



# concept and collaboration

## the john street residence

by Ashley Kessler, Photographed by John MacLean

**M**any architects are happiest while their designs exist in the pure, abstract world of drawings and plans, unencumbered by the inevitable considerations of costs and materials, uncompromised by the requests of the clients who will one day inhabit their ideas. Jonathan Starr, principal of the Starr Design Group, views collaboration as an integral part of his design process. He strives to “make the best house that the client wants”.

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Shifting volumes along the main axis create a sense of movement and sculptured form.

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A sophisticated open plan meets the owners' need for comfortable, casual entertaining.



**His design aesthetic may be best exemplified by his daily uniform: a crisp button down shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, jeans and flip flops — simple, elegant, and effortless.** Starr grew up in Laguna Beach, earned a Masters in Architecture from Cal Poly, and set up his design firm in a renovated surfboard factory in Hermosa Beach. His design vocabulary is heavily influenced by the casual nature of the beach lifestyle. “A lot of people talk about walking into the house with sandy feet. They don’t want the architecture to be too fussy or the materials to be too precious,” he says. “I try to create spaces that are timeless, real, soft and warm, but still modern. Sometimes people have this fear of modern design being cold and unforgiving and not a place you want to call a home. So I am trying to design a home, a place that you would feel comfortable, a place that you can put your feet up.”

What began as a single person practice has grown into a cutting-edge design and planning firm, with a portfolio of residences and commercial developments that span the Southern California coast. The firm handles as much of the design/build process as the client requests, from the design and planning stages to daily on-site supervision of the construction.

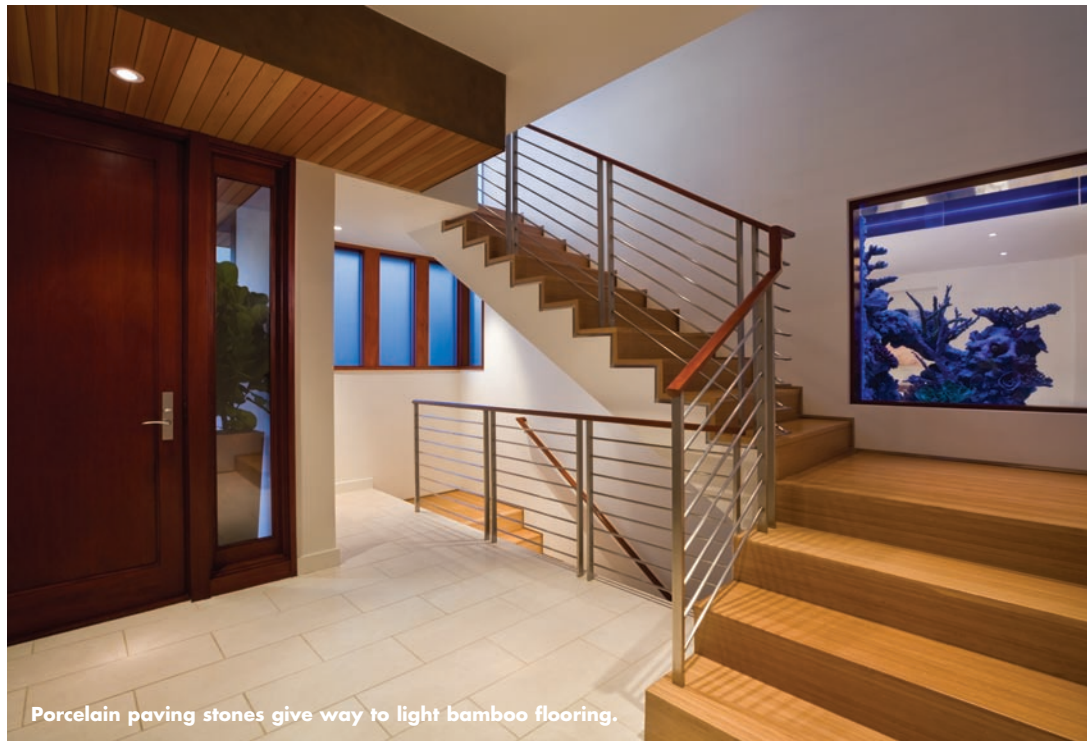
Starr describes a design as a continuously evolving dream, a process rooted in creative problem solving. One of his clients wanted to be able to play catch with his son, but the lot was too small to accommodate a rough and tumble stretch of yard. Starr’s solution was to create a sliding door system that allowed the interior of the home to transform into an open play space. He says, “Simple things can drive the design, and small details have a big impact.”

In the beach communities where Starr designs, square footage is precious. Many South Bay houses are intent upon maximizing square footage. Left unchecked, however, this imperative results in the building of giant boxes. Starr feels that one of his main design

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Seamless transitions between interior and exterior create a beach-inspired, free-flowing vibe.



Porcelain paving stones give way to light bamboo flooring.

challenges is how to “unbox the box”, using subtle plays of volume and material.

The John Street Residence is a perfect example of the elegant simplicity that is emblematic of Starr’s designs. The home is situated on a corner lot in the hill section of Manhattan Beach, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The design is organized around two walls that create an L-shaped plan. This linearity is subtly altered by the shifting of volumes along the main axis to create a sense of movement and sculptured form. These volumes are defined both by materials and by use — smooth troweled stucco contrasts with a rich, warm mahogany siding, accented by copper sheet metal cladding. The outer walls function as a screen to create privacy from the street, while still allowing for maximum light to enter the space.

The placement of the windows on the facade recalls the face of a lantern and, like a Japanese shoji screen, achieves a translucency rather than a transparency. The landscaping is gently graded, echoing the sense of movement already established in the build-

ing’s clean and fluid lines.

Entering the home, there is a seamless transition between indoor and outdoor by virtue of a consistent palette of materials that is carried in from the exterior and utilized throughout the interior as well. Ann Sacks’s porcelain paving stones carry over the threshold into the dining room, giving way to light bamboo flooring that blends with the tone of the tiles. Starr designs with a simple yet sumptuous palette, and a repetition of the finishes gives a clean simplicity and continuity to the overall design.

As you enter the foyer, the open plan reveals itself. Floor to ceiling sliding doors “disappear” the inner wall, revealing the garden and pool area that is the true heart of the house. Although the layout is extremely open, with one room flowing into the next and indoor blending into outdoor, each volume or room is well defined and conveys the sense of a definite end and beginning that is cozy and airy all at once. Mahogany built-in cabinetry and both door and window frames trace dark and elegant lines throughout the light-filled space. The tongue and groove detail on the exterior

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The home's elegant simplicity is emblematic of Starr's designs.

of the house is repeated in the Douglas fir ceilings, while the light-hued furnishings with celadon accents add a gentle texture and warmth to the space. Although the sightlines offer views of the entire length of the plan, the subtle shifting of volumes creates complexity and corners that beckon to be explored.

The John Street Residence is undoubtedly a sophisticated space, and yet it is also a comfortable playground for the children in the family. This kid-friendly theme is evident everywhere, from the garden path that circles the trunk of an old tree that leads to flower beds where the family's little girl plants herbs and sunflowers, to the game and screening room on the house's lower level, to the comfortable seating that appears at every turn. Starr discusses, with evident pleasure, the detailing that he creates to suit the specific requests of his clients. He created in each of the children's rooms a secret space, accessible only to them. In the daughter's room, a mural painted by a local artist sets the scene for an

island adventure, while behind a waterfall, created by layers of fabric, she can steal away to a private boudoir that is replete with vanity table and petite crystal chandelier. Next door in the boy's room, one would never notice that the bookshelf that sits flush to the wall is in fact a secret passage to a windowed space with a loft where he is master of his own domain.

Starr's intention was to create as much of an open feeling as possible, allowing seamless transitions between the interior and the exterior and capturing the free-flowing sense of the beach just beyond. The pool is an oasis, replete with a palapa-like deck and waterfall, inspired by the client's travels in Mexico. Entering the house, one finds a sanctuary of light and water and air that is hidden from the outside world. The owners of the house wanted the easy open feel of tropical architecture, which often features shelter without walls. They required a sophisticated and elegant space for their family's daily routine that was private, open, casual and comfortable with

rooms that were appropriate for entertaining. The owner interviewed many design firms and had a specific sense of what the space should feel like and how it should function, but didn't have an exact picture of the shape that the space would take. Jonathan Starr "just got it". He was able to listen to the concerns, requests, and inspirations of his client and translate those dreams into form. ●

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