

## Interview with Daniel Monti of Modal Design

David Kubiczky

Like a great work of art, I love it when I encounter a house whose design stops me in my tracks and gives me something to think about. That's what happened recently when I came across the Walnut Residence, a Venice single family home designed by Los Angeles based architect Daniel Monti. The use of cor-ten steel on the exterior of the house is immediately evocative of a Richard Serra sculpture, yet Daniel manages a delicate aesthetic through its shaping and perforation. Venice, with its decidedly eclectic character, is the perfect location this home, which embodies some unique and daring design elements. A couple constraints worth noting are the lot size, which is fairly small at 30' x 120', and a tree in the backyard with a trunking measuring 5' in diameter that would remain untouched. The resulting design is a two-level, 2700 square foot gem that is a photo-op from the street, and a place of comfort on the inside.

I first learned of Daniel Monti at the Dwell on Design conference this past June where his firm, Modal Design, had a booth on the show floor. I subsequently met with him at his mid-city studio to learn more about the evolution of the Walnut Residence's design and his approach to architecture, in general. Daniel has great energy about him. He's sharp, engaging, and very passionate about his work - exactly the kind of person that I'd be thrilled to have leading a project for me.

Here's my Q&A with Daniel, as well as several more photos of the Walnut House....

### Daniel Monti Q&A

#### AL: You've lived in many places in your life. How did you come to settle in the Los Angeles area?

DM: My wife and I were still dating while I was attending GSD (Harvard Graduate School of Design) and there was always an interest in living in a place that fostered good design. For us that meant Los Angeles, New York, or maybe San Francisco. Los Angeles offered more opportunities to work on progressive architecture and ground-up houses, remodels, and new construction projects in general. San Francisco, by comparison, has more traditional, provincial homes. New York would have been mostly apartments, remodels and office spaces. Of course, the weather in Southern California was a factor in our decision as well. Admittedly, we were a bit naïve about the impact great weather has on your lifestyle, but nonetheless, we were drawn to the progressive nature of the city. We've definitely become addicted to this place.



#### AL: What or who inspired you to become an architect?

DM: I wouldn't say that a particular architect inspired me; instead I draw upon the experiences of where I've been and what I've seen. I've been extremely lucky to live in a number of diverse countries, with dramatically different people, culture, language and architecture. I've seen so many different places and I'm heavily influenced by memories and experiences of spaces. I'm a very visual person. I enjoy seeing how people in various parts of the world use spaces that they live in.

#### AL: What do you enjoy most about your work?

DM: I love hearing people's ideas, learning about how they live, and then conveying, through architecture, what is important to them. My goal is to bring something new and inventive to the process that they didn't expect as part of that translation process. I also love the challenge of the unknown that comes with the work. Our office operates on the premise of learning something new every day. We feel that pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone is a good thing.



#### AL: Generally speaking, is there a primary goal or principal that you strive to achieve in any given design?

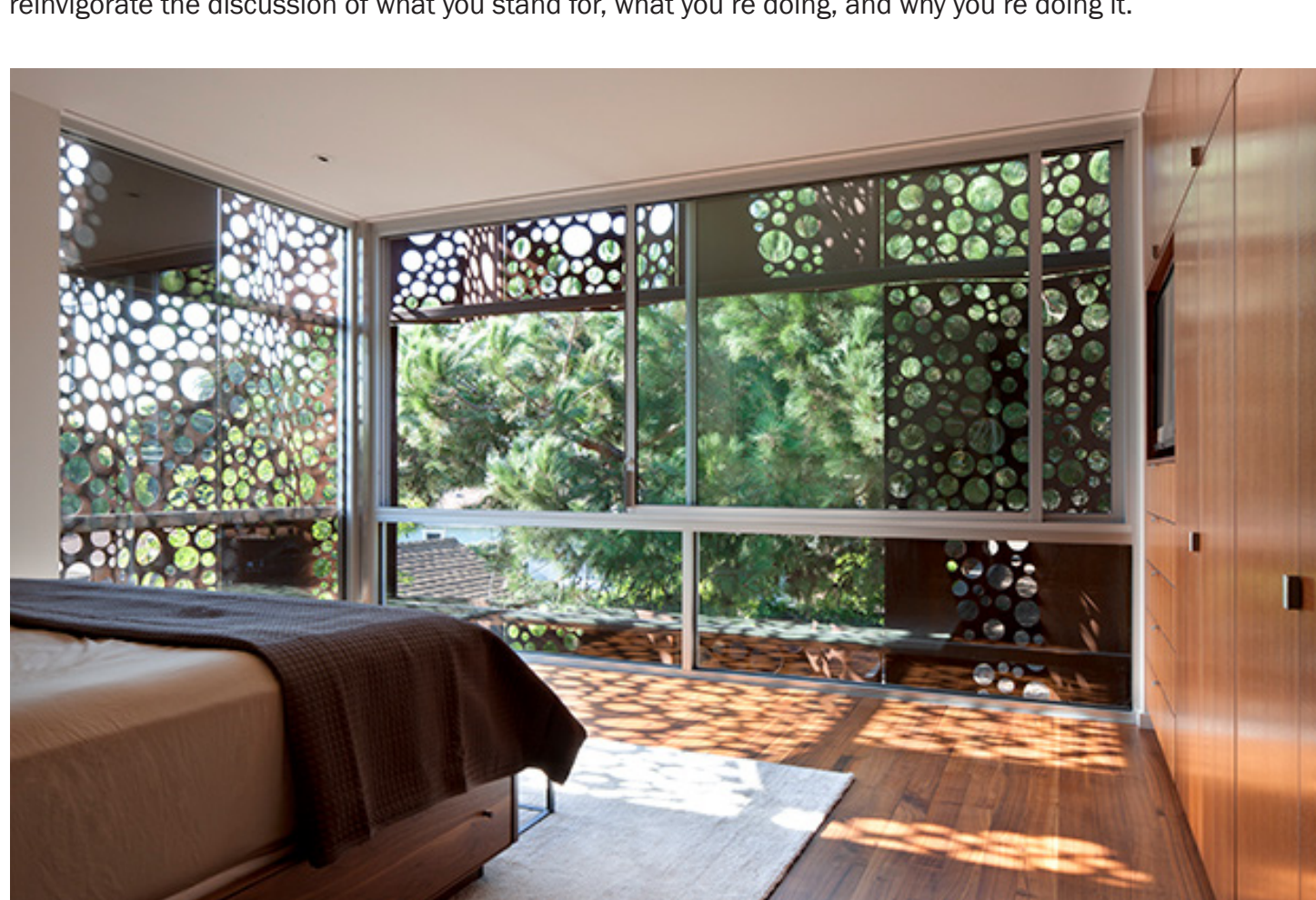
DM: I think the most noticeable thing for non-architects would be the restraint and simplicity in our projects. Because there's so much visual clutter around us constantly grasping for our attention our office strives to create houses with a restrained simplicity that have a timeless, almost classic quality. Another key element that we play with in our projects is light. With the abundant light we have in Southern California a simple skylight, a thoughtfully placed window, or a special light-well can dramatically change the way a space feels.

#### AL: When embracing a new approach to some element of a design, to what extent does that happen due to the project's constraints versus simply exploring a new idea?

DM: I suppose we have a predilection towards design that is modern, clean, and not overly fussy, but we approach each project as an investigation of a client's desires; not with a pre-defined set of looks or styles. Our process is based on exploring how we can interpret a client's desires and ideas, as well as other opportunities or constraints; the site and its characteristics, city requirements, etc. Our better projects are ones in which the client is open-minded about the investigative process; that faith or willingness to explore ultimately brings us all to something that no one could really foresee. What this means is that not a lot of our work looks the same.

#### AL: Bold, new designs are always interesting. But why are new areas of design also important?

DM: I wouldn't say that we have an agenda to do work that is bold and new per se but it's often the case that there are better ways of doing things that you wouldn't discover without pushing yourself, or a client, or a program into new territory. For example, in the course of designing the Walnut House and performing a series of light studies we really began to question why we don't always strive to use more natural light, in better ways, in our homes. I believe new ideas, new forms, new materials push our perceptions about our environments and ultimately about our lifestyles and living habits. Without these things people tend towards complacency; they stop paying attention. Our firm is constantly aware of that tendency and we are interested in new ideas because they help you reengage where you are and what you're looking at. They reinvigorate the discussion of what you stand for, what you're doing, and why you're doing it.



#### AL: Are there any signature elements in your work that would enable someone to recognize a project as yours?

DM: I don't think that we have a signature look although lately it seems we have a tendency to paint our buildings brown. (laughs) We're not an office that's stylistically driven, which can be a challenge for us in its own way because clients often like to have an idea ahead of time of what to expect from an architect. With us, you're getting a process, which isn't a tangible thing.

#### AL: What would you characterize as the most important element of design that affects one's experience of their home?

DM: That ties into what I was just saying a moment ago. After spending a lot of time in the Walnut House, I have a whole new perspective and appreciation of the ways in which natural light can bring a space to life. Especially if you manipulate the way the light enters a space or volume, it changes the way a room feels throughout the year. It can be so transformative that you may use a space in one way during one part of the year and use it differently during another; it can be an element of delight - something that wasn't even anticipated beforehand.

#### AL: The cor-ten panels used on the exterior of the Walnut house are beautiful to look at and their utility as a screen casts stunning shadows within the house. Do they also hold a structural value or purpose?

DM: At the Walnut house we didn't choose the cor-ten panels for their potential structural value but rather evaluated them from the outset for the manipulation of light. We did however come out of the project with the realization of two other benefits that the panels bring. One of those things is the artistic, sculptural value they bring to the facade of the house. The other is that because of the way the panels are mounted to the building, there is an air gap between the screen and the building and the panels actually shade the structure, keeping it cooler and reducing heat gain during the summer months. We ended up working with an engineering company to model the heat gain / heat loss of the building with, and without, the panels. The study found that there was a 20 percent energy savings with the panels.

#### AL: What are you currently working on and when will it be complete?

DM: We are working on a substantial remodel of a house in Malibu with a 270 degree view of the ocean. We're in meetings with the City for planning approval on that. Hopefully we'll break ground around Thanksgiving and the work will probably take about another 10 months. We also are designing an Episcopal church, education building and parish hall in the mountains of Arizona in the small town of Payson, north of Phoenix. It's a great project involving a site that has stands of mature chaparral pines and about 100 feet of level change. It's a project that's been ongoing for a couple of years and they've initiated a significant fundraising effort in order to start construction. We are hopeful they'll secure enough funds for us to start back up in January. We have a number of other "potentials" but I'm superstitious - I don't want to jinx it.

#### AL: Do you have a dream project?

DM: No, not specifically. For us, it's about the excitement of working with interesting clients. Our dream is to work with people that appreciate and hire us for our skill set; who want to participate in the process but trust that our experience and our process will deliver something unforgettable.