

Carver + Schicketanz

ARCHITECTS · PLANNERS · INTERIOR DESIGNERS



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DID IT DROP FROM THE SKY? THE TURTLE HOUSE FLOATS ABOVE THE FOREST FLOOR IN A REMOTE BIG SUR CANYON 13 MILES SOUTH OF CARMEL

CARMEL, CA—(May 30, 2006)—The two-story steel and redwood home seems to float above the forest floor in Big Sur’s Garrapata Canyon, with each of its rooms cantilevered over the rushing creek that twists through the property.

The house is made practically invisible because it appears to be wrapped in redwood. In fact, the exterior of the residence is covered with 1/8” steel which was applied vertically to emulate abstracted redwood tree bark.

“The result,” says architect Robert Carver of Carver + Schicketanz Architects in Carmel, “is a home that blends in so well that most people are not aware of it when they drive by.”

Known as the Turtle House because of its unique six-sided floor plan, designed to take advantage of the views of the creek and to undulate in and around the giant redwoods, the home is the retirement/vacation residence of former Silicon Valley executives Richard and Sally Taylor.

A few years ago, the Taylors, ardent conservationists who founded the Conservation Agency, began looking for a special spot to build a retirement home on the Monterey-Carmel Peninsula.

Searching during his lunch hours, Richard, then Vice President of Manufacturing for Toshiba, found a 10 acre property in Big Sur in isolated Garrapata Canyon, a redwood forest 13 miles south of Carmel. “It looked like Muir Woods,” said Richard. “We called it the Enchanted Forest.”

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Garrapata Creek, one of the largest tributaries on the coast, flowed through the property, winding its way around the site. Even though the Enchanted Forest was beautiful, the acreage was landlocked, with no right of way to the road and separated from the road by the roaring creek. But a spring bubbled out of the mountain side that could provide water and it looked as if the property could accommodate a septic system.

Taylor and his wife Sally, then comptroller for Cisco Systems, found the property too “compelling” to pass up. Over the next few months they negotiated the purchase of the scenic acreage, and also acquired a right of way to the nearest road. “We wanted to preserve the land,” said Taylor, “and we wanted to preserve the ecosystems. We knew it was a unique spot.”

“After we bought the land, we begin asking ourselves, what kind of home we could build here,” said Taylor. “We wanted something small but different; something that would fit into the forest. We also wanted something that would be earthquake resistant and fire resistant and have no maintenance. We didn’t want to take any of the trees down. And then we went looking for someone who would be creative enough to work with us to design this crazy thing, and we heard about this young architect that lived in the area who was very creative. We sought him out and liked him and began the process.”

That architect was Rob Carver, one of the original contributors to the Big Sur Land Use Plan. Carver, who specializes in coastal land use planning as well as the use of green technologies, is dedicated to creating sustainable projects which fully integrate the needs of his clients with the nature of their sites. He has a special affinity for Big Sur, and his feeling for this site was no exception.

Carver proposed the “Turtle House” design, a two story six sided home with a steel core that would be built over or around the creek, with each of the rooms of the residence cantilevered over the water. The home was shaped loosely like a turtle, with two short lengths running opposite each other and four long lengths...

But before the home could be built, Carver and the Taylors began what became a protracted eight and a half year permitting process with the Monterey County Planning Department. During this time, Carver created three designs that he felt met the needs of the clients and the nature and challenges of the site.

“Our first design was to build a bridge to allow equipment to cross the creek to install the septic system and then build the House on that bridge,” said Carver. “That would have been the smallest impact on the site. Instead the Planning Commission recommended that we site the house on the other side of the road.

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“Our second design accomplished this, but the planning commission then decided that side was too steep! By this point we had proven that there was only one other possible site left on the property—the one that we liked the most but never thought they would let us build on. The third design was for the house that was built, and it was on the prime site.”

Carver and his new partner Mary Ann Schicketanz designed the home to be transparent with the environment. Once the site was selected, workmen hand dug to locate and avoid the roots of the redwoods on the property. Holes were drilled and concrete piers were poured between the roots. Steel I beams were laid on the piers to float the entire house gently above the forest floor, and the fabricated steel was applied to the exterior to look like redwood. Most of the rooms of the 1360 square foot two story home feel like they cantilever over the creek.

The Taylors also gave Carver other requirements. “We wanted a home theatre, two bathrooms, and a galley kitchen where we could work together,” said Richard Taylor. “We wanted to be able to see the forest; we wanted a library. Upstairs, we wanted complete privacy, with only a bedroom and bathroom.

“Most houses we lived in had the living room to the side that nobody uses. We told Rob we wanted the living room to be the center of the house, so that wherever you go, you are forced to use it.

“Rob incorporated our wishes with an absolutely unique, you’ll never see anything like it design,” said Taylor. “He measured where the trees were and came up with a design to flow around them. Where the head of the turtle would be is a bridge deck with a triangle shape. The deck holds a hot tub surrounded by heated green granite.”

The home, true to the Taylor’s request has a master bed and bath upstairs, in a 245 square foot loft master suite. The 1115 square foot first floor contains the living room and kitchen, a media room that doubles as a guest room, library, and a second bath.

The home is angular, and the outside is steel, yet it blends into the forest so that it is like living in the woods, with floor to ceiling windows to incorporate the view.

Rob also recommended a true mechanic of a builder, Bob Haller, who noticed that there were century old redwood trees lying on the property that had been cut in 1895 by the lumbermen who used to work the site and couldn’t move the trees out. The trees had rotted on the outside, but what remained was an eight foot diameter old growth redwood. Each log weighed 20,000 to 30,000 pounds.

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Haller bought a mill, set it up on the property, and made lumber to build the house. Haller also constructed a system of cable cars to move the logs to the highway to be inspected and then back to the house where they were assembled.

The interiors of the home feature off white walls and light glossy maple floors. Lighting designer Donald Maxy custom designed the interior and exterior lighting, including outside lighting that at 700 THz is the same frequency as moonlight. The lights shine up out of the ground into the forest—part of the enchantment.

“Rob wanted the house to look like it dropped from the sky, and that no damage to the spot had been done,” said Taylor. “That was his vision. And he succeeded. People stop and say, ‘Where’s the road?’ ‘How did you get it here?’ It’s an example to everyone of what they should do.”

Design Team:

Architect: Carver + Schicketanz

Partner in Charge: Robert Carver

Builder: Bob Haller

Lighting Design: Donald Maxy

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