

BY ZAHID SARDAR

True Modern

Cole Valley adopts midcentury Modernism

Peter Bransten, a lawyer and descendant of a founder of MJB, a San Francisco coffee company, began to understand and love modernism only after he moved to Los Angeles and watched the construction of a building by architect Fred Fisher. "I grew up in San Francisco and was familiar with the design aesthetic of Victorians and Edwardians, but when I stumbled upon modernism, I was fascinated that houses could be much more adapted to the way people lived in the modern world."

To build his own home along the lines of the experimental Case Study houses that sprang up in Southern California during the 1950s became his dream. Flexible, lofty, light-filled interiors stripped of ornament and filled with art from his mother, Rena Bransten's gallery, became his mantra.

Architect Addison Strong divined this need soon

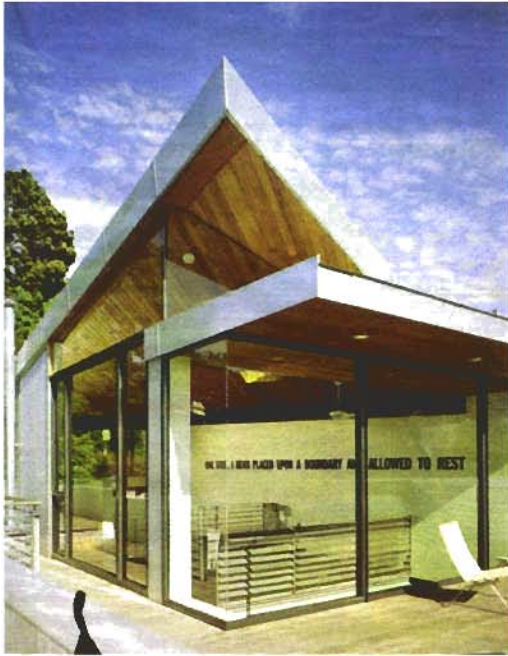
after he was hired to remodel Bransten's 1960s home in Ashbury Heights. Strong persuaded his client to build from the ground up. In neighboring Cole Valley they found a perfect site, where designing a modern structure amid Victorians and Edwardians was no problem because the neighbors welcomed it.

A greater challenge was Bransten's changing life. When he started to work with Strong in 2001, Bransten was in the process of getting a divorce, but by 2004, as his new home took shape, he had met and married Leela de Souza and soon became a father.

"Leela had to come into a house that was designed before we met," Bransten says. But the open-plan interior proved to be an adaptable space, even though the double-height core, crowned with a light-filtering mezzanine of aluminum grating that rolls on I-beam tracks, has a glass, wood, tile and steel exterior.



Facing page: An aluminum mezzanine on steel tracks hovers over Addison Strong's three-story gallery-home. On the landing, a Vik Muniz composition is a self portrait. Left: In the living space, furnishings from Propeller in San Francisco are paired with a framed photograph by Candida Hofer. Above: The mezzanine penthouse is invisible from the Heath tile-covered facade.



One of three bedrooms on the second floor became a nursery, and the den in the basement neatly doubles as guest space. The mezzanine, intended as an art gallery below skylights, is now “a mobile aerial office,” says Peter Jeal, a steel fabricator and artist who collaborated with Strong and contractor Uwe Dobers in engineering it. With the aid of a hand crank, it moves to and fro as simply as a bicycle.

“It is not just a toy,” Bransten says. “We talked about the idea of someday building a house on a railroad track. I think of the mezzanine as a study for that kind of movable house.”

De Souza grew up in Chicago amid Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies Van der Rohe designs but hadn’t given modernism much thought. “This is my first house. I had seen things like the Guggenheim and Bilbao but I could not honestly say I had studied modernism,” she says. A Stanford business school graduate and a Genentech employee, de Souza is more apt to be involved in politics and mentoring families in East Palo Alto than she is in design pursuits. But “because Peter has a deep interest in modern architecture I also learned to appreciate it,” she says.

The terraced garden, in full view from every level of the house, became her focus and contribution to the design.

Meanwhile, Strong and Bransten continued to refine ideas for the building using scale models. “The interior space was hard to nail down,” Strong says. As the steel armature took shape, details became easier to resolve. “We wanted transparency, that’s why we got orange resin treads and clear glass walls. But at the same time, I did not want the outside to read like a glassy box. The neighborhood has a material quality and it did not need a bare modern building.”

So, a carport intended to emulate typical mod-



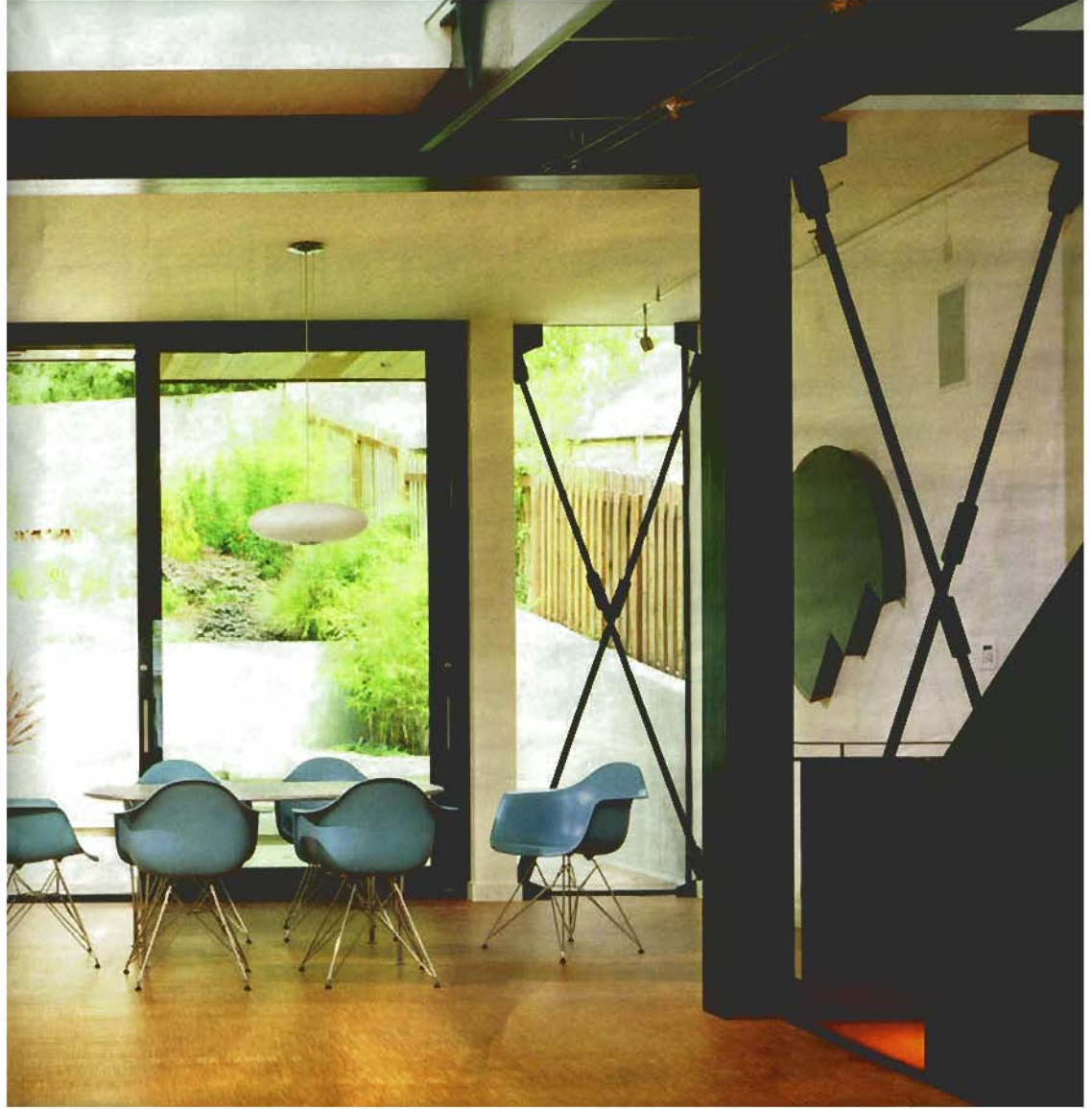
Facing page: A resin and steel ramp leads to the master suite on the top floor just below the movable mezzanine. This page: The butterfly roof of the mezzanine penthouse, invisible from the facade, is clearly visible from the rear garden. On the mezzanine wall is a conceptual word piece by Lawrence Weiner.

ernist cantilevered shelters can now be closed off with secure see-through irregular steel slats painted red. In another nod to ’50s-style buildings with warmer finishes, the facade is clad with cedar and handmade Heath tiles fired to look like Corten steel. “We also wanted to match the neighboring vernacular of brick, stone and terra cotta,” Bransten says. The neighbors were relieved when the former poorly modernized Victorian was ripped away to make room for this new structure. “They were so happy that it was truly modern. They had seen enough of the developer condos that were try-

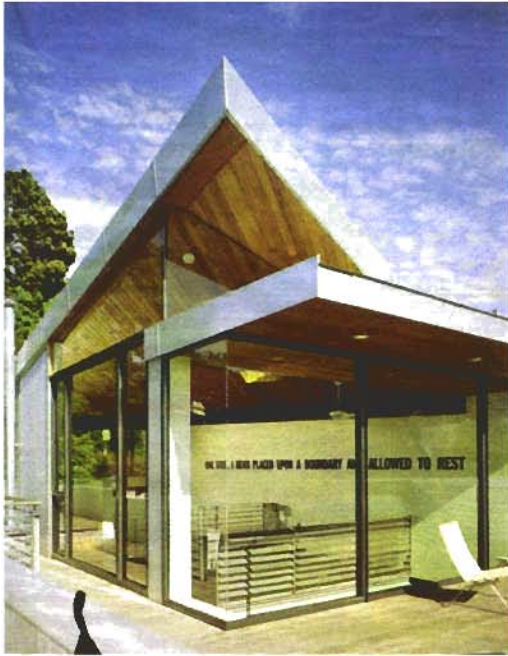
ing to be a fake Victorians. They owned the real deal and knew the difference,” Strong says.

“Initially, we proposed something less ambitious — a row house with less steel and glass and no tile,” Strong says. “But Peter was willing to go further. He would ask for cantilevers and glass. He pushed me and that was so important.” And all around, “people were interested and they asked what was happening next,” Strong says. “They adopted the building.” ♦

Zabid Sardar is the design editor of The Chronicle. E-mail him at zsardar@sfcronicle.com.







One of three bedrooms on the second floor became a nursery, and the den in the basement neatly doubles as guest space. The mezzanine, intended as an art gallery below skylights, is now “a mobile aerial office,” says Peter Jeal, a steel fabricator and artist who collaborated with Strong and contractor Uwe Dobers in engineering it. With the aid of a hand crank, it moves to and fro as simply as a bicycle.

“It is not just a toy,” Bransten says. “We talked about the idea of someday building a house on a railroad track. I think of the mezzanine as a study for that kind of movable house.”

De Souza grew up in Chicago amid Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies Van der Rohe designs but hadn’t given modernism much thought. “This is my first house. I had seen things like the Guggenheim and Bilbao but I could not honestly say I had studied modernism,” she says. A Stanford business school graduate and a Genentech employee, de Souza is more apt to be involved in politics and mentoring families in East Palo Alto than she is in design pursuits. But “because Peter has a deep interest in modern architecture I also learned to appreciate it,” she says.

The terraced garden, in full view from every level of the house, became her focus and contribution to the design.

Meanwhile, Strong and Bransten continued to refine ideas for the building using scale models. “The interior space was hard to nail down,” Strong says. As the steel armature took shape, details became easier to resolve. “We wanted transparency, that’s why we got orange resin treads and clear glass walls. But at the same time, I did not want the outside to read like a glassy box. The neighborhood has a material quality and it did not need a bare modern building.”

So, a carport intended to emulate typical mod-



Facing page: A resin and steel ramp leads to the master suite on the top floor just below the movable mezzanine. This page: The butterfly roof of the mezzanine penthouse, invisible from the facade, is clearly visible from the rear garden. On the mezzanine wall is a conceptual word piece by Lawrence Weiner.

ernist cantilevered shelters can now be closed off with secure see-through irregular steel slats painted red. In another nod to ’50s-style buildings with warmer finishes, the facade is clad with cedar and handmade Heath tiles fired to look like Corten steel. “We also wanted to match the neighboring vernacular of brick, stone and terra cotta,” Bransten says. The neighbors were relieved when the former poorly modernized Victorian was ripped away to make room for this new structure. “They were so happy that it was truly modern. They had seen enough of the developer condos that were try-

ing to be a fake Victorians. They owned the real deal and knew the difference,” Strong says.

“Initially, we proposed something less ambitious — a row house with less steel and glass and no tile,” Strong says. “But Peter was willing to go further. He would ask for cantilevers and glass. He pushed me and that was so important.” And all around, “people were interested and they asked what was happening next,” Strong says. “They adopted the building.” ♦

Zabid Sardar is the design editor of The Chronicle. E-mail him at zsardar@sfcronicle.com.