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STALKING THE RATIONAL MIND

Francis H.C. Crick won a Nobel Prize for discovering DNA.

Now he's after an even more elusive prey—the source of conscious thought. BY MICHAEL A. HILTZIK



Industrial designer Holger Schubert used fiberboard finished in matte white for the dining room table, left, in his home on the Venice canals. Opposite: Expansive south-facing windows with view of the canals drench the living room in natural light.



Harmonic Convergence

The Open Spaces of This East-Meets-West Venice Home Combine Beauty, Function and Tranquillity

BY MICHAEL WEBB / PHOTOGRAPHED BY TIM STREET-PORTER

GERMAN PRECISION AND JAPANESE SERENITY mingle in industrial designer Holger Schubert's Venice home overlooking the canals. A tall ficus hedge conceals the white-and-gray stucco structure from the public footpath, but the interior is flooded with light and full of surprises. It's a machine for living that works in interesting ways and an experiment in minimalism that is enriched by views of water, sky and greenery.

Schubert, who trained as an industrial designer at Art Center in Pasadena, was planning to build on a beachfront plot when he chanced on the tranquil enclave of the canals—all that remain from Abbot Kinney's ambitious project of the early 1900s to re-create Venice beside the Pacific. He and his wife, Yuriko Nagasaki, wanted to raise a family and decided that it would be quicker to remodel an existing house than start from scratch. Schubert, who owns the Culver City design practice Archisis, bought a 10-year-old contemporary residence, intending only to upgrade the kitchen and master bathroom. One thing led to another, and it took more than three years and \$500,000 to refine the entire house.

"I decided to tear out all the stuff we didn't like, saving whatever we could, and then design new window openings, built-ins and finishes," he says. "I was naive, thinking it was just a matter of drywall, glass and paint." Pivoting doors, limestone paving and white oak paneling de-

manded expert installation into the existing structure. Holger learned the hard way that few share his sense of perfectionism, and that you don't demolish anything before deciding what to put in its place. "You have to know where you are going or it's costly, time-consuming and messy," he says.

Now that the house is finished, harmony rules. In contrast to neighboring residences, where the ground floor is for living and upstairs for sleeping, the master bedroom opens onto the enclosed garden, and the bathroom is suffused with natural light from a sliding glass door that is screened by feathery bamboo. Both were inspired by Holger's three-year professional sojourn in Tokyo. He learned to live with a minimum of possessions in one room and to appreciate the alternation of light and shade, the sensuous and the austere.

In his three-story home, Japanese minimalism continues to influence his aesthetic. A deep soaking tub occupies much of the bathroom, and the open shower can be screened off by a pair of curtains. The floor slopes to a concealed strip drain and a mirror slides across on an overhead track. Essential tools, such as electric toothbrushes and a Water Pic, are clamped to built-in storage cabinets above a pair of walnut-encased pedestal sinks. The bedroom ceiling was lowered to achieve intimacy and conceal a structural beam, and a flat





Schubert mixes Japanese minimalism with a Western aesthetic by adding touches such as a lowered ceiling and soaking tub in the bathroom, left, and a lowered table with floor seating, below right. In the office, 20-foot-high white organza drapes create a tent-like ambience, below left. Opposite: Whitewashed walls and concrete floors add to the airy feeling in the two-story main living room.



television screen pivots on a central column so that it can be viewed from the bed or the sofa.

Aluminum-clad steps with a stainless steel handrail lead up to the second-floor living areas and office and to the upper-level guest bedroom and roof terrace. The kitchen and dining area flow out of the double-height living room, and sunlight from 11 south-facing windows plays over the white walls and concrete floors. Expansive sliding windows to the west frame the canal. Holger designed the dining table using a medium-density fiberboard with a matte white finish supported on two aluminum-wrapped poles set in concrete. An opening at the center accommodates a metal container for making the Japanese dish *shabu-shabu*, or a glass dish can be substituted. When illuminated from recessed spots directly above and below, it casts shadows on the floor and ceiling. Sheer white organza drapes surround the 20-foot-high office on three sides, turning it into what the designer calls "a floating work tent," and a circular pedestal table revolves to keep the computer screen out of the sun.

As a first house by a designer with no architectural training, the project has turned out well. Holger has given functionalism a human face, and he and Yuriko are constantly surprised by the way the house changes its character throughout the day. They wish they had more storage space, but realize they'd quickly fill whatever they had. The arrival of Kaya, the couple's 1-year-old daughter, has changed some of the design elements. "I love the sun, but for her it was too bright, so I had to install drapes," Holger says. However, he is busily planning a beach house, incorporating the lessons he has learned from this home.