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RESIDENCE/LOS ANGELES

Home improvements

How do you improve on perfection? For the owners of the Birtcher-Share House it meant asking what the architect would have done and matching his humility at every step.

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Doss and Adel Mabe had just settled into a small cottage in Mount Washington, a hillside neighbourhood in northeast Los Angeles, when the low, lean, redwood-clad house two doors down suddenly went up for sale. At the time they couldn't manage another move and a Hollywood couple bought the house instead. Yet the Mabe's fixation grew stronger as they befriended their new neighbours and experienced the house more intimately. Doss, an architect, had heard of the property's modernist designer Harwell Hamilton Harris but was by no means a student of his work. "It wasn't about labels," says Doss, 73. "It was about how the house felt. It felt right."

Fortunately the Hollywood couple decided to sell a few years later – and they gave the Mabe's the right of first refusal. "So began this 17-year love affair," says Adel, 71. "Only without the sex – it's a bit late in life for that."

Love may be too weak a word to describe the Mabe's relationship with their home and the architect behind it. Inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright and tutored by Richard Neutra, Harris bypassed his mentors' heroic approach in favour of a more serene and selfless form of expression. Harris homes are marked by pitched roofs, integral gardens, long walls of French doors and lots of wood.

(1) Japanese-inspired gardens surround the house
(2) Vintage Eames DCW chair in the bedroom
(3) The Mabe's remade Harris's built-in sofa, now flanked by Poul Henningsen 3/2 table lamps



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Completed in 1942 for a man who sold medical equipment, the Birtcher-Share House may be Harris's most harmonious residence. Here the architecture's grandest statement is one of humility. The design seems almost Japanese in its fastidious respect for the contours of the site and the specific needs of the client.

Initially the Mabes were struck by how much sense the space made. Three lapped redwood boards crown the walls, inside and out, uniting the wings of the house. A row of deep holes pierce the cantilevered roofline, illuminating the interior while deflecting the sun's harshest angles. A brick bench and built-in sofa flank the monumental fireplace, almost eliminating the need for living-room furniture. As one of Harris's draftsmen put it, "He knew exactly why he did everything."

Yet somehow, for all its liveability and logic, the Birtcher-Share House also conveys what Doss calls "a sense of mystery". In part that's a product of Harris's floor-plan, which was meant, as biographer Lisa Germany has written, "to unwind slowly as one moved through it [with] states of



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(1) The Mabes enlarged Harris's original brick patio and added a lap pool (2) Light streaming in (3) Chinese guardian lion standing watch (4) Douglas fir cabinets line the passage between the kitchen and the new wing (5) Cosy dining spot

disclosure, calibrated carefully for the greatest effect". Through the entrance vestibule a glimpse of the library beckons; to the left of the library the living room, exposed to valley and ocean views by a vast expanse of glass, unfurls beyond the low wall of the sofa. "The house just never gets old," says Doss. "There's always some new revelation."

When the Mabes began to restore and expand the existing structure and replenish the surrounding landscape it was Harris's blend of meticulousness and mystery that they sought to preserve. They refused to rush. The addition took about two years to design and another three to build. For an architect, the major question when altering a historic home is whether to make the alterations seamless or obvious – and neither option is necessarily correct. In this case Doss chose not to impose himself on Harris, just as Harris never imposed himself on client or site.

The result is a new wing, linked to the kitchen by a hall lined with built-in Douglas fir cabinets on one side and



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French doors on the other, that looks and feels as if it has always been there. Like the original living room, which floats over the lovely garden on piers, a study hovers above the enlarged brick patio and the lap pool below; an adjacent double-height studio for Adel, an artist, glows with northern light from a bank of clerestory windows. A library of thousands of rare books sits where the garage once was. The shelving, Adel notes with a grin, is from Ikea.

The deliberate pace of the extension project allowed the Mabes to live in the main house for five years – "To really understand it," says Doss – before proceeding with the restoration. By the time they finally turned to fixing up the original interior and exterior, they knew what had to be done.



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Sense of flow

Less famous today than his predecessors RM Schindler and Richard Neutra, in whose office he got his start, Harris was nonetheless one of the most innovative and celebrated US architects of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. At a time when the stars of the Case Study programme were defining LA's iconic mid-century image with steel and glass, Harris's goal was different. He wanted to design "the most natural thing" and to let that be "revolutionary". "Of course I know Harwell Hamilton Harris," said Frank Lloyd Wright when the two first met. "You're a great artist – and when your hair is as grey as mine you'll be a great architect."



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(1) Furnishings by Poul Kjaerholm, Paulo Mendes da Rochas, Hans J Wegner and Serge Mouille mingle with Asian and Scandinavian pottery in the Mabes' living room



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“This was not an anal-retentive restoration but we were always thinking, ‘What would Harris do now?’”



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(1) For their kitchen the Mabes repurposed the Cherokee red of Harris’s original front door (2) Vintage Eames Lounge Chair beside the indoor-outdoor fireplace in the study (3) Ceiling panels continue beyond a wide glass wall, leading the eye to the patio and lap pool beyond

Water had wrecked the vintage ceiling panels; the living room sagged. The ship varnish that a previous owner had slathered over the redwood would bake and bubble in the summer heat. The Mabes removed every single board, remilling, restaining and, where possible, reusing them. To replace the unsalvageable members – about two thirds of the thousands that enveloped the house – the Mabes found a back-channel source of old-growth redwood. Obtaining the material was tricky: once plentiful, the timber has long since been off limits due to deforestation. “How did I get it?” says Adel with a smile. “I learned to flirt.”

The Mabes weren’t afraid to make changes but something of Harris remained in each refinement. The bathrooms’ modest footprint; the push-touch latches of the cabinets; a new slat screen at the edge of the kitchen to evoke the architect’s original division; and the compression and release of paths in Adel’s new Japanese garden, where walls of greenery open and close like the rooms of the house.

Consistency was key. Harris sought to create “a feeling of endlessness” by “using the same finishes and floor coverings throughout”; the Mabes did the same. The architect also advised homeowners to “keep the furniture line low and the pieces moveable” and the Mabes’ Poul Kjaerholm chairs, Sori Yanagi stools and Japanese pottery certainly fit the bill. “This was not an anal-retentive restoration,” says Doss. “But we were always thinking, ‘What would Harris do now?’”

Today the eucalyptus trees that stand over the Birtcher-Share House rustle in the ocean breeze. Looking west from the living room, the late sun backlights the landscape, leaving each hill a little hazier than the one before it. A lizard scurries over a large stone outside the bedroom. On the patio Doss and Adel lean back in low chairs and reflect on two decades of decisions and disruptions, of running out of money, of never compromising. At last everything seems perfect – but is the project complete? “Never,” says Adel with a laugh. “People see this as a house. I see it as a painting, the biggest painting I will ever do. The process is as important as the finished product.” — (M)



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