

Home & Garden

The Inside Story

How California architect David Hertz designed his own house to be both environmentally and family friendly—without sacrificing style



By Christy Hobart • Photographs by Chad Holder






An open floor plan allows warm or cool air to circulate. Sophie descends the stairs while Max plays on the dining-room floor and Collin plays Nintendo in the family room, which has a low ceiling for a cozy feel. The hallway between the staircase and the kitchen leads out to a courtyard that houses the children's swings and Ping-Pong table.

Nine-year-old Collin Hertz enthusiastically leads visitors around his house in Venice, California, pointing out the things that make it so special: temperature-controlled windows that open and close on their own, bath tiles embedded with bits of "trash," a couple of living paintings by Dodd Holsapple. He's particularly proud of these see-through, antfarmlike boxes filled with dirt and plants. "Sometimes you can find worms in them," Collin says. "They're very cool."

Indeed, the whole place is very cool. Designed and built five years ago by Collin's father, eco-architect David Hertz, the house is a laboratory where Hertz senior tests new ideas and materials. Though the lot he had to work with measures a scant 40 by 90 feet, Hertz created an open, airy house by taking advantage of vertical space and natural light: Doorless rooms with 11-foot-high ceilings and huge windows flow seamlessly into each other—and into a series of courtyards, decks, and patios. Hertz, who worked for Ron Lautner and Frank Gehry before starting his own firm, Syndesis, in 1984, says he identifies strongly with the philosophies of Frank Lloyd Wright. In other words, he believes that buildings should be designed with nature and their surroundings in mind—that architects should take their cues from specific sites, climates, and views, using local materials whenever possible. His house is a



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3-D embodiment of such sentiments. With its sharp angles and hard materials, it's far more modern than the houses around it. But modernism, Hertz points out, is more indigenous to southern California than faux colonial or Cape Cod styles.

Despite its striking looks and numerous environmental bells and whistles, the building is surprisingly comfortable. In addition to serving as Hertz's laboratory, it's home to his family: wife Stacy, seven-year-old daughter Sophie, and sons Collin and Max, age four. And their real lives are on display here—literally. Rather than install cabinets that would hog precious floor space, the Hertzes keep their dishes out on industrial, stainless steel kitchen racks. Instead of hiding playthings in a chest, they've arranged their children's toys, like little works of art, inside open-front boxes hung on the wall. "Architects should work to balance their built environments with the natural environment," David Hertz explains. "And human beings are a part of the natural environment."

The master bedroom *invites the outdoors in, through convertible screen doors and large windows made of heat-mirror laminated glass, which reflects heat away while still allowing sunlight to stream in. Stacy heads back inside from the "sleeping porch," where daybeds, chairs, and tables—all crafted from plantation-grown teak—mingle with containers filled with fragrant, drought-tolerant plants, including Mexican sage and Spanish lavender.*





In addition to serving as his home. Real life is on

Max, opposite, grabs a toy from one of the drawers incorporated into the base of his bed, designed by his mother, Stacy, and crafted of renewable apple plywood. This page, clockwise from top left: In Sophie's room, vintage toys and lunchboxes become art; instead of using chemical-laden cleaners, Hertz simply hoses down his concrete floors, which don't collect dust and mold the way carpet can; by rejecting a pitched roof, the architect "picked up free usable square footage" above the house, where a greenhouse cuddles Stacy's orchid collection.



*Hertz's laboratory, this is
display here—literally.*





Genius in the Details

- Hertz chooses plants that will thrive in his hot, dry yard without excessive watering or fertilizing. But instead of limiting himself to indigenous species, he supplements California natives, including this festuca and agave, with imports from places that have similar climates, such as Australia and South Africa.
- The cushions on the outdoor furniture are made of organic cotton fill and covered in organic brushed-cotton denim. Unlike fabrics manufactured for out-

door use, cotton is machine washable and doesn't promote mold growth. The sun keeps them bleached white, and Hertz removes any stains with salt.

- Hidden in a small penthouse on the roof, this control panel regulates the solar-heated water used in all the faucets. Some of it is also circulated through the concrete floor, keeping the house warm. "It's a zero-maintenance system," Hertz says. And one that works. "It takes less energy to heat this house than it does to power a 60-watt lightbulb."



- To avoid the typical under-stairs closet that collects a jumble of soon-forgotten stuff, Hertz created an accessible, and elegant, storage unit. Though the architect rarely builds with new timber, he couldn't resist this Douglas fir. "If I use wood," he explains, "I'm going to show it. It's never wasted behind walls."
- Sinks and counters in the kitchen and bathrooms are made of Syndecrete, a product Hertz developed by mixing concrete with industrial by-products and post-consumer waste, including old electronic com-

ponents, brass screw shavings, and glass chips. Cracks can appear, but, says Hertz, "That's what's nice about nature. Things aren't totally perfect."

- Instead of wasting a tree on an expected picket fence, Hertz surrounded his house with a rammed-earth wall, made from the building site's leftover concrete, dirt, and sand. 🐘

For more on David Hertz and his favorite building materials, see Resources on page 126 or visit www.organicstyle.com.