



Sense of Place: Kovac Architects

Michael Webb

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A Sense of Place is a collection of built and un-built residences by Los Angeles-based firm Kovac Architects. Over the past twenty-five years, firm principal Michael Kovac has quietly built a number of idiosyncratic, modernist residences from rural Maine to Baja California; Sense of Place primarily looks at homes built in the foothills of Los Angeles. The firm's work characteristically rejects any signature form or formula- houses are pure responses to a site's characteristics and a client's program. For guidance, the office looks to a set of essentially modernist principles, distilled in Southern California by Schindler in the 1920's, and refined through the end of the Case Study House Program era in the late 1960's. Each house is conceived of as a unique, and deeply personal space, patiently and meticulously tailored from the finest materials. Although many of the homes in Sense of Place enjoy expansive vistas, the firm's houses are never conceived of as platforms for studying the environment from afar. Each embraces nature and often invites it in; one is made to not only see, but also to feel, the outdoors. This ethos, consistently present in all of the projects featured here, also allows the nearly invisible integration of passive sustainable features. A deep understanding of the site is also critical to Kovac's work. In Los Angeles, sites are often vertiginous, and the firm's solutions explore a variety of building/ terrain relationships. Some projects are situated on the brow of a hill, while others cantilever beyond the edge of a slope or are sheltered below it. Building on a steep site presents a number of challenges; including compliance with municipal zoning laws and reconciling seismic issues. However, a sloping lot can also be exploited to fantastic benefit, and interior and exterior spaces in Kovac's projects are designed to enable a variety of dynamic spatial relationships. The firm's work often explores and borrows from regional vernaculars, by degrees local and foreign. Traditional Japanese building is often referenced - many of Kovac's residences are conceived of as envelopes of space sandwiched between the ground and a carefully articulated roof - sometimes a levitated plane, other times a gentle curve. Sliding and pocketing doors recall shoji screens, and in the absence of walls, rooms become engawas. Agrarian vernaculars are also a reoccurrent theme, explored for the quality of their interior spaces and the simplicity of their forms. Michael also experiments with emerging technologies and alternative materials when possible. His own Sycamore House (certified LEED Platinum) was largely built to serve as a laboratory for experimenting with sustainable design practices and green technology. As in all of his projects, the integration of active technologies and passive features is seamless, and nearly invisible.

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