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Architect Bob Peterson's 10-year-old home (right) fits comfortably with his eclectic Downtown North neighbors.

Modern in Palo Alto

Three contemporary architects influence their home city

by Carol Blitzer
Photographs by Marjan Sadoughi

Three Palo Alto architects, who live within blocks of each other in Downtown North, are changing the way Palo Altans view contemporary architecture — one house at a time. They are passionate about their beliefs, dismissive of derivative traditional styles, open to using new materials and sensitive to the environment.

Of the 125 new homes built each year in Palo Alto, only a few could be called “modern.” The rest range from Craftsman and Spanish to Tudor and Tuscan knockoffs.

Architect Bob Peterson refers to his neighborhood as the “architects’ ghetto.” Take a walk along Webster Street, just north of University Avenue, and one encounters Peterson’s terra-cotta stucco nestled between two tall, beige stucco homes. With dark-green trim and side-by-side garage doors, the home stands out for color, use of steel and angles. It’s also been recognized by the American Institute of Architects.

Further up the street, it’s easy to spot architect David Solnick’s home. It’s the one with 100 windows, all situated to catch the sun’s rays. Subtle landscaping and a path lead behind a low wooden fence to the front porch. When his house was completed, perfect strangers would stop by and knock on the door, eager to tell him how much they liked it, he said.

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‘The outside should be handsome but modest. When you open the front door, it should knock your socks off.’

— Bob Peterson, AIA

‘You can make concrete and glass and steel warm. I think “modern” can be homey and is homey.’

— Joe Bellomo, AIA

On the cover: Architect Joe Bellomo pauses beside his street-front fence, made of gravel sandwiched between two steel-mesh layers. Photo by Marjan Sadoughi.



(Above) The public spaces of David Solnick's home (below, the architect with a statue by Jim Hunot) are roomy, soaring high. Right, Solnick extends livability of his many-windowed home by wrapping it around a central courtyard.

Modern

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The homes of two other architects, who have modified older homes, lie further up the street. One sports an orange entryway. Down another street is the concrete, steel and glass home of David Baker, the architect for a more traditional-looking development on the former Palo Alto Times property on Bryant Court.

Around the corner and over by Johnson Park is architect Joe Bellomo's compound, which includes the 1928 bungalow he's owned for more than 25 years, a granny unit in back and a new concrete and steel structure that Bellomo refers to as "eye candy."

It is within this eclectic "ghetto" that the cutting-edge design philosophies of three of these architects — Bellomo, Peterson and Solnick — have taken root and developed.

David Solnick, 52, could not resist snagging a piece of paper and drawing a series of intersecting boxes, when talking about building ideas. What sets his design apart from, say, Victorian architecture, is his need to overlap spaces, to move easily from living room/dining room to kitchen to courtyard — all under a soaring ceiling.

The exterior of his home doesn't scream, "I'm modern." Rather, it lines up with his neighbors' homes — a one-story shingled home with a large front porch or a two-story, ersatz Craftsman with white pillars and a white picket fence.

"It's intentionally opposite of a two-story grand entry, meant to be low and modest," he said of his low-profile entryway.

But, once inside, the high ceilings and a half wall guide you into a great room that consists of an overlapping living/dining room and kitchen — melding into an outdoor courtyard.

"I prefer to have zones that have just a little degree of definition in them. The Victorian organization tends to be discrete boxes of rooms, possibly with partial walls

or a hallway. The more modern approach is to break the corners of the boxes: You get partial separations; rooms flow into each other, but not completely; spaces overlap.

"This is what modern's all about, breaking the box," he said.

Solnick wanted to maximize use of both outdoor and indoor spaces for his family of five, while clearly separating public and private areas. Emphasis is on the high-ceilinged public spaces, with bedrooms stacked at the rear of the house.

"If I were designing cities, I would take the same attitude," he said, pointing to Italian cities with their large plazas and tiny houses, and how that corresponds to bigger common areas and smaller bedrooms.

For Solnick, design is very site specific — and should feel comfortable in its time. Perhaps that's why he scoffs at building Spanish or Tudor houses in 21st-century Palo Alto.

"A lot of people misuse the word 'style.' Spanish style was generated in hot climates where there weren't a lot of trees, so stone and masonry made sense. Style starts out very site specific, then gets co-opted to places where they make no sense."

Rather than focus on style, Solnick thinks a lot about adapting materials to create eco-friendly buildings and letting design flow from there. Pointing to his immense engineered-lumber beams, he said, "You could buy huge wood timbers (like the beams in an Eichler) 50 years ago, but is it appropriate today? No." Better, he said, is to buy lumber made from tiny wood sticks. "It's stronger than lumber, better-looking and doesn't use big trees."

For his own home — 2,375 square feet on 1/8-acre — Solnick situated the house to maximize sun and light. The concrete floors serve as a passive-solar heat absorber.

Solnick is a native of Southern California and said, "L.A. suburbs were strongly influential as negative examples." He started his career as a molecular biologist, teach-

'The more modern approach is to break the corners of the boxes: You get partial separations, rooms flow into each other, but not completely; spaces overlap. This is what modern's all about, breaking the box.'

— David Solnick, AIA



Architect Bob Peterson opens his home to the outside with 18-foot-wide glass folding doors. His design further expanded the visual space with high ceilings and a catwalk connecting upstairs rooms.



Is Palo Alto ready for modern architecture?

Individuals slower to embrace cutting-edge design



The single-car garage that neatly lines up at the front of David Solnick's home would not be allowed in Palo Alto under today's rules.

About one-third of the 26,048 houses in Palo Alto were built before 1949, and 11,000-plus of those — many developed by Joseph Eichler — arose from a post-World War II through 1980 surge, according to U.S. Census data.

Since 1990, the older housing has been gradually replaced, most recently turning over at a rate of roughly 125 new homes each year, according to city planners.

Few of the new homes could be labeled “modern.” And that, say some local architects, is how residents prefer it.

“People by and large are very timid when it comes to spending enormous amounts of money for something that has to last a long time and might have to sell to someone else,” said Judith Wasserman, former chair of Palo Alto’s Architectural Review Board (ARB). Most lack the vocabulary, background and training “to understand why certain architecture might be exciting and not difficult to live with.”

Just because a home is new, it’s not necessarily “design forward.” Most are modeled after older styles.

“There’s very little to distinguish a new traditional from an old traditional house,” Wasserman said.

“Architecture transcends style; architecture has a memory,” architect Joseph Bellomo said. “A lot (of people) relate architecture to a memory. That’s good and bad.”

All three architects profiled in the main article — Bellomo, Bob Peterson and David Solnick — have served on the ARB (Solnick chairs the board this year), which reviews

multi-family residential and commercial projects.

They have strong opinions about the city process for guiding home design. Each objects to a recent city rule regarding garages. None could build their homes as designed today, according to the new law.

The so-called “contextual garage” guideline forces a homeowner to have “a certain kind of garage (front or back) if your neighbors have a certain kind of garage. I don’t think that should be legislated. I think it should be considered strongly in design review,” Solnick said.

“In trying to solve the worst problems, they take out the best solutions,” Peterson added.

“Design review is a two-edged sword,” Solnick said. “If you don’t have good design review, it can be worse than nothing at all.”

He added, however, “Palo Alto zoning is relatively stylistically progressive, not written in a way that mandates a style.”

As for who really impacts the architectural norm, Solnick looks to larger forces at work.

“Personally, I think one of the most influential persons on architecture is Steve Jobs, because the type of design he does wears off on other things. . . . Everybody knows we’re very tuned into iPods and computers and iPhones, not just into engineering and software, but their design and interface. That has sensitized people into how they look at design.” ■

—Carol Blitzer



Architect Joe Bellomo walks near the pool fronting his new residence; his trellis above the master-bedroom balcony doubles as solar panels. Right, Bellomo seismically upgraded and renovated his 1928 bungalow, then connected it to his new home via a glass breezeway. From the backyard, one can see how the three structures are linked by courtyards and the breezeway.



ing at Cornell University’s Sloan-Kettering Institute in New York. Ultimately, he was unhappy spending so much time in the lab, and he began to explore design professions.

After earning his architecture degree at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he came to the Bay Area and began working on low-income housing projects before spinning out on his own. His strong interest is in small multi-family projects; he’s recently completed the design and construction of three units in Downtown North.

“You don’t have to do cookie-cutter stuff. Developers take great risks and tend to be conservative. . . . I’m partly doing this as a demo project for other developers,” he said, noting that he’s getting \$100 per square foot more in sales than the neighbor did recently and two of the three units are already sold.

Looking back at the now-of-disrespected houses of the 1960s and ’70s, Solnick places the blame on developers who missed the point.

“Modernism was a very powerful movement, with a very strong and clear philosophy. What got extracted from Modernism was minimalism for its own sake,” he said.

“Developers were on the forefront: They thought ‘we can strip all the details and people will love it.’ They took the soul out and called it minimalism. . . . The reason Modernism is having somewhat of a comeback is people realize it’s possible and we’re doing it.”

Bob Peterson, 74, knew he wanted to become an architect since finishing high school in Arizona, where he’d been exposed to Frank Lloyd Wright’s ideas. He was one of the first graduates of Stanford University’s Art and Architecture Department, where he earned a master’s degree and taught for 10 years.

His hero today is still the early Modernist Le Corbusier, and he admires much of local architect Birge Clark’s work — although he does not design in the same vernacular.

“I wouldn’t do it (Spanish style) and it

doesn’t make sense, but he did a very good job with orientation, circulation and massing. You could take off the tile roof, get rid of the arches — and it still works well.”

His first job was under Modernist Edward Durrell Stone, while he was designing Stanford Hospital. His second was with Victor Thompson, who chaired Stanford’s architecture department. Ultimately he went out on his own.

As for articulating his own design philosophy, Peterson is clear that he doesn’t “design in styles.”

“Those are superficial and meaningless,” he said, and can’t really be defined until 500 years have passed, he said. Instead, he approaches projects based on design problems: climate and orientation (e.g., where to put the garden), and circulation (i.e., what spaces need to be next to each other).

“We purposely hold off ‘the look,’ which designs itself after dealing with the first two (issues),” he said. “It comes out looking as it comes out looking.”

Peterson uses certain elements, such as trellises, because he finds them efficient and useful. And they let in plenty of light.

And he’s fond of steel, which tends not to interrupt the view; he notes that two columns of steel do the work of four columns of wood.

He’s also into “honesty” in materials. “I like to use real materials that look like what they are — arches that hold something up, concrete that doesn’t look like wood.”

For his own home, Peterson acknowledges that he needed his wife to serve as a client and help organize their needs. He had already designed the Menlo Park home where he and Clydine raised their four boys. This one was “an adult house” but with seemingly endless possibilities.

The biggest challenge was creating the right spaces on that 1/8-acre lot. His solution was to angle the home, building around a tall redwood tree on the north side, encroaching on setbacks where he could, to allow more space for the garden to face southeast.

Rather than creating a grand statement, Peterson said, “The outside should be handsome but modest. When you open the front door, it should knock your socks off.” Downstairs are the public spaces, with few walls and very high ceilings, plus his wife’s fiber-art studio.

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Cover Story

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Upstairs is a guest room and office bridged by a catwalk lined with bookshelves, leading to the master bedroom suite. Leaning out from his upstairs office, Peterson can wave at his wife in her downstairs studio.

Brick flooring leads one from the driveway and entry inside all the way through the downstairs. The groutless bricks were set in wet mortar and sealed — although they remain a cleaning challenge. Peterson's home does not require air conditioning. Instead, environmentally friendly climate control is woven into the design, from the 18-foot-wide exterior folding glass

doors to the operable skylights and radiant heating in the floor (which heats objects, rather than air).

"I think from inside out. I put fairly fluid spaces together, see how it fits on the site," he said, adding that he is constantly defining spaces by ceiling heights, partial and full walls, or the continuation of flooring from inside to outside.

As for how well his styles will hold up, Peterson said, "I hope not to be trendy. That ages things very quickly and is so superficial. I keep reminding myself, go back to fundamentals, to things that make sense."

Perhaps the most "modern" of the three architects is Joe Bellomo, 53, who grew up on the Peninsula near a cherry/apricot farm, yet considers himself a "city boy" who enjoys living and working downtown.

A graduate of St. Francis High School in Mountain View, he started as a carpenter before studying with both expert builders and architects in Europe and the United States.

"I merged hands-on with architecture education," he said. His heroes range from Renzo Piano, designer of Paris' Pompidou Centre, to Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, who did the recent M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San

Francisco.

He's probably best known locally for his design of the Alma-High streets public parking garage, and he was cited last year by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) for a major, contemporary remodel of a traditional Crescent Park home.

He too is not a fan of derivative architecture: "You can't create a Victorian today. If you have that kind of dough, do it right," he said, pointing with pride to his home's ability to generate electricity to give back to the grid.

That contemporary home overlooks Johnson Park, adjacent to the 1928 bungalow Bellomo's lived in since 1979 and a rustic, one-bed-

room granny unit he added in back, made of recycled maple plywood on the inside (with the screws exposed "expressing attachments and material") and 3/4-inch by 3/4-inch narrow wooden strips on the outside.

Bellomo doesn't describe what he's designing as modern.

"I try to be as true as possible with what we have to work with. I express the material," he said. "Green and sustainable is instinctive to me. I continue to explore the minimalization of materials we use. You can make concrete and glass and steel warm. I think 'modern' can be homey and is homey."

His new house, which is connected to the old house by a glass breezeway, sits well back from the street under towering trees. Bellomo's goal was to fit his new creation into the older neighborhood by minimizing its footprint, using larger setbacks from neighboring property lines, and incorporating solar panels as both a functional and decorative trellis-like element over the second-floor, master-bedroom balcony.

Bellomo chose unusual ways to integrate inner and outer spaces: His front "lawn" is made of gravel, which continues into the courtyard, where it surrounds the pool. Another atypical element is the wire-mesh fence, which is filled with gravel. When rocks slip through the spaces, and the fence fails to provide privacy, Bellomo simply scoops up some of the gravel and drops it back between the mesh layers.

Inside the home's basement, light streams into two bedrooms and a bath through light wells at the side, as well as through a high window that looks into the swimming pool, giving the effect of watching an aquarium.

Upstairs is the master bedroom suite, with high windows affording privacy to the Bellomos and their neighbors. Glass walls enclose the toilet, turning the cubicle into a steam room.

No Sheetrock adorns this home, with its concrete floor plates filled with hydroponic piping. Bellomo points to the solidity of materials that don't leak, attract mold or termites, and stand up well in earthquake country.

What Bellomo is seeking is "that expression of material, structure — the bones of the building expressed. . . . Context is important." He is not concerned that his glass and metal garage door is in sharp contrast to his more traditional neighbor's home.

"I've been here so long; I love this neighborhood. I will only live here," he said. "It's not a gated community." ■

Assistant Editor Carol Blitzer can be e-mailed at cblitzer@pawweekly.com.

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Joe Bellomo's street-front fence is made of gravel dropped between layers of steel mesh.