

HOUSE OF THE ISSUE > MODAL DESIGN

Daniel Monti wraps the geometric Walnut house in a folded facade of Cor-ten steel.

By Michael Webb



Daniel Monti describes the house he and his firm Modal Design created for his parents in Venice as “a collision of opposites.”

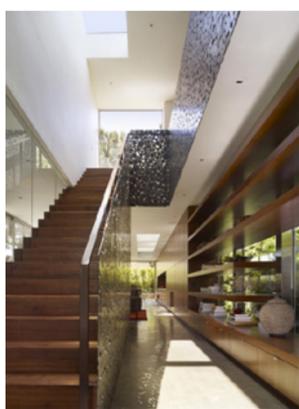
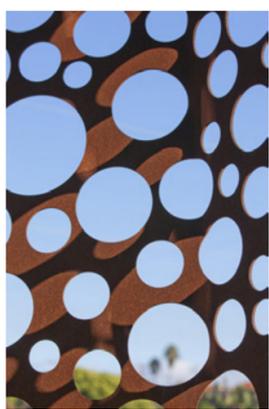
The rectilinear nature of the house’s two levels contrasts with a huge stone pine that juts over the rear of the structure, while the shimmering play of light and shade through its branches is echoed in the patterns cast by the upper level’s perforated accordion-like facade. Circles are punched in a folded screen of rough hewn and solid Cor-ten steel wrapped around the bedrooms, which sits atop a smooth, light, and long glazed bar of living spaces. The steel will weather like the bark of the tree, offsetting the smooth white expanses of the interior walls.



The house is nestled under a huge pine tree (left) and a view of the backyard from the dining room (right)

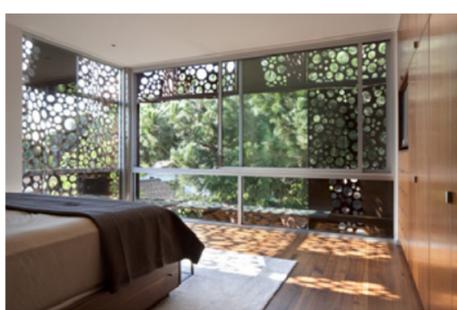
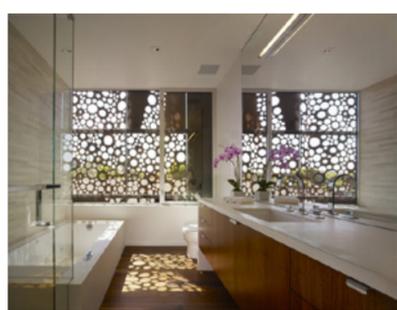
“Contrasting textures, light conditions, color, and materials, make each appear to stand out more,” said Monti. “It’s the manner in which a material is used and its relationship to other elements, not the material itself, that increases awareness on the part of the viewer.”

Monti was born in Venezuela, and had lived in seven countries by the time he turned 18, exposing him to a diversity of cultures and architectural traditions. He received his M. Arch from the Harvard GSD, and worked for Marmol Radziner before establishing Modal Design in 2004. His experience feeds into his precocious mastery of form, space, and light, all evident in the Walnut house, which is named for the street in Venice on which it sits.



Left to right: Perforations in the Cor-ten facade cast shadows on the floor; detail of the Cor-ten facade; detail of the custom banister along the stair; a central stair unifies the interior.

The home first appears as a composition of three volumes: the chocolate stucco cube of the garage to the left, the recessed band of glazing to the right, and the upper-level screen, cut away to frame the windows. The open-plan living areas are treated as an architectural promenade through layered spaces, in which each step brings a new sensation. A small glazed office behind the garage frames the linear pool along the south face of the house, and the living areas open onto this walled side yard and onto the century-old pine, which finally reveals its immensity. Seating and kitchen cabinets are treated as floating islands.



Left to right: The Cor-ten facade; the patterned facade screen filters light and privacy in the bathroom; Small perforations create geometric shadows in the bedroom.

A primary goal of the design was to exploit the plentiful Southern California light. Folds in the Cor-ten screen cast changing shadows over the exterior, and the circular openings act as sundials to record the hours and seasons inside. Light becomes a sculptural presence that adds depth to every space and surface. A linear band of skylights reveals the extended branches of the stone pine, which cast a dappled pattern of sun and shadow across the polished concrete floor, balancing the light flooding in through wide glass sliders. The staircase balustrade is composed of the steel discs that were laser-cut from the Cor-ten screen, spot-welded to create a tactile enclosure that mirrors the thousand points of light playing over oiled walnut floors.

The house feels more spacious than its 2,700 square feet would suggest, thanks to its good proportions, refined detailing, and the intimate connection with the outdoors. Though a delicate and skillfully balanced composition, more than anything, the Walnut house feels livable.