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Well Thawed Out

The Minarc House takes full advantage of its temperate Southern California location with an open design that allows for passive cooling and heating—and even includes an outdoor dining room.

At the end of 2000, Tryggvi Thorsteinsson and Erla Dögg Ingjaldsdóttir, Icelandic natives and partners in the Santa Monica-based design firm Minarc, bought what was essentially a teardown in the West Village neighborhood of Los Angeles. “We liked it for its simple lines and flat roof and thought we could do something with it,” Thorsteinsson says. But soon after the purchase, Ingjaldsdóttir’s first pregnancy and projects ranging from a Protestant church in South Central L.A. to a boutique hotel in Nigeria took precedence over the renovation. Five years and many spirited design discussions later, the new addition penetrates through the old frame, finally allowing the couple and their two children to call Minarc’s first environmentally conscious house home.

Where the structures merge, slots and gaps gracefully filter light announcing their separateness, as do contrasting materials: stucco for the original house and concrete panels by U.S. Architectural Products made of 30 percent recycled fibers for the new. “They were introduced as a faster way of building, intended to go underneath stucco,”

says Thorsteinsson, whose interest in materials dates back to his years as assistant manager at Iceland’s largest hardware store, BYKO, in Kópavogur. “We come from a large country, relative to its small population, that doesn’t always think ‘green’ is so important,” he continues. “We believe being conscious about the environment, recycling, and using existing materials is vital. It doesn’t matter where you are in the world.”

In their all-in-one kitchen/living room-turned-playground, their daughter, four-year-old Carmen Inga, careens carefree around the oversized orange Corian kitchen island. The sides are clad in tough rubber recycled from tires, allowing her parents freedom from having to watch her every move. “I read rubber takes over 2,000 years to decompose. Perhaps it never really does, so we thought to reuse it and the kids would have a hard time wearing it out,” Ingjaldsdóttir explains of the material used more frequently in gyms and playgrounds.

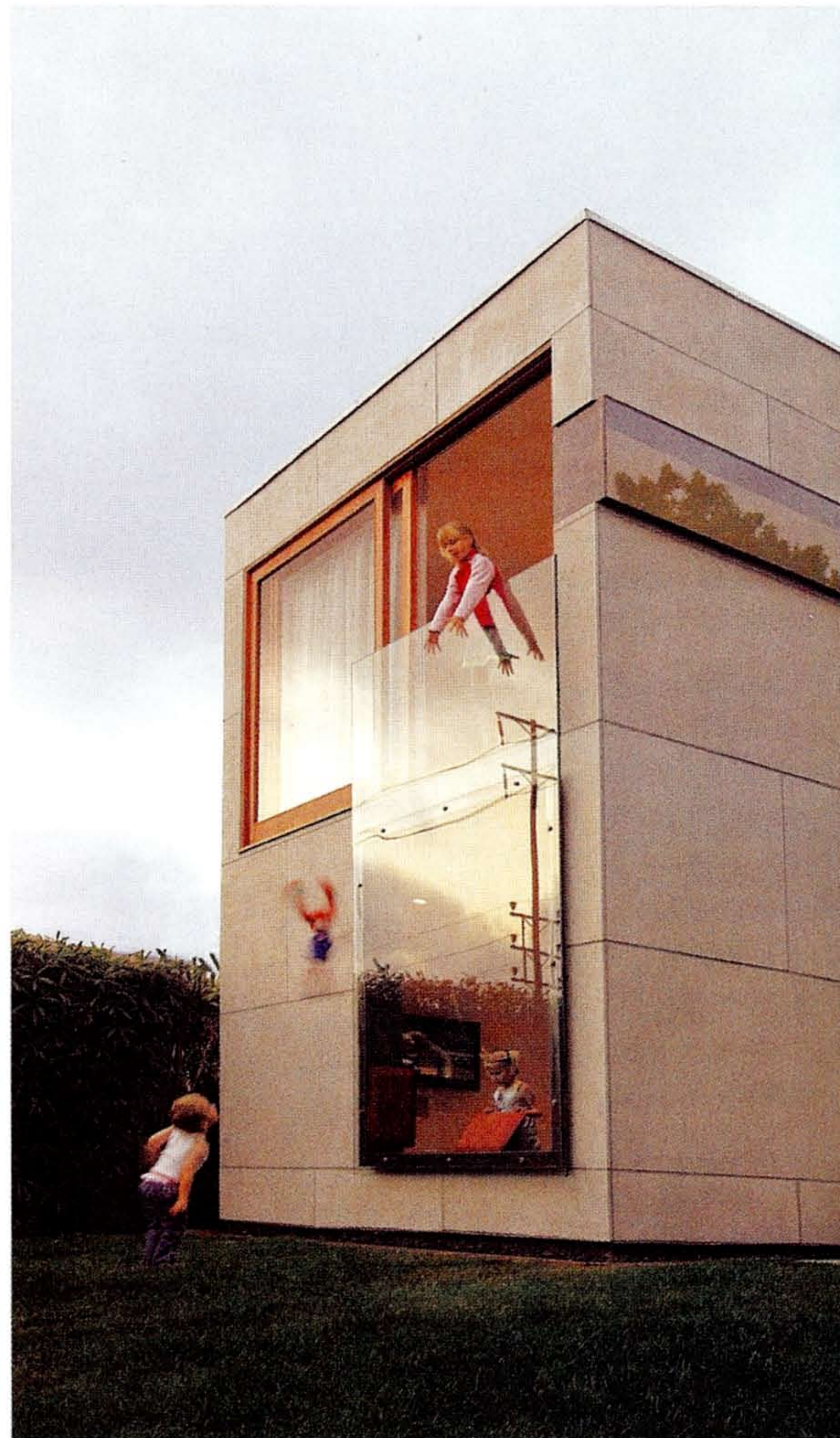
During the renovation, the couple was not only committed to the reuse of materials but also rethinking ►



Thorsteinsson (above left, standing in doorway) relaxes with his daughter Carmen Inga (standing) and friends on the outdoor sleeping pavilion. The platform is surrounded by black lava rock, which acts as a deterrent to keep children away from the edge of the second-story deck. An 8-by-12-foot piece of tempered glass on the front of the house (above right) serves as a window for the first-floor den and a railing for the second-floor office.

the usefulness of materials, resulting in exceedingly simple organic solutions. All the walls, for example, are paint-free. “Why cover up the matte of the drywall? It’s white and the texture gives depth and richness. Let that be a part of the house, it’s beautiful,” says Thorsteinsson, indicating the exposed aluminum door jams. “We like to allow the materials to be what they are.”

Another significant aspect of the home’s earth-friendly approach is its ability to cool, and to a large extent heat, itself. During the five years before the renovation, the couple lived in the house and studied the movement of the sun and wind. When it came time to draw up plans, they oriented the new structure accordingly. “The sun rises behind the house and heats up the concrete mass during the morning, and [comes] through the front of the house in the afternoon; if need be the radiant energy warms up the house when temperatures drop in the evening,” says Thorsteinsson. Thanks to the thoughtful process, the couple was able to leave out the air-conditioning, and the house’s under-floor radiant heating system has turned out to be almost superfluous. Additionally, an enormous, pivoting front door ushers the Pacific Ocean



breezes from the west inside, while a bank of sliding glass doors help keep the climate comfortable on the east side. On the second story, large openings—a sliding glass door in the master bedroom and sliding glass window in the office—dominate the front and back, recirculating fresh air, while narrow windows located at the south side minimize direct sunlight. “Even though we expanded the square footage of the house from 900 to 2,400 square feet, we have been able to cut our energy costs by two-thirds,” says Ingjaldsdóttir.

In what might be called a tip of the hat to the family’s infatuation with their natural surroundings, they positioned their only dining room outside. “At first guests don’t even notice they’re no longer in the house,” laughs Ingjaldsdóttir. “But this is California and it’s really about taking advantage of what you have around you.”

Another favorite spot is the outdoor sleeping pavilion on the southern side of the second story, complete with a mattress and a swing. “Coming from Iceland, sleeping outside is really an exotic idea,” marvels Thorsteinsson, who says the sleeping pods at Rudolf Schindler’s Kings Road home inspired the design. ▶



The simplicity of the design is complemented by the unfussy use of materials, including the exposed edges of the bedroom furniture and paint-free drywall (above left). The sides of the orange Corian kitchen counter are clad in recycled rubber.



Back inside, the upper level, consisting of an office, master bedroom, and bathroom, is a grown-ups' sanctuary. "It feels like a spa and keeps our relationship alive," says Ingjaldóttir, pointing out the floating staircase designed in part to discourage wandering guests at their numerous social gatherings. Coated in cobalt blue liquid rubber, it is one of the playful elements the couple has introduced to reference their origins. "It reminds me of the waterfalls and glaciers back home, while the orange Corian kitchen counter is reminiscent of the glowing fire inside the volcanoes. Iceland will always be an important part of our lives," Ingjaldóttir says, acknowledging that it's easier to embrace all of the elements and be nostalgic about a frostier past when sheltered by their own design in a place where the mercury level rarely dips lower than 70 degrees year-round. ■



A Grand Entrance

Expansive glass openings play an essential energy-saving role at the Minarc House, alternately pulling breezes and the sun's warmth inside. The eight-foot pivoting entry door was a collaboration between Thorsteinsson, Five Star French Doors and Windows, and Rixson hardware company. "The challenge was to make a door this size that would pivot," says Thorsteinsson. They calculated that given the excessive weight of approximately 150 pounds, no more than four and a half feet could extend from the center pivot. They positioned the pivot off center and left only a foot and a half extending over the exterior threshold.

"More out-swing might have been hazardous with kids around," Thorsteinsson explains. A standard hinged door next to it allows a total nine-foot-wide opening. Both doors are made of vertical-grain Douglas fir with white laminated glass for light and privacy.

On the opposite side of the room, a 30-foot stretch of glass doors framed in Douglas fir sit on a tracking device called lift and slide, by Alban Giacomo. A detachable lever raises the doors about a half inch and all three glide out of sight, becoming one with the wood grill in front of the bedroom window. The result is a living room that's completely open to the backyard. —K.H.