

The logo consists of the letters 'D', 'f', and 'L' in a white, sans-serif font, separated by vertical lines. The entire logo is set against a solid orange background that is shaped like a house with a triangular roof.

DfL

Design for Living

Spring

MODERN IMAGINATION

THE WINNERS OF
THE AIA EAST BAY
RESIDENTIAL
DESIGN AWARDS

— SCULPTING A GARDEN

— THE ART OF GORDON HUETHER

— THE MODERN SENSIBILITY OF ROBERT SWATT

MODERN IN THE BLOOD

Architect Robert Swatt says he was born with a pencil in his hand. Judging by his prolific portfolio of award-winning projects, we believe him — by Sandra Ann Harris



Conrad house



ARCHITECTURAL MODELS FILL SWATT ARCHITECTS' BRIGHT EMERYVILLE OFFICE. THERE'S THE CLUSTER OF THREE DIMINUTIVE, SINGLE-ROOM TEAHOUSES UNDER CONSTRUCTION IN THE SOUTH BAY, SEVERAL 14,000-SQUARE-FOOT RESIDENCES, AND THE NEW, HIGHLY ACCLAIMED GREENCITY LOFTS IN EMERYVILLE, ONE OF THE FIRST MULTIFAMILY PROJECTS IN THE COUNTRY DESIGNED ACCORDING TO GREEN PRINCIPLES. EACH STUNNING IN ITS OWN WAY, THESE PROJECTS ARE JUST A SMALL SAMPLING OF THE PORTFOLIO OF ROBERT SWATT, FAIA, WHO HAS ATTAINED INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR CREATING HOMES THAT HAVE A MODERN SENSIBILITY BUT ALSO WARM, LIVABLE ELEMENTS AND A RESPECT FOR THE LOCAL TOPOGRAPHY.

"What you often hear about modern homes is that people don't know how to inhabit them," says architect and friend Pierluigi Serraino, author of *NorCalMod: Icons of Northern California Modernism*, as well as several other books about modern architecture. "They have too much glazing; they're cold; they're austere. People feel like they're living in a museum. You never have these problems with Bob's houses. They are so comfortable and livable. People can just be themselves."

Perhaps that's because building these homes is in Swatt's blood. "I think I came out of the womb with a pencil," he says. "I live and breathe architecture. This is my passion in life."

MODERN AT HEART

The 59-year-old architect grew up in Los Angeles and was inspired by early modernism. He attended the Richard

Neutra-designed Emerson Junior High School, with its 15-foot-tall sliding doors made of steel and glass, and his grandmother hired Rudolf M. Schindler, another modernist master, to design her Nobby Knit Shop. He graduated from UC Berkeley's architecture department in 1970 and went on to work under renowned architects Cesar Pelli and Howard A. Friedman. Swatt established his own firm in 1975 and since has been creating a diverse palette of design, from residential, commercial, and industrial to healthcare and educational.

Swatt made his mark in the national architectural community in 1993 when he designed Levi Strauss & Co.'s San Francisco headquarters, called the Icehouse. Swatt renovated two linked 1914 masonry buildings with a glass-and-steel structure. The resulting 200,000-square-foot sensation received high acclaim and numerous design awards.

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His breakthrough as a residential architect came a couple years later with his own East Bay home, where he still lives with his wife, Cristina, and three children. What made the 3,800-square-foot residence noteworthy was its informal design, its innovative placement on a challenging hillside lot, and its seamless integration with its surroundings. Employing a stepped construction, Swatt maximized the exposure to light and views, and turned the challenge of the site's slope into a unique design element. "The landscape feels like a room by the way the house is positioned relative to the hill," explains Renee Chow, an architect and professor at UC Berkeley. "The sense of what's inside and what's outside is not a distinct separation. There's really a flow between the two."

These elements—the knitting together of interior and exterior spaces, the use of open floor plans, and the creative use of materials—connect Swatt to California's long tradition of modern architecture. But Swatt makes it clear that his style is his own. "I'm not into 'isms,'" Swatt says. "Modernism is what they were doing in my grandmother's time. I like to say that what I'm doing is architecture 'of our time.' That's how it's modern."

Although *modern* was an ugly word for decades in Northern California, the architectural pendulum has finally swung back, a boon for Swatt, who is elated to be able to really focus on the California modern architecture that he says has "always been in my DNA." "There was very little market for this kind of work," explains Serrano. "Bob has survived waves of criticism and hostility. He had to fight a lot to be where he is."

Swatt's more than survived. "The world of design came around, and finally I can do what I love," he says. "I feel like the luckiest guy in town."

KUDOS AND MORE KUDOS

Swatt's love of—and proficiency with—the modernist style recently caught the attention of the architectural





community again, catapulting him once more into the limelight. In 2006 alone, three of his firm's projects were recognized by The American Institute of Architects, East Bay, for their outstanding design.

The 2,700-square-foot Conrad home in Sausalito was built on the site of a single-story 1950s home originally designed by architect Roger Lee. The building had suffered irreparable structural damage, prompting the owners to rebuild from scratch. Using post-and-beam construction, Swatt paid homage to the lost building, but he also infused a modern, open layout that maximizes the surrounding landscape and views.

Swatt's Gradman house, in the small community of Inverness Park, similarly focuses on the site's woodsy environment. The home's five levels step with the site's sloped topography, with each bedroom opening onto its own private hillside terrace while the living and dining areas open to expansive terraces with beautiful views of wetlands and the town of Point Reyes Station.

The third award-winning project is the GreenCity

Lofts on the Oakland/Emeryville border. This collection of 62 loft condominiums in five buildings is one of the first multifamily projects in the country designed according to green principles. The project focuses on using recycled and sustainable materials, maximizing energy efficiency, and maintaining a healthy interior environment. "We know a lot about healthy buildings now," says Swatt, "because we've just done the healthiest building around."

Elements of the project reflect the typical loft style but also blend into the surrounding diverse residential, commercial, and industrial neighborhood. High ceilings and large expanses of glass are typical of live/work loft spaces; reverse bay windows, inset glass, balconies, stairs, and stoops recall residential edifices; and fiber cement panels topped with low-slope standing seam roofs are a nod to the industrial surroundings.

While these three projects are vastly different, each carries familiar threads of Swatt's design concepts: modernist contrasted with warm, traditional touches. Concepts of a man with modern in his blood. ★