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# Nature through the front door







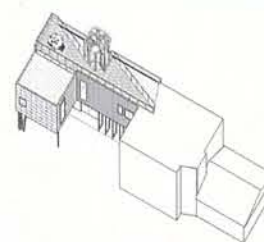
## How a small cottage in Venice Beach, California, was transformed into a two-storey home wrapped in greenery, inside and out

By Adele Weder

The narrative of 509 Brooks Avenue in Los Angeles begins at the front gateway, with an intriguing filigree of leaf shapes laser cut into a wide metal frame. The gate, made of slatted orford cedar, hints at the architecture within, through slivered views of the house and garden. In this neighbourhood, with its cryptically solid gates, it makes for an unusually open and intriguing gesture, says Vancouver-based designer Marc Bricault: "Venice's recent urban history has been about barricading oneself in. This was an opportunity to give something back to the street."

The house began life almost 70 years ago as a tiny weekend cottage when Venice Beach served primarily as a seaside retreat. It grew with the neighbourhood, tripling in size via a fairly conventional 1980s extension of the main floor and a second-floor addition. Bricault's renovation transforms the formerly nondescript SoCal house into a kind of West Coast Alhambra, rich with detailed, patterned walls and harbouring its own elaborate ecosystem.

Bricault doubled the home's existing footprint from a floor space of 140 square metres to just



Project

### Brooks Avenue House

Architect

**Marc Bricault,  
Bricault Design**

Location

**Venice Beach,  
California**

Elevation

**6.2 m**

Building size

**300 m<sup>2</sup>**

Lot size

**490 m<sup>2</sup>**

Climate

**Mediterranean**

Structural materials

**Steel, wood, glass,  
living wall panels**

Green features

**Green roof, living  
wall, grey water  
recycling, solar  
panels, hot water  
recirculation loop,  
non-toxic finishes**





over 300, wrapping it around the lot to generate an indoor-outdoor sanctuary for the family. The extension begins with a corridor glazed from floor to ceiling on either side, which brings in the courtyard vista on one side and, on the other, lush foliage along the house's northeastern facade. By day a playroom and by night a dinner-party theatre, this crucial component lacks a proper name for its variegated purpose. The owners call it the brise-soleil. Bricault dubbed it the extended garden room. "You sense that the garden just slips underneath and comes up the other side," he explains. Or perhaps "flex space"? Technically accurate, but too banal by far. Better to call it the central nervous system, linking the house's far-flung sections and purposes, from kitchen to carport to rooftop boardwalk.

The Brooks Avenue house is more graphic than volumetric, its narrative unfurling in two-dimensional cladding rather than three-dimensional space. Aside from the courtyard's Neutra-esque wall of pivoting doors, the house departs from typical West Coast modern styles. Rather than craning upward and outward in search of a thumbnail of ocean view, the house focuses inward, toward its own courtyard, greenery and craftwork. In this largely open plan, the transition between spaces and programs is cued by changes in patterns and materials.

At the plan's heart is the winding interior staircase to the second floor and rooftop. Here, the stainless steel spindles are repeated in the rooftop railings, and echoed in the splayed columns of the seismic X-braces that support the staircase and carport.

Sustainability features include a grey water recycling system, natural ventilation strategies and a rooftop garden. But the visually dominant feature – the architectural billboard of green design – is the home's living wall. Wrapped around three sides of the master bedroom module, and visible from almost every vantage point inside and out, the wall and its contiguous

**Rather than searching for a thumbnail of ocean view, the house focuses inward, toward its own courtyard, greenery and craftwork**

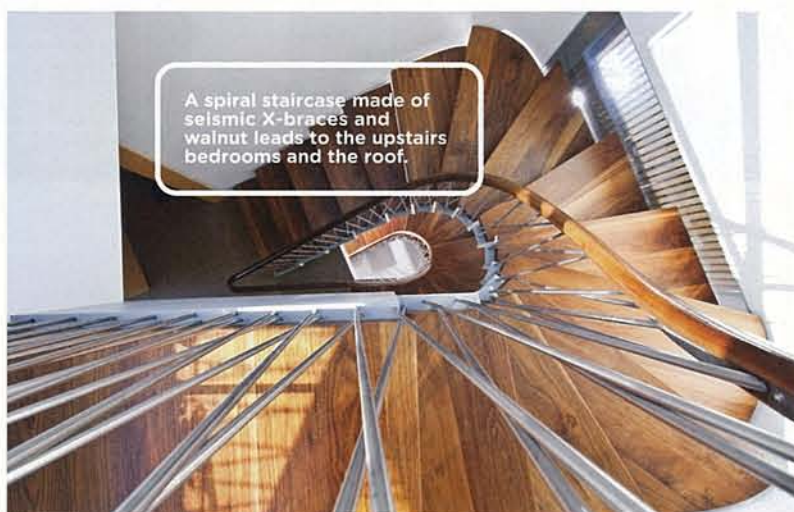




Marble and Byzantine glass mosaic tiles form a pattern of carp swimming on the shower floor.



The remodelled kitchen includes Caesarstone countertops, a Julien sink and Miele appliances.

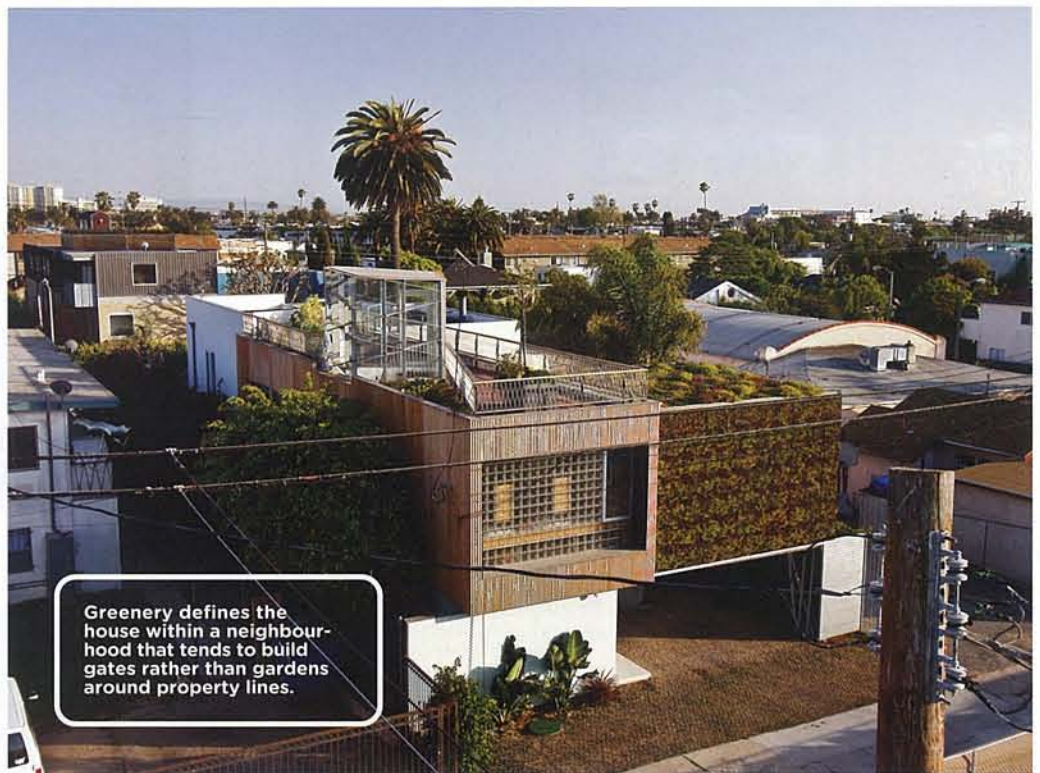


A spiral staircase made of seismic X-braces and walnut leads to the upstairs bedrooms and the roof.

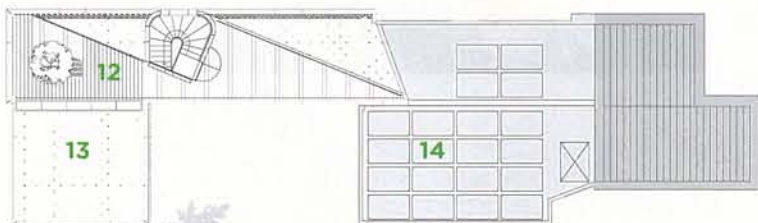


Bricault calls the glazed corridor an extended garden room. "You sense that the garden just slips underneath and comes up the other side."

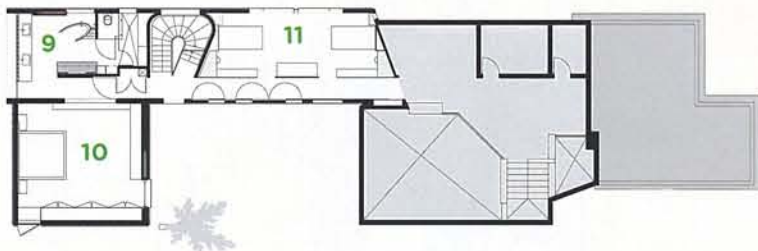




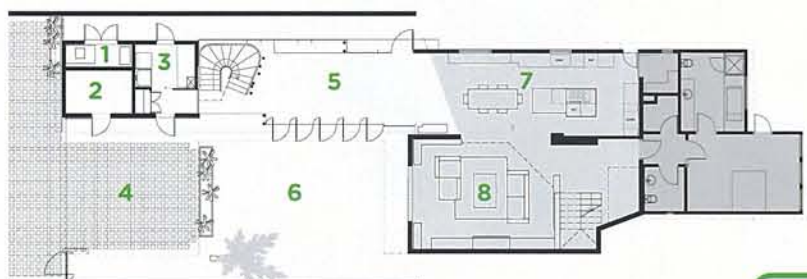
#### Rooftop



#### Second floor



#### Ground floor



- 1 Mechanical
- 2 Storage
- 3 Laundry
- 4 Carport
- 5 Main hall
- 6 Courtyard
- 7 Kitchen
- 8 Living room
- 9 Master bathroom
- 10 Master bedroom
- 11 Bedroom
- 12 Green roof
- 13 Vegetable garden
- 14 Solar panels

rooftop boast a tongue-twisting array of plant species, all irrigated by recycled household water. A concealed system affixed to the bedroom's three exterior walls supports the greenery, insulating the space within and visually defining the entire property. The foliage segues into the laser-cut tulip pattern of the Juliet balcony, which in turn throws haunting shadows onto the bedroom ceilings as night falls.

What's going on here? So much detail, so much surface representation for a West Coast modernist. Bricault honed his design skills by working in construction and then furniture design. His laptop brims with collected images that evoke the exuberant patterns embedded in his work. And his projects, from cafés to chocolate bar wrappers, are characterized by the manipulation and replication of patterns: a close-up of tomato flesh, the intersecting curves of train tracks, a section of tree bark, the delicate cell work of an insect-wing fragment. You can see this influence in the artisanal details within the house, like the hand-designed bathroom tiles depicting swimming carp. "The drive to detail – that's why I take pictures of tomatoes," Bricault says with a shrug.

The narrative of 509 Brooks Avenue ends in the back laneway, a typical alley filled with trash containers, rotting mattresses and bedraggled fences, a segment of public space almost universally neglected in North America. Yet this house's rear facade is as lavishly detailed as the front, imbuing the lonely alleyway with beauty and dignity – an opportunity, taken, to enrich and give back to the surrounding neighbourhood. **AZ**