so deeply restrained that it becomes a meditation on the power of the unspoken—which is fitting, since the room cannot be seen from the street and, unless you are a guest of the owner, exists more as a rumor than as a fact. The owner's wish to remain anonymous fuels the sense that the library is a figment of a Brahmin bohemianism: in other words, a work of art.

The library is the best small building to be constructed in Los Angeles in decades. No architect has come close to exhibiting such fidelity to a material—not Frank Gehry at Disney Hall, not Thom Mayne at Caltrans, not Office dA at Helios House gas station—without resorting to puncturing, bending, or deforming to coax feeling from an inert substance. The library shows that metal left alone can be utterly evocative. The pewter calm of the zinc draws you in. The little structure evokes the spirit of a “black” painting by Ad Reinhardt. The strict geometry and blank surfaces renounce the extraneous. All is silent foreground; here is pure architecture, an unrelenting commitment to the beauty of a shape any grade-schooler can sketch. Con-

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TOMES ENTOMBED: There's a deep tranquility to the book-lined vault

fronted by the shock of the near nothingness of the library, we are freed to see and experience a great building as if we'd never seen a building before.

This minimalist spirit hasn't gotten much traction lately. Encouraged by museum curators, school administrators, and wealthy home owners, architects are trampling one another in a race to see whose building can transform a lackluster institution into a great one—as if a more vertiginous cantilever or torqued steel plate could improve holdings, raise test scores, or sell more real estate. The result is too much architecture, the after-shock of Bilbao.

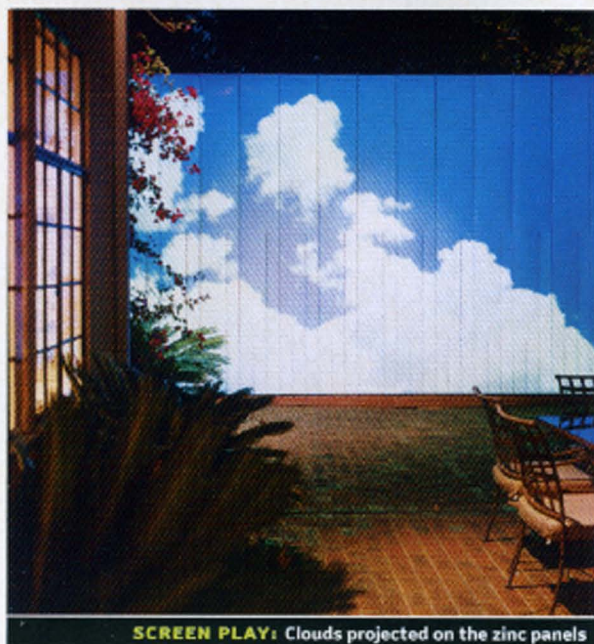
The library, designed by Los Angeles architects Mitchell De Jarnett and Christoph Kapeller, is an antidote to an overload of expressionism. Inside, the 500-square-foot library has shelving for about 10,000 to 12,000 first editions of photography, art, and architecture. When the owner, a former magazine art director turned corporate attorney, bought

the Hancock Park home, his collection was languishing in storage. He wanted to build a library that was, as he puts it, "totemic."

De Jarnett and Kapeller were found through a mutual acquaintance. At the time, the architects shared a practice (which since has dissolved). De Jarnett, who teaches at Cal Poly Pomona, is known for his innovative designs, in which distorted images are projected onto unusual surfaces (he codesigns *Zone of Transformation*, part of the state's largest public artwork, in Sacramento). Kapeller, who is on the design faculty at USC, recently completed a makeover of the architecture school's Graduate Research Center. They worked together on the *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*, the revival of the ancient Greek library in the Egyptian port city of Alexandria. In Hancock Park the pair went through 20 versions of an exterior, including several proposals for a rooftop terrace (rejected because visitors would be traipsing through the owner's bedroom to get to the upstairs patio).

The book-lined addition emerges from the living room, a gracious space traditionally furnished as one might expect in a Hancock Park home, and containing a portion of the owner's collection of recent figurative painting and photography. Unlike the stark exterior, the interior of the library extends the warm, rich language of the house, which John C. Austin, the main architect of City Hall, designed eight decades ago. As De Jarnett says, "The library balloons out of the living room." The oak floor is covered in a hand-loomed carpet, woven in strands of burgundy and reddish brown wool. A pair of mohair-plush gentleman's chairs face an equally well-upholstered taupe couch.

Natural light enters indirectly through three aluminum-framed, acid-etched windows that hug the floor along the southern wall ("Books don't like light," the owner comments). The sun's rays are filtered by large, overhanging trees that shade a narrow side yard along the south face of the house. Another window, easily overlooked, is in a corner near the mahogany-paneled passage connecting the living room to the library. That window was



SCREEN PLAY: Clouds projected on the zinc panels

moved from the spot where the doorway is now and tucked into a deep recess, allowing in only a dusky glow.

Seated in one of those plush chairs inside the library, you realize that the room is not rectangular. One of the long walls meets the far wall at an obtuse angle—four degrees off square—an eccentricity befitting a collector

of books. This forced perspective, which arose out of the need to build parallel to the property line, adds to the feeling of being entombed. But it's a pleasant exile to a cozy chamber of books.

Although the new interior is a wing of the old one, the exterior is anything but. "I didn't want to build a simulacrum of a 1925 house," says the owner, who once studied architecture at Cooper Union in New York. "There's no mistaking that this is a new structure appended to the old."

In fact, the metal library slams right into the gunite house, accentuating the distinction between old and new. Yet the little whale gray box fits in. For starters, the library, like the rest of the house, is beautifully proportioned and detailed. The height of the new roof, relative to the

length of the new building, is comfortably tall enough to have a presence but not so high as to dominate the setting. The mass has a solemn balance that suits the repose of the large house. Then there is the metal, which is the only material on the exterior of the library. The zinc panels are 20 inches wide and have three evenly spaced seams. Each seam ends



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at a different height, turning an otherwise empty, even harsh, vertical expanse into a lively surface. Because the shorter seams terminate in the middle of a panel, the metal had to be bent and folded by hand, like origami, so the flat fields could continue uninterrupted. This gives the library its handmade quality.

It isn't easy to give a sharp definition to a small structure without resorting to gewgaws or faceted surfaces or indulg-

ing in the use of contrasting materials or color schemes. The simplicity of De Jarnett and Kapeller's design—the stripping away of nearly every architectural device while imparting a radiant presence—proves that proportion and scale and a draftsman's parsimonious use of line can create great architecture.

The seams, which Kapeller at first dismissed as ornaments, bring the surface and the building to life. Sunlight plays off them, making a slow-motion animation of shadows throughout the day. Where the seams bend at

the precipice of the roof, it becomes apparent that the whole building is encased in the metal—even though you cannot see the roof from the ground. Without the raised lines, which cue the imagination to fill in the missing information, this would not be obvious. Further, the seams, and not just the four corners of the box, define the enclosure, giving it volume. They add visual tension, like the cables on a suspension bridge. Erase them, and the edges of the building would become vague and melt into their surroundings.

But the library wasn't meant to disappear altogether. It was meant to be another irreducible form set in a garden that is composed of nothing more than the essential shapes of trees and shrubs and grass. The building was designed in response to a backyard that is not landscaped, just pruned and mowed. In the center of the broad, rectangular lawn is a swimming pool the owner designed. Standing at the far end of that pool, with the library in full view, you immediately understand that the architects have taken the watery void and turned it into a metallic solid.

At night, the beauty of this composition is revealed, as pool and library fade to flatness. All is surface. Now the library becomes a silver screen—the ideal foil for the owner's collection of video art. From a kitchen window, a \$12,000 projector throws images onto the smooth library exterior. Under the glare of the pixels, the zinc assumes a ductile quality, as if it were flexible enough to be shrink-wrap. If by day the library's splendor is the blank zinc, by night it is the zinc lit up. Every display of color, shape, and movement seems possible. A video loop of clouds floating by becomes clouds floating by. The library disappears. Structure no longer exists. Just image.

The owner calls his library "the vault." What's outside is utterly unknown and undetectable; what's inside is hidden from the world. This is a lapse into romanticism—a term of opprobrium among modernists, as Kapeller notes with mild amusement. Yet he and De Jarnett have captured the essence of a library: an escape, a sanctuary to let the mind wander, a secret world apart that becomes, at night, a flatiron for the projection of *Monday Night Football* and video artist Jennifer Steinkamp's dancing trees. Who doesn't dream of that kind of space?

Confronted by the shock of the library's near nothingness, we are freed to see and experience a great building as if we'd never seen a building before.

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