

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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Bird's-Eye View

Perched Over the Pacific, a Central California House Soars

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The locals are fond of saying that Big Sur is the place you go to launder your karma. "To the man whose senses are alive and alert there is not even the need to stir from one's threshold," observed the writer Henry Miller. "For such a one there is a world here as full and rich, as compelling and instructive, as Thoreau found at Walden." If one's threshold resembles a windswept monastery clinging to cliffs above the Pacific, floating ethereally above the whales passing by isolated coves below, stirring becomes excruciatingly difficult indeed. "You get down here, and you sort of bliss out," explains one of the owners, an engineer now in his 40s who conceived some of the software that makes the Internet run.

The couple spend much of their time in Big Sur on the deck, watching and listening for wild creatures in the refuge below.

The residence, designed by the original owner in the 1950s and then rebuilt and added on to by the architect Mickey Muennig in the 1990s, lies just below Highway 1 along an exquisitely isolated part of the coast where it is easier to purchase copper wind sculptures than a gallon of milk. Built literally into the cliffs and cantilevering over the ocean, the residence is approached gingerly along a steep path of 126 steps, the distractions of the cerulean surf and siren songs of pelicans looming at every turn.

The owners, who as even younger people dreamed wistfully of such a residence and then found themselves with a sudden fortune—"There's no *Sudden Wealth for Dummies* book," the husband wryly observes—were instantly smitten with the house, built of stone, steel, glass, concrete, copper and wood. They were especially entranced with the additions by Muennig, creator of an indigenous Big Sur vernacular all his own. To the original owner's nest Muennig added Muennig—including perforated-metal cable rails encircling a second-floor

balcony and a cantilevered metalgrille deck revealing the ocean 80 feet below. Buffeted by winds and heroically embracing the elements, the residence feels at once perilous and protected.

"The house seemed Zen to me," says the wife, an artist with long strawberry-blond hair who possesses a serious collection of Buddhas and other Asian art. "The problem was it was very cold and industrial. It needed something organic to balance it."

Enter Mark Boone, partner with Mimi London in London Boone in Los Angeles. "The house is very dynamic, but it lacked any sort of relationship of architecture to interior," he explains. "It's a very powerful house, and the interiors needed to step up to that place. On such a windswept coast, they also had to be comforting. They needed to be one big security blanket."

The three went to work, developing a rather novel routine in which the clients (the husband is a pilot) would fly in from Monterey, pick up the designer in Los Angeles, spend the day together in Big Sur and then fly the designer back to L.A. "I'd be home in time for dinner," Boone remembers. "We'd fly by on the ocean side to get perspective on what the house was about. At sunset it was pretty remarkable."

The peripatetic arrangement allowed the couple and their designer to fine-tune things on-site. To temper the residence's hard surfaces, the trio took a softer stance, employing sheepskin, cashmere, textured wood and other natural materials that also had the ability to endure the sometimes brutal sun.

Much of the furniture was designed by Mimi London, whose bold, sculptural forms subtly allude to the Arts and Crafts Movement but are less stodgy and far more comfortable. The two-story living room, for instance, is anchored by a London table composed of three massive timbers, a piece that looks as if it could have ambled down

from the heavily forested Santa Lucia Range plunging to the ocean, Highway 1 the precarious ribbon in between.

"You needed furniture as strong as Big Sur itself," Boone observes.

"You can't put a dinky French table in a space like this and expect it to hold up."

The installation was an epic Cecil B. DeMille-scale production: Every piece of furniture had to be hoisted down the cliff by crane, "sweeping the sofas over the cliffs as if the furniture was flying over the ocean," recalls Boone. "There was a tremendous amount of sweating going on," adds the husband. "I went out for a very long breakfast."

The wife's collections of teapots and Buddhas are artfully placed throughout the residence. The clients have also acquired several bronzes by the late sculptor Leonard Baskin, including *Unnoticed Dead*, an unsentimental, moving work that reflects their commitment to social and humanitarian issues, such as community AIDS work in sub-Saharan Africa.

The couple, who have a grown daughter, spend much of their time in Big Sur on the deck, watching and listening for wild creatures like otters in the refuge below. A webcam captures the scene, so they can log in and stave off homesickness when they are not there. "When you sit and are quiet," says the husband, "it's amazing what appears."

Together they commune with blue whales, often heard before they are seen, rare California condors perched on the eaves and, on one memorable occasion, a mountain lion with clearly impeccable taste that seemed to prefer a habitat designed by Mickey Muennig and London Boone to the Big Sur wilderness.









