

A modern two-story house with a large glass facade and a courtyard. The house features a prominent white wall on the left, a dark wooden slatted screen in the middle, and a large glass wall on the right. The ground floor is mostly glass, revealing an interior with a staircase and a table. The house is surrounded by a green lawn and trees. The sky is clear and blue.

outdoor living, indoor comfort

by sri kesava

photography by jasper johal

a “couple of architects” marry their skills and
dreams with a conscientious spirit



Sometimes the most remarkable structures are those which are almost indistinguishable from their natural environment. Such is the case of the Solar Umbrella house, home to architects Larry Scarpa and Angie Brooks, as well as their young son. It is not so much that one cannot detect the man-made residence amidst the California natives; it is more that the Scarpa-Brooks residence lacks a certain ostentation of which one might assume two architects building their “dream home” might be guilty. On the contrary, the Solar Umbrella house is understated, elegant and modest – the perfect balance of utility and design.

Now married nineteen years, Angie and Larry first met at the University of Florida. They moved to Los Angeles in 1988 and went to graduate school at SCIARC, the Southern California Institute of Architecture. Larry went on to work for renowned architect Gwynne Pugh and two years later was made partner. Six years later, when their son was born, Angie also joined the firm. In 1994 they designed and built the Solar Umbrella house.

Situated on a through lot less than a mile from the beach in Venice, California, the modernist-design home was originally a 650 square-foot bungalow, but has now been transformed into 1,900 square feet of responsible living. Being Florida natives, Angie and Larry naturally had a penchant for outdoor living and “inside-out” became a recurring theme behind the design. As architects, it became their quest to build a home where the “inside” was simply an extension of the “outside.” “Why doesn’t everyone live outside?” quips Larry. “I love those days when the inside and outside become one. We can sit in the living room while our son is in the pool, because we are essentially in the same space.” He’s not the first to voice this opinion; California is rich in history when it comes to the merging of indoor-outdoor living, as articulated by architects such as Rudolph Schindler.

It’s clear as one enters the home that decisions were made to appease not only hard environmental realities, but also the eye. The steps leading to the front door feature recessed, subtle lighting and appear to be “suspended” on water,

creating a stepping stone effect which one might find occurring naturally across a brook. The natural imagery is extended to the front door. Explaining that people tend to think of wood as either an inert building material or a tree, Larry tries to capture the “in-between” idea by designing the front door out of CNC (computer numerical control) computer-routed Cherry wood, creating a piece that would suit *Lord of the Rings* as well as it does the Scarpa-Brooks residence.

Not satisfied with form alone, the architects extended the idea further into economy and practicality. Once inside, the door closes and becomes the seamless panel of a contiguous living room wall, a wall that features bookshelves, entertainment center and hidden entry to a guest bathroom. Realizing the need for a guest bath, but not wanting to lose any space to accommodate such an entry, this dual-function feature illustrates how ingenuity and simplicity coexist.

The sustainable features of the home include ninety photovoltaic (solar) panels that heat the pool as well as the in-floor radiant heating,



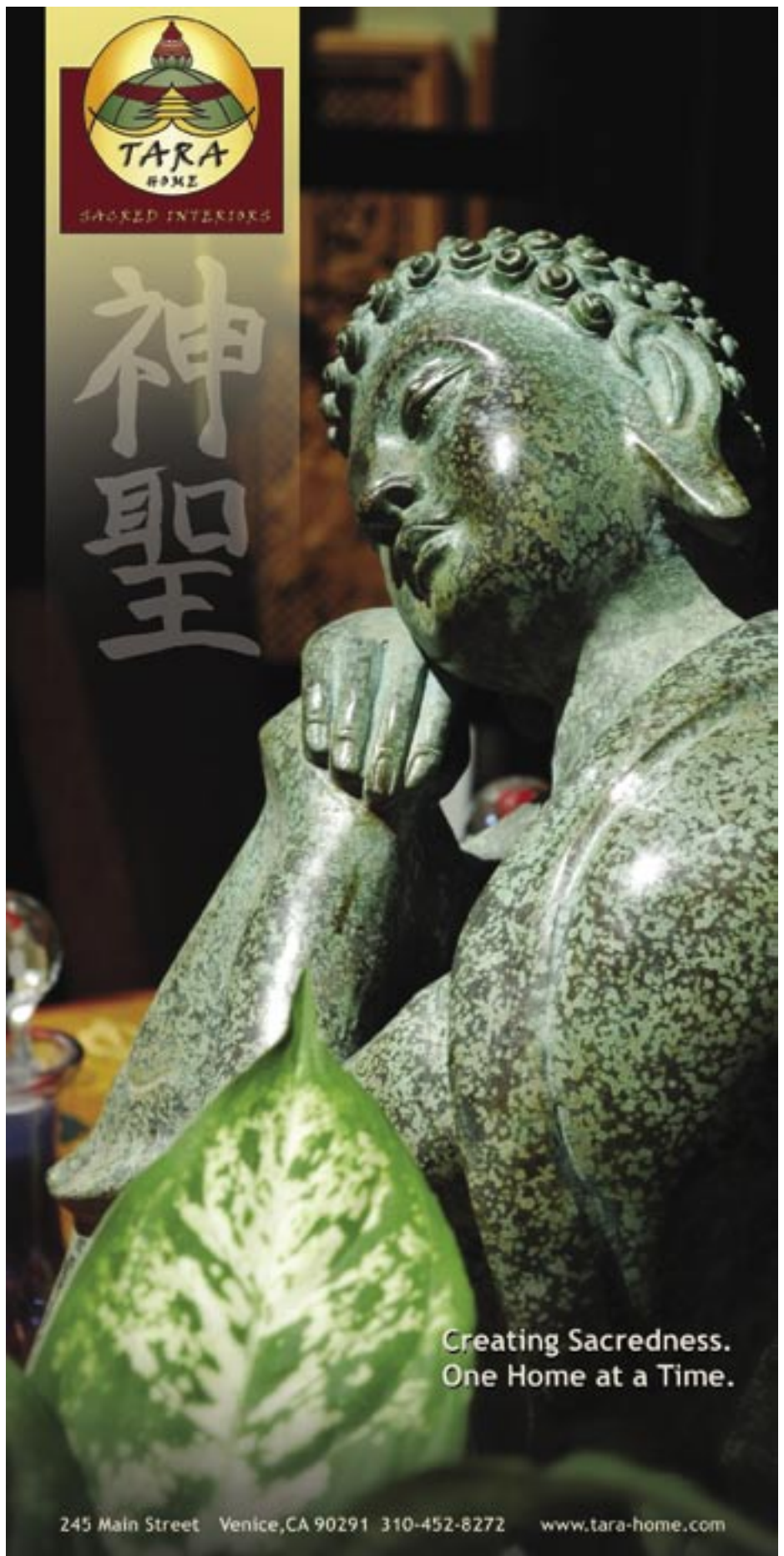
while eliminating utility bills. Rather than being relegated to the roof, the solar panels overhang, envelop and even shelter the second story master suite. So attractive is the designed layout of the panels that, to a novice, their utility would be incidental.

Most of the materials used in the building are already recycled content or reclaimed. The concrete used is high-content fly ash. The steel is 70% recycled content. The entire job generated only two dumpsters of debris, and approximately 70% of that was already recycled. The faux suede look of the wall panels is achieved with Homasote, an acoustical panel made from recycled newspaper, sanded and used as a finish material. The kitchen cabinets and floor are made out of OSB (oriented strand board), a structural grade building material composed of leftover wood chips compressed together with high strength adhesive. Sanded, stained and sealed, OSB provides a cost-effective and materially responsible alternative to hardwood. Every material used, with few exceptions, has a homogenous core. If you scratch or damage any surface, simply sand back and it's restored, resulting in a design that is ultra low maintenance.

The appliances and fixtures are also high efficiency. There are almost no doors in the house, each room being defined by function. Storm water collects in a retention chamber underground, which in turn is piped to various flora, reducing the need for sprinklers. The garden plants are drought tolerant, and the Buffalo grass needs to be cut only once a year. If anything, the design of the house is "lazy-chic."

The floor in the living room is intentionally below the level of the rest of the house: overlooking the yard and back fence at this grade, one's line of vision merely captures treetops and sky. It is a disarmingly simple, yet effective means of creating absolute privacy. By lowering the grade, Larry and Angie essentially blocked out neighboring structures from view, kept within accepted fence height limits and created a practical ledge for sitting as a result of the lowered floor. As one stares out into the yard while reclined on the day bed, situated "just so" to catch the sun, it's hard to believe you are in a densely populated suburb with structures less than a stone's throw on either side.

Larry and Angie are not extremists. They are interested in environmental issues more from a practical standpoint than a political one. Larry muses that people often wonder what it's like to live in a home such as theirs. In one sense, it's a very normal existence. But once the subtle pleasures of privacy, low maintenance, cool shade and warm light are experienced together with the cold hard reality of a zero-balance utility bill, one begins to wonder: why live any other way?



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