INTRODUCTION

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Creating a home is one of the most meaningful things people do. Before we walk into that home, a designer has set the stage to enable us to make a house a home. The stage-setting craft implicit in that design takes us halfway to homemaking. That craft enables us to live our lives in that building freely and joyfully, and most of us haven't a clue that the stage-setting has preceded our own steps toward making a house just as we'd like it.

Everyone needs a place to live in. To many, the ideal is to have their own house. But what we all want is a home: a space that warms and comforts us, that harbors our loved ones, protects us from the storms of life, and expresses our true selves—an intangible set of desires that can only be met with a concrete structure. What does it take to make a house a home? That depends on whom you ask, of course. But one thing everyone agrees on is that it takes passion and vision.

When we employ an architect in the process, it can become a work of art—and a home that we truly love. But only a fraction of the homes built every year in America are designed by architects, and very few of us are privy to the intense thought process and myriad decisions that go into their sketches, plans, and elevations. I thought that I'd talk to a few architects about their craft, their stage-setting, to raise an awareness of just how much thought precedes our own homemaking.

My own passion for homemaking began a dozen years ago, when my wife and I bought a midcentury house in the Hollywood Hills. It was an elegant post-and-beam structure—a simple, open plan with generous outdoor views in every direction.

It took time for the "home" to emerge, however; we couldn't recognize it at first.

Our realtor's first words were: "You can't see it, but there's a great house here." We knew he was right, took the leap of faith, and made our offer. The structure had had a number of different owners since its initial construction in 1955. Each occupant had left a mark, every family had added an overlay—a partition, a bit of siding, new built-in shelves, and countless coats of paint—their attempts to turn the house into a home, I surmised. But all the additions had compounded into a ramshackle mishmash of forms that largely obfuscated the architect's original intention.

Then began the odyssey of finding that original, architect-inspired house. The more we stripped away, the more we wanted to uncover. There was a different hue of paint for every decade since 1955—layer upon layer on the walls, siding, even the brickwork; paint was everywhere. The sandblasting alone took days. The original cork flooring—meant to be warm and pliable underfoot—had been supplanted by a layer of cold, hard marble. You could almost feel the structure breathe a sigh of relief when we stripped it back.

As the house began to reveal itself, I gained new appreciation for the architect's vision and original design. To supervise the remodel, I had brought in the Los Angeles architects Peter and Hadley Arnold, a forward-thinking couple that *Dwell* magazine called "environmentally attuned," and who had recently redesigned my workplace. I was inspired by their contribution of maintaining and enhancing the integrity of the original home design while modernizing materials in order to reduce the home's environmental impact.

Later, for a small addition to the home, we engaged another visionary team from Los Angeles: Frank Escher and Ravi GuneWardena. They helped integrate a brand-new concept into the Mid-Century Modern design: a "home office" was not exactly a mainstream idea in 1959. Now, it's my favorite room.

Perhaps the biggest reward of this whole process was my deepening appreciation of residential architects. Good design can create a home that is cherished for generations. It's a complex art that combines myriad sensory experiences: texture; luminosity; feelings of expansion, contraction, coziness, and grandeur. A beautiful home produces feelings of pleasure, peace, and serenity, and this emotional need for a true home appears to be hardwired into our DNA.

Our primal response to the place we live predates civilization, according to the archaeologist Margaret Conkey, whose trailblazing work in the 1990s proved that cave dwellers did not actually live in caves—at least not exclusively. And why would they? Caves are dark, uninviting, cramped, damp, and not terribly comfortable.

According to Conkey, a professor emerita at Berkeley, "Home is a place where you reconnect with people or memories." It must be a place of beauty, not a dark cave.

Our ancestors certainly spent times in caves—they provide safety and reliable shelter, after all. But cave dwellers' idea of "home" was far more expansive, suggests

Conkey. Their home may have contained a cave for the brutal winter months; but it also had a stream, a wooded area, a meadow—places of beauty and pleasure. They staked out a certain area of the landscape and called that "home." The meadow was their front porch or an outdoor eating area; the woods, their backyard; the stream, their bathroom, and so on. In other words, they had "rooms" just as we did. They took pleasure in their home. They were, according to Margaret Conkey, "spatially ambitious"—just like us.

The Great Recession of 2008 has been laid at the feet of the "housing bubble," meaning we'd been building big homes we couldn't afford by the millions. Owning a home isn't just a part of the American dream—it's been the heart of the American dream. And Americans will go to any length to keep this dream alive, including making catastrophic economic decisions.

Many architects in this book believe that a financial and moral sensitivity to scale in our homes must become a new norm. A hundred years ago, residential architecture was used to convey financial success—a grand façade with Corinthian columns indicated the wealth and power of a home's inhabitants, an overt expression of materialism. But that cycle of accumulation is waning, even becoming archaic. Given the finite space on this increasingly populated planet, we could all afford to live with a more modest footprint.

There are growing environmental pressures on our homes as well, like earthquakes and extreme weather—hurricanes, coastal flooding, drought. Good design of our homes is more important than ever. A thoughtful architect must consider an array of forces—site and zoning restrictions, local vernacular, history, tradition, technology, innovation, as well as her or his own particular aesthetic. It is an admirable balancing act that produces an outcome that affects our everyday lives.

After finishing our remodel, I went on a quest to meet more architects and find out how they think. It began as a short documentary (*American Homes*, 2012) that I started working on in 2006. Fascinated and obsessed with what architects do, I intended to interview several dozen notable designers to give the audience a glimpse into the many decisions that go into designing a home—a peek under the hood, if you will, into the design process.

For the visuals, I had turned to a book: *American Homes: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Domestic Architecture* (Black Dog & Leventhal, 1981), by the architect Lester Walker, an encyclopedic volume of hundreds of line drawings of different home styles, arranged by decade from the Pueblo period to the present day.

"If you look back to when architects first got involved, say, in the early eighteenth century, they were doing buildings that were designed to impress people," said Lester Walker when I interviewed him. "They weren't doing buildings to be beautiful and part of nature."

Then, Frank Lloyd Wright comes along and gives us the Prairie Style—with fewer, more open-planned rooms and a harmonious relationship to its site. The architects in this collection are deep admirers of Wright's work and legacy.

I was fortunate to have talked with quite a few notable designers, thirty in all, including three Pritzker Prize winners (Thom Mayne, Richard Meier, and Robert Venturi); the Pulitzer Prize–winning critic Paul Goldberger; the director of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), Robert Ivy; the legendary Denise Scott Brown, Kenneth Frampton, and Robert A. M. Stern, to name a few. I even had the pleasure of conversing with the Chicago maverick Douglas Garofalo before his untimely death.

Architects universally love to talk about architecture. My discourse with these designers was lively, opinionated, full of passion, inspiring to me, and also energizing. But I was only able to use fragments of the interviews in my short film, which is the reason I decided to create this book: to share longer conversations with these esteemed designers.

This is an important time for us to be thinking about our homes, which seem to be under increasing pressure from forces beyond our control—from extreme weather to real estate bubbles. The architects in this book have thought deeply about these issues and readily share their insights. While the interviews range widely, certain themes clearly emerge, which is why I chose to break the book into five parts. There are overlaps, of course, and readers should freely jump around and make their own way through the book.

The thirty architects, educators, and cultural visionaries in this collection all aspire to improve the quality of our lives through thoughtful design. Their varied ideas and eclectic opinions weave a tapestry of thought around the American idea of home. Many factors that go unnoticed or we take for granted go into the dwellings we inhabit, and yet they have daily impact on our lives.

In the interviews that follow, I've attempted to draw out that thought process so all of us can partake in a discussion of what goes into the design of the American home.