

THE NEW MODERNISTS

By Frances Anderton Photographed by Misha Gravenor

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MEET THE NEXT GENERATION OF SHOWBIZ ARCHITECTS WHO ARE QUIETLY CONSTRUCTING HOMES FOR A RANGE OF INDUSTRYITES, INCLUDING BRAD PITT, EWAN MCGREGOR AND MIKE OVITZ

In his heart of hearts, architect Lorcan O’Herlihy has a secret — it involves eggs.

Years ago, in 1980 to be exact, during his fifth year in college, he proposed a design for a new Chicano Cultural Center, which was his thesis project. “This was at the peak of postmodernism,” confesses the California native with inquisitive eyes and a rapid-fire delivery, “when all the other grad students were doing boxes covered in pastiche like Spanish-y Taco Bells.”

And that’s where O’Herlihy’s secret comes in. Unlike his classmates, he admired the clean, rationalist work of classic modernists like Mies van der Rohe and wanted to explore a similar, less bombastic form of architecture. So he turned in a “strict Mies-ian design” and hoped for the best.

“They threw eggs at me,” he recalls.

Now, 25 years later, the architect, with a small but fervent following, has built a solid practice on the very principles once espoused by early modernists like van der Rohe, Aero Saarinen and Le Corbusier, which is no small feat given the unfettered experimental age of digital manipulation and sculptural, expressive forms currently championed by the likes of Frank Gehry and other superstar designers.

He’s not alone.

Today an entire generation of thirty- and fortysomething Los Angeles-based architects is proudly returning to a kinder, simpler modernism — in particular the kind that evolved in California in the 1920s — a nuanced amalgam of European and Japanese influences with a dash of Spanish. “Space architecture” is what critic Esther McCoy called it in 1945, an architecture defined by clean lines, large spans of glass and minimal ornamentation. It was, and is, inherently experimental and forward thinking because at its core — and this is what fuels the imagination of the current generation — it’s essentially about the delicate, elastic manipulation of intangibles like light and volumetric space.

In the process, O’Herlihy’s peers — Barbara Bestor and the firms of Escher GuneWardena and Graft — are attracting like-minded, creative professionals within the industry as clients, from actors like Brad Pitt and Ewan McGregor to production designers like David Wasco and Alex McDowell; from executives like Mike Ovitz and Joe Fineman to screenwriters such as Bruce Wagner and Mike Ferris. “What was born and bred in L.A. was a cool, rational, pragmatic version

of modernism that is immensely appealing,” says noted architecture critic and former film programmer Michael Webb. “It is like buying a BMW; it will never go out of style.”

But we’re not talking about the ever-growing list of industryites known for snatching up and restoring midcentury modernist homes by architects such as Richard Neutra, a list that includes Sony’s Michael Lynton, New Line’s Toby Emmerich, Tom Ford, Wim Wenders, Kelly Lynch, Mitch Glazer, Courteney Cox Arquette, Drew Carey and “The Simpson’s” Sam Simon. We’re talking about commissioning new houses by contemporary architects working in the modernist vein.

That’s an important distinction, says Kevin MacCarthy, a storyboard artist who commissioned one of O’Herlihy’s earliest houses, a simple but poetic wooden-clad box cantilevered out over a hillside. As a fortysomething industryite himself, MacCarthy came of age during the midcentury modernist revival of the 1990s, but he’s adamant that he’d rather patronize more innovative architects than be “retro” or build something in the nostalgic style of most American homes. “If you build a so-called traditional house with elements of tradition extrapolated in a postmodernistic muddle, you really are acknowledging a certain lack of inquisitiveness about things, a certain desire to reinforce the status quo,” he says. “You are not contributing to the forward movement of any kind of aesthetic.”

Among California firms today, five stand out for doing just that: pushing architecture forward for the next generation of showbizsters. But they’re not the only neomodernist firms of their kind. After all, Michael Maltzan blazed the way in the 1990s by designing a home for Ovitz and another for entertainment attorney Alan Hergott. Marmol Radziner lent its expert touch to dozens of restorations for the likes of Sony’s Amy Pascal; Demi Moore; Carey; and Ford, for whom it recently completed an original design in New Mexico.

There are younger firms that certainly deserve honorable mentions, including Debbie Richmond and Olivier Touraine, who were trained in the studios of three masters of contemporary architecture, Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel and Renzo Piano. (They did a remodel for Wenders and are currently working on abodes for Wagner and music producer-Dust Brother John King.)

The following are the top five.

