

# Two Rugged Baths



**All earth tones.**  
Tucked into a tangle of Monterey cypress trees, the Ramirez house overlooks a restless landscape.



## Inspired by a modern master, these baths with natural, exposed materials embody the spirit of the California coast

BY CHARLES MILLER



**As rugged as the landscape.** With rafter tails breaking it into illuminated squares, a room-length skylight casts a soft light across the east wall. Just beyond the showerhead, a tall casement window admits the prevailing breeze and the sound of the surf. The board-formed cast-concrete walls are both structural and stylish.

**P**ounded by surf and raked by prevailing winds and relentless tides, the geological chopping block known as the Northern California coast is merciless. At the place called The Sea Ranch, the cliffs are scoured clean, and the cypress trees grow at an angle, espaliered by the wind. Geologists point out that a 30,000-ft.-thick layer of stone has disappeared here over the past 10 million years, lost to erosion. The only way to make a building that holds up in this harsh environment is to assemble it with the toughest materials available. Concrete, stainless steel, stone, tempered glass, tight-grained redwood, and copper are all on that list.

Ninety years ago, an Austrian architect used a similar menu of materials in a house that changed the course of residential design in California. In West Hollywood, Rudolph Schindler designed and built the Kings Road House, a duplex that defied convention. With an open plan that included a courtyard with a fireplace, concrete walls on the inside, and unadorned materials used as finished surfaces, the Kings Road House became the quintessential indoor/outdoor California residence.

Back on the north coast in 2004, Gabriel Ramirez acquired one of the premier bluff-top lots at The Sea Ranch. Perched above a sheltered cove, the site was perfect for the kind of house pioneered by one of Ramirez's most-admired architects: Rudolph Schindler. Ramirez asked two Southern California architect/educators steeped in Schindler's work—Judith Sheine and Norman Millar—to collaborate on what Ramirez describes as “the only house I plan to build from scratch.”

Millar and Sheine updated Schindler's list of preferred building materials, adding corrugated Corten steel, ipé, and marine-grade Douglas-fir plywood. Then they devised a system of horizontal and vertical grids for orchestrating the intersections of the structural and finish materials, both inside and out.

### **Baths epitomize Schindler's style**

The two upstairs bathrooms, modest in scale and low-key in their colors and their composition, demonstrate this seemingly effortless rigor. They adhere to the approach that Schindler described in his assessment of his Kings Road House: “The traditional building scheme, by which the structural members of the house are covered onionlike by layers of finishing materials: lathe, plaster, paint, paper, hangings, etc., is abandoned. The house is a simple weave of structural

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**Architects:** Judith Sheine and Norman Millar **Builder:** Brian Dixon



**Precious metal.** Prized on the coast for its longevity in a salty environment, copper steps inside as a faceted jewel of a tub framed by a wood and concrete backdrop.

materials which retain their natural color and texture throughout.”

The two upstairs baths are on the east side of the house, in separate bump-outs that stand proud of the house’s wedge-shaped footprint. The north bath (photo p. 76) has the taller ceiling, with a shower along the north wall. The south bath has a tub in the same location (photo right).

Initial plans were to use concrete for the shower pan and tub, but concrete’s weight in upstairs installations and its potential for cracking argued against it. In searching the web for fixtures and fittings, Ramirez discovered Diamond Spas, a Colorado-based fabricator of custom metal tubs, spas, and pools. He commissioned a copper hot tub from them and was so pleased with the results that he ordered a copper shower for one bath and a copper tub for the other.

A palette of materials in the spirit of Schindler and the site had emerged. The warm tones of the copper, the wood, and even the concrete echo the cliffs and buckskin meadow grasses that border the house. For consistency in the materials’ roles and relationships, the architects established guidelines: Ceilings are marine-grade Douglas-fir plywood; cabinets are also Douglas fir, but with a more refined vertical-grain pat-



**Squared off.** Rectilinear shapes at different scales abound in the baths, from the end-grain Douglas-fir flooring to the Duravit Starck X toilets. Practical issues included the need to create custom copper sleeves to extend the pipes for the tub mixer (inset).

### Notable elements

**Toilets** Duravit Starck X; duravit.us • **Faucets and shower mixer:** Hansgrohe Axor Starck; hansgrohe-usa.com • **Sinks** Sonoma Stone; sonomastone.com  
**Tub and shower pan** Diamond Spas; diamondspas.com • **Light fixtures** David Weeks; davidweeksstudio.com

# An architect ahead of his time



## Echoes from a landmark.

The bathroom of the Kings Road House showcases Schindler's innovative use of materials. The house is open to the public through a branch of the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts ([makcenter.org](http://makcenter.org)).



tern; walls that are likely to get wet are either copper or concrete; walls in dry areas are ipé.

## Simple? Not!

By design, the baths are calm and orderly. Everything lines up. There are no gaps unless there are supposed to be gaps, in which case they measure  $\frac{3}{16}$  in., period. There's no trim. Of course, nothing is harder for a trim carpenter than not to have trim to cover the gulf between what was drawn and how it turned out. Projects like this don't get built without a talented ringmaster. In this case, that ringmaster was Sam King.

King had to solve scores of unforeseen problems to make these baths look effortless—for example, how to attach copper panels to the walls with no visible fasteners. The obvious choice would be a sealant/adhesive, but what kind? No one knew. King ran a series of tests until he found a sealant (Dow Corning 795) that didn't react with copper.

In another “solve this” puzzle, the position of the tub mixer had to be extended from the wall to reach its target. The solution: custom-made copper sleeves that look like they came with the tub (bottom photo, facing page).

At one point, King was so deep in concentration while securing a trimless towel bar to a concrete wall that he didn't realize that Ramirez was standing at the door a few feet away. Ramirez recalls that as King dialed the towel bar into its final position, he stood up, surveyed the installation, and said to himself under his breath, “Sweet. Now walk away.”

Guided by Schindler, Gabriel Ramirez and his architects knew when to walk away from the drawing board and start building. □

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**Trained as an architect in Vienna, Rudolf Schindler** came to America in 1914 to work with Frank Lloyd Wright as an unpaid draftsman. For Schindler, learning everything he could from the master made a salary pale by comparison. Schindler planned to learn from Wright and return to Austria. It didn't work out that way.

At 31, Schindler settled into the dynamic of Taliesin East in Spring Green, Wis., and quickly became an important member of Wright's staff. He found himself caught up in the energy of the place and met his bride to be, Pauline Gibing of Evanston, Ill.

At the same time, Wright's commissions were coming from clients in far-off places, spreading him thin. He needed somebody to oversee the ones he couldn't attend to on a regular basis. Among them was a significant commission from Aline Barnsdale, an oil heiress who had hired Wright to design the Mayan-esque Hollyhock House in East Hollywood. Schindler moved to Los Angeles in 1920 to oversee its construction; in doing so, he fell into the rhythms of Southern California. Unlike Austria, where an oppressive architectural conservatism stifled fresh thought, Los Angeles was wide open to new ideas. An incorrigible, free-spirited Bohemian, Schindler had found his greener pastures.

By 1921, the Hollyhock House was finished, and the Schindlers took a High Sierra vacation in Yosemite. Their campsite—with its granite boulders for a backdrop, a campfire ring for warmth, and a thin canvas tent for shelter—stoked Schindler's imagination. Why not combine these contrasting elements in a house? The result is the house he built for himself on Kings Road in West Hollywood. Its slab floors and tilt-up concrete walls stand in for granite, the courtyard fireplaces are the campfires, and the second-floor canvas “sleeping baskets” are the tents. None of these elements entered the mainstream, but the exposed structural elements of the Kings Road House and the indoor/outdoor nature of its plan charted a new course for California residential architecture.

Schindler lived and worked in the Kings Road House until his death in 1953, his practice kept afloat mostly by small residential commissions. An exception was the Lovell Beach House, a magnificent cast-concrete arrangement of pure-white rectangles elevated above the street. Although Schindler's innovative design baffled critics during his lifetime, by the 1960s, influential architecture critics such as Esther McCoy and David Gebhart saw the genius in Schindler's work, and said so. Prominent architects such as Charles Moore sang Schindler's praises.

Today, the Kings Road House remains, a living museum open to students who want to see firsthand a house still standing at a fork in the road of residential design.