

Cliff Hanger

ED NILES'S ANGULAR
AERIE ON A MALIBU BLUFF
DEFINES SPACE—
BUT BARELY ENCLOSURES IT.



The central corridor of Ed Nilan's house is walled in sliding glass doors that open it to ocean breezes and the central courtyard. Opposite: The modular steel structure is fully exposed between the master suite (at left) and living areas (at right).



Architect Ed Niles recalls the time a doctor came to his Malibu office and asked him to design a Spanish-style house. "I said, 'You've got a beautiful ocean view—why choose a style with small windows that's 500 years old? Would you operate on someone with a hacksaw?'" The doctor should have known better: Niles is a diehard modernist, known for his dramatic, site-specific glass-and-steel houses, individualistic designs that are forged through a thoughtful dialogue with clients. (Not surprisingly, one of his favorite clients was a psychiatrist well versed in a shared process of exploration.)

For his own house, Niles had only to satisfy himself and his wife, Kay. "Her ideas were essential because she

spends more time at home than I do," Niles notes. "But we both have an aversion to clutter."

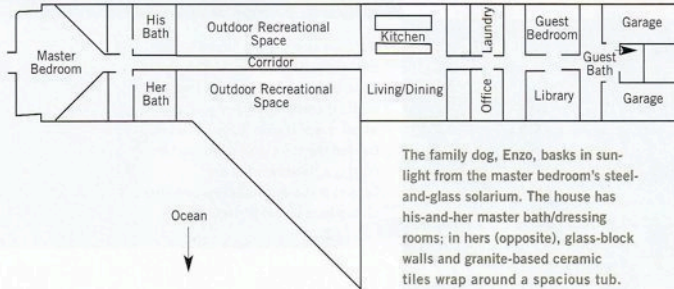
With their boldly simple geometric forms and machined surfaces, his houses seem light-years ahead of their retro brethren. Some resemble gravity-bound space stations. This one, he observes, "is like a giant container ship that ran aground": its superstructure a modular steel framework, its containers a series of double-glazed volumes, its deck a stem-to-stern sweep of granite-based ceramic tiles. Anchored on a rugged bluff above Pacific Coast Highway, the house orders space with crisp precision as it captures multiple views of the hills, the sky and the sea. "In this house you're constantly aware of the outdoors," says Kay.



A glass-roofed corridor (opposite) runs the length of the house. Le Corbusier's metal-framed leather seating complements the lofty living/dining area, where mesh shades filter sunshine. Behind the steel-clad main kitchen (left) is a "hideaway kitchen" (above) that conceals before-and-after clutter from dinner parties.

The design's spine is the long corridor that runs from living and service areas on one end to the master bedroom on the other. It's roofed in half-inch plate glass (as is the roof of part of Johnny Carson's Niles-designed house). "It's wonderful at night," says the architect, "when moonlight reflects off the steel-clad walls and shines into the hallway." In the central courtyard—a sparsely furnished outdoor living room defined by the open steel structure—the corridor all but dissolves, its walls formed by sliding-glass doors that open to cooling breezes and flanking patios.

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The family dog, Enzo, basks in sunlight from the master bedroom's steel-and-glass solarium. The house has his-and-her master bath/dressing rooms; in hers (opposite), glass-block walls and granite-based ceramic tiles wrap around a spacious tub.

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xpanses of glass and indoor/outdoor tile also blur the division between the courtyard and the kitchen and living/dining room—a box seat overlooking the Pacific's parade of sailboats, freighters and migrating whales. Beyond rise steel-clad structures that hold other high-ceilinged rooms, including a den that doubles as a guest room, Kay's office and a library (from her favorite reading chair, its well-placed window frames the surfers at Sunset Point).

The house's transparency, its pared-down materials and sleek furnishings make it seem larger than its 2,800 square feet. "The steel frame added about 15 percent to the cost," says Niles, "but has huge benefits." He cites its resistance to earthquakes and Malibu's infamous brushfires, as well

as termites, rot and warping. Cross-ventilation cools the house, making air conditioning unnecessary. Maintenance involves washing the house occasionally, "like a car," Niles says. But they don't do it themselves: Their efficient window-washers use squeegees and deionized water.

The 20-acre property runs over the ridge to adjacent state parkland—the source of the deer, bobcats and mountain lions they've spotted on their land. "People think that modernist houses embody a perfection that's hard to live with," Niles observes, "but our five grandchildren love to play here. Traditional houses insulate you from nature; this one allows us to live with it."

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