

Housewatch

The architect's own place, small but full of poetry and surprise

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When architect Barry Berkus designed a pied-à-terre for himself in Santa Barbara, Calif., three years ago, he brought an unusual depth to the project.

First, Berkus knew every inch of the downtown site and the surrounding historic neighborhood because he designed the house next door, where he lived for two years before selling it to the current owner. He also designed three houses across the street.



A wavy bronze sculpture encloses the carport on one side. At night, heaters and track lights tucked under the pergola roof of the carport transform this area into an outdoor party space. (Jim Bartsch)

Second, and more important, over a 50-year career Berkus had accumulated a nearly unmatched wealth of experience in residential design. When Berkus left the University of Southern California in 1957, a professional focus on residential design was not a popular choice.

Raising even more eyebrows, Berkus wanted to work with home builders as well as individual clients because he wanted to make good design affordable to the average homeowner. He recognized that every family wants a well-designed house, but few can afford an architect's design fees, which can add 5 to 20 percent to the construction cost of a custom-designed, custom-built house.

Initially, home builders in California were skeptical that an architect's services would be beneficial. But, Berkus said, they were won over after observing that good design improved sales dramatically, and soon he was designing houses all over the country.

During the 24 years that Berkus had an office in the District (1969-93), his firm designed many new subdivisions in the Washington area. Three of his former employees, Chris Lessard of Vienna, Bill Devereaux of McLean and Mary Reader of Alexandria, continued Berkus's unusual focus in their own

practices. They have designed more than 20,000 houses in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs.

Taken together, his two "sister firms," B3 Architects and Berkus Design Studio, are credited with the design of several hundred communities around the United States and abroad and about 10,000 different houses, which Berkus estimates have been built about 600,000 times.

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As household size and lifestyles have changed dramatically over the years, Berkus's designs have followed suit. But his basic design premise remains unchanged: "Your day starts and ends in your house -- it should have some poetry and some surprises because your house has a great influence on your psyche."

Berkus's work with builders and their lean budgets and rigid requirements for ease of construction forced tremendous discipline on his design aspirations. His work with individual homeowners allowed him to

explore spatial challenges and sculptural solutions, many of which he eventually worked into his designs for home builders.

Berkus knew he wanted a small house, but it took him 10 iterations to arrive at his final design, a modest, 900-square-foot, single-story structure. Its simplicity attests to years of designing "just the basics" for production builders, while the subtle nuances and careful detailing reflect his years of working with a custom-design clientele. Berkus also incorporated his signature elements of poetry and surprise, as well as ways to showcase another of his passions, contemporary American art

The first surprise is the appearance of the house. On the street side, this California Spanish revival-styled house has just two large garage doors. If you weren't tipped off that this is a separate residence, you would think it belongs to the bigger, stylistically similar house next door.

Things get more interesting as you head up the entry walk. Halfway to the front gate you encounter a playful piece of bronze sculpture that doubles as a fence. About 150 "willow branches bending in the wind," each 54 inches high, rest on a solid, curving base. The piece was made by Santa Barbara sculptor David Shelton.