

A 180° View of a Hotbed of Housing Design



Michael Wescher for The New York Times

BOOMTOWN With the population of Los Angeles on the rise, city planners are looking for alternatives to the classic single-family house with lawn and driveway. Mr. Touraine and Ms. Richmond have shown one way to increase the density of neighborhoods. They did not build their new corrugated steel home, above, to the lot line, as many Angelenos do, but instead built up, to the maximum height permitted. That left room for a strip of native plants surrounded by a redwood fence, without sacrificing light and views. A redwood deck with chain-link fencing acts as a bridge between the new house and the 1951 stucco building at right, which they use as an office and a rental unit, and which doubles as a carport. The resulting structure — two households and an office — is “our own little mixed-use development,” Ms. Richmond said.

By MICHAEL CANNELL
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Venice, Calif.

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Michael Wescher for The New York Times

HIDDEN ECONOMIES Kitchen cabinets are made of sanded oriented strand board, an engineered wood that is stronger than plywood, and cheaper: about \$12 for a sheet 8 by 10 feet. The white cabinets are medium-density fiberboard, a lower-grade material. “When cabinets are painted there’s no point in using anything but the cheapest paint-grade material,” Ms. Richmond said.

AS any architect knows, wedding vows are negotiable in the face of a design competition. Six months after Deborah Richmond and Olivier Touraine, architects in Los Angeles, married in 2001, they found themselves facing off on teams competing for the high-profile job of overhauling the grounds of the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#).

“It was really difficult; it was really tense,” said Mr. Touraine, who worked with a former boss, the flamboyant French architect Jean Nouvel, and shuttled for four months between France and California.

“It was really fun,” said Ms. Richmond, who moved to Rotterdam in the Netherlands to work on [Rem Koolhaas’s](#) team. “It was like Deb’s Big European Adventure.”

They talked by phone, but never about work. “The atmosphere was like ‘Mr. and Mrs. Smith,’ ” she said, recalling the film about assassins told to kill each other.

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material, Ms. Richmond said. We simply wanted these to disappear into the whiteness of the wall.”

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Michael Weschler for The New York Times

EXPOSURE The living area has 180-degree views, but exposure has its drawbacks. To deflect the Southern California heat, Deborah Richmond and Olivier Touraine hung curtains lined with Firebreak, a Mylar fabric used by farmers to protect produce. For privacy, they cover the glass walls with sliding panels of translucent Lexan, a lightweight resin used for airplane windows and bulletproof glass (information: geoplastics.com).

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Michael Weschler for The New York Times

INSIDE OUT Deborah Richmond and Olivier Touraine, above with their son, Thomas, enjoy their extended living area in Venice, Calif.

“That movie was so close to our experience that we preordered tickets.”

The couple met in 1997, when he was working for Mr. Nouvel and she for Jon Jerde, the California master of mall design. The firms were designing parts of a commercial complex in Japan, and Ms. Richmond acted as translator and guide for Mr. Touraine and Mr. Nouvel when they visited the Jerde office here.

Eight months later Mr. Touraine, who is French, moved to Los Angeles, ostensibly for a job at the Southern California Institute of Architecture. “I really moved here because of Debbie,” he said.

The couple also started a firm here, Touraine Richmond Architects, and after the museum-grounds competition they settled back into working together. (The museum chose the Koolhaas plan, but abandoned it for lack of funds). They did a series of Los Angeles projects, including a home they converted from a 12-car garage in the Hollywood Hills for Wim Wenders, the filmmaker, and his wife, Donata.

Their latest collaboration is the so-called One Window House, a home they share with their 2-month-old son, Thomas. Once a backwater of tattoo parlors and beachside bodybuilders, Venice has become a percolating design district with a growing inventory of adventurous homes on narrow lots. Much of [Frank Gehry](#)’s early work was in Venice, and he is building a highly anticipated home for himself three blocks south of the One Window House.

“This is a real laboratory,” Ms. Richmond said, “especially for young architects.”

Like other architects living here, Mr. Touraine, 43, and Ms. Richmond, 39, gravitated to Venice for its freedom: they could design what they liked without obeisance to a prevailing style. “Context?” Ms. Richmond said. “What context? There’s a bungalow here and stucco condo there.”

Architects also move here for the bargains (or did until a few years ago, when Venice real estate started to catch up with the rest of Los Angeles). In 2002 the couple paid \$337,000 for a 3,900-square-foot plot and a two-story stucco house from 1951, which now contains a rental apartment and a studio for their firm.

They designed a second house for themselves and built it next door in 2005 for \$410,000, or about \$275 a square foot — as opposed to \$300 to \$350 for typical architect-designed houses in the area — largely by drawing on unconventional materials. A translucent plastic welding screen is used in place of a closet door, for example, and their fireplace is mounted in a black box built out of an inflammable material made of pressed paper.

“The materials create a certain lightness and thriftiness that richer materials would not

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impart,” Ms. Richmond said.

On a recent morning they fed Thomas in the open living room as distinctive California light filtered through sage, alder and California myrtle visible through glass walls framing a 180-degree view. “It’s almost like our porch,” Ms. Richmond said. “We wave to our neighbors without leaving the couch.”

In fact, the couple consider the first-floor living area as much outdoors as indoors, a classic California sentiment. For all its light and views, the first floor does not have windows, only those walls of glass.

The openness gives way to utter privacy as you walk upstairs into a corrugated steel box with a compact labyrinth of rooms. In fact, the couple originally intended to build the No Window House, but in a last-minute concession to the ocean breeze they installed one horizontal strip in the master bedroom.

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