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Mythic Proportions

A tiny home office addition in the Hollywood Hills comes with a truly fabulous floor.

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"We came up with this design out of a desire to have a bit of a beacon in the hills," says Charlap Hyman & Herrero principal Andre Herrero. He designed a petite structure of glass, steel, and terrazzo—plus a well-placed Noguchi Akari lamp—in Hollywood for Steven Alper, a retired dentist who wanted a home office with a distinct point of view.



“From working with architects before, I’m most happy with the result when I give up as much control and decision-making as possible to them.”

STEVEN ALPER, RESIDENT

“I wanted it to look good from everywhere because the whole canyon can see it,” Steven says of the gleaming cube sitting on his property that he’d hoped to spend \$70,000 to build. “I just stopped counting at some point,” he admits, referring to the blown-out budget.

Constraints often produce creative results, but municipal codes and permitting processes can also be design downers. So much so that Steven Alper, a retired dentist turned something of an architecture impresario, dreamed up a way to evade them altogether, even while adding something beautiful to Hollywood’s visual hodgepodge of a hillscape.

He and Andre Herrero, principal of bicoastal architecture and design firm Charlap Hyman & Herrero (CHH), were previously frustrated in their attempt to

add a granny flat to Steven’s 1,000-square-foot Beachwood Canyon home. So when the pandemic lockdown began, Steven approached Herrero to design a freestanding home office small enough to be outside the city’s purview. But just because they weren’t constantly corresponding with the planning department doesn’t mean the designers avoided dense reading; Steven assigned homework in the form of Geoff Manaugh’s book *Landscape Futures*, a compendium of provocative design inventions. “I wanted to shake >

“We literally built art into the building. It’s like a lobby mural by Diego Rivera or something.”

ANDRE HERRERO, ARCHITECT



Pictured in Design Within Reach’s Pollock chair, Steven (left)—now working on The Last House on Mulholland, a development project aiming to build an architecturally iconic house in view of the Hollywood sign—gave terrazzo artists Ficus Interfaith creative freedom to design a storytelling medallion for his floor. The architecture firm’s initials, CHH (above), are an ode to historical building plaques.

them up and scramble everybody a little bit,” he says with a laugh.

His brief: a space just under 120 square feet with no plumbing or electricity and a very big desk. In essence, a work shed. “The whole thing is an appliance,” says Herrero, “sitting on the hillside.” Beyond that, nothing about the jewel box built of steel and warm gold glass says “shed.” Take the glamorous yet no-fuss black-and-white terrazzo floor, “a very lobby material,” says Herrero, who enlisted college friends, a pair of Brooklyn-based terrazzo artists who go by Ficus Interfaith, to

design a custom piece. They had been preoccupied with mythological themes and suggested some ideas along those lines. The designers’ ambitious client liked the Icarus motif for his perch in L.A.’s sunny hills, so Ficus Interfaith made a circular medallion of the ill-fated Greek surrounded by stars and shipped it out. Next, “Steven found the guys who do the Hollywood Boulevard stars,” Herrero says, to complete the rest of the floor by replicating the medallion’s aggregate recipe.

Steven also wanted a commemorative plaque like those in historical buildings

but was thrilled by an alternative: embedding the design firm’s initials, CHH, in brass letters taken from the Walk of Fame inventory.

Case study houses and 1970s mirrored glass office buildings were part of the discussion en route to this tiny, gleaming beacon, but the finished office and its exposed steel exoskeleton remind both men of Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building, in Midtown Manhattan. The shed’s thin steel columns and proud, offset pivot hinges allow the golden windows to swing out 90 degrees on three sides, >



making the reflective cube truly open to nature's breezes and birdsong. Intimate yet boundless.

Such precise details led CHH to act essentially as general contractor on the two-year project, which relied heavily on local craftspeople. "There are visible welds, as if this thing was built in 1930," says Herrero. "It's not just a slice of the Seagram Building. It's as an artist would interpret a slice of the Seagram Building. You see the hand of everyone." That level of care and craftsmanship doesn't come cheap. Steven's intended budget was \$70,000, but he ultimately spent close to twice that. Still, Herrero calls it "kind of amazing" that even with zero economy of scale they built the structure for just over \$1,000 per square foot.

The office's value is infinite to Steven, who spends hours per day—and some vivid sunsets—working at his computer, clipping bonsai trees, listening to music, and sewing what he calls light-up pocket fancies (a sort of glowing pocket square) on the quarter-inch waxed steel desk that forms the back wall. Herrero pushed hard to face it—a laser-cut labor of love—toward the Downtown L.A. panorama, but his client was unwavering about having it face the opposite way. "It was the pandemic, and I became obsessed with people's Zoom backgrounds," admits Steven, who was unapologetically fixated on having the very best one. "Steven is a tinkerer," says Herrero of his "dream client," whose respect for the architectural profession is immense. "And he kind of tinkered this building to existence." ■

"The feeling I get when I'm inside is my absolute favorite part," says Steven. Throughout the day, the light moves across the operable glass windows (above), playing off a ceiling painted with Benjamin Moore's Antique Jade and furnishings that include a shiny stool by L.A. designer Shun Kinoshita. Steven's mutt (right), Dioji (pronounced dee-oh-gee), sits between the hand-welded steel columns of what Herrero calls the exoskeleton.

