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Rus, Mayer. "Power Play." *Architectural Digest*, November 2011.

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POWER PLAY

Exquisite works of art and design achieve striking equilibrium in a Bay Area residence by interior decorator Steven Volpe and architect Lewis Butler

TEXT BY MAYER RUS PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIETER ESTERSONH PRODUCED BY HOWARD CHRISTIAN



In the central hall of a Northern California home designed by Steven Volpe and renovated by Butler Armsden Architects, the skylight brightens an Ado Chale table from Hedge (the San Francisco gallery co-owned by Volpe, and the source of many of the house's furnishings); the work at left is by Random International, and at right is a piece by Anish Kapoor. The owner's golden retriever lies on a floor of limestone; the paint is by Benjamin Moore. **Opposite:** The neoclassical-style house was originally built in 1996. For details see Sources.

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1970s advertisement for Coty perfume beckoned consumers with the indelible slogan, If you want to capture someone's attention, whisper. The quietly radical house just south of San Francisco that Butler Armsden Architects and Steven Volpe Design remodeled and decorated for a tech-sector titan operates on the same principle. It declares, sotto voce, that the boundary lines traditionally drawn between art and design are not merely permeable but irrelevant—that exceptional works of high design must be accorded the same respect and value as fine art.

"I was trying to create something that makes an impact, something that people haven't seen before," Volpe says. "To have a client who allows you to work through a process in which you're not sure where you're going to end up is incredibly rare."

A tour of the single-story residence offers a primer on the current state of avant-garde design as well as an in-depth look at some masters of the previous century. Strategically placed throughout are major pieces by Zaha Hadid, Marc Newson, Mattia Bonetti, and brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, alongside stellar works by Joris Laarman, Christophe Côme, Emmanuel Babled, and a host of midcentury French and Italian designers. It's an all-star lineup.

"We made trips to the Art Basel fair and places like David Gill's gallery in London so the client and his wife could see the works up close and appreciate just how extraordinary they are," Volpe says. "I had done houses for him previously, so I didn't have to sell him on a concept. I just showed him beautiful things."

Each remarkable item has its own story. Newson's Voronoi shelf, a matrix of cells carved from a single block of gray Bardiglio marble, required reinforcement of the floor in the lounge to carry its weight; Volpe buttressed the floor in several locations to allow for different placements of the massive piece. Hadid's Dune table was originally offered only in orange or green lacquer. Volpe asked the famously fastidious architect to have the piece fabricated in a matte-white finish—and at first the answer was no. Eventually, however, Hadid relented, setting off a months-long quest by Volpe to secure the ideal white and the ideal matte texture.

What's most striking about Volpe's compositions is the ease with which formidable sculptural objects and artworks occupy

the same rooms without flaunting their pedigrees or jostling for center stage. The atmosphere of peaceful, unexpectedly casual harmony is a function of the designer's restrained color palette—whites, grays, silver, and the occasional hit of pale purple (which he jokingly describes as "prune crème")—as well as the subtle correspondences he creates in each room. "I spent a year looking for the perfect counterpoint for the Zaha table before I found a Raphaël sideboard," Volpe says. "It's a balancing act; one misstep throws everything off."

The original house, built by a developer in 1996, had grand interior spaces, high ceilings, a central hall, and Doric columns arrayed along the façade—all solid virtues for a place meant to accommodate important *objets de vertu*. The materials, finishes, and detailing, however, required significant upgrades to conform to the quality and ambition of the new owner's collection. "It was basically a stucco box that had put a classical outfit on," explains architect Lewis Butler. "We took it all down to the wood frame and foundation and rebuilt it by enhancing the proportions and stature of its existing style and exploring the intersection of classicism and modernism. This house nods to the past but lives in the present."

The new entry boasts a pair of Carlo Scarpa-inspired gated doors that open onto an ethereal central hall—cum-gallery. This space perhaps best represents Volpe's vision of sublime balance and a mutually ennobling détente between art and design. Anish Kapoor's *As Yet Untitled*, a shimmering concave disk comprising hundreds of reflection-fracturing hexagonal mirrors, commands one wall. On the opposing wall, *You Fade to Light*, an interactive OLED (organic light-emitting diode) installation by the London-based design collective Random International, produces its own compelling meditation on mirroring and movement. An imposing table by Belgian designer Ado Chale with a top of inlaid hematite and lapis on a steel base holds the center of the room. Anchoring this ballet of reflective surfaces is a patchwork floor—as elegant as the finest silk carpet—of Spanish limestone with honed, brushed, scored, and bush-hammered finishes.

"We created an environment that's more than a façade of luxury," Volpe says. "It's like a solid-hardwood door versus a laminate one. This house has integrity and beauty all the way through." □



Clockwise from top: The lounge includes a pair of 1940s French chairs by Marc du Plantier, a black marble mantel by Axel Vervoordt, twin '50s floor lamps by Gino Sarfatti, a restored circa-1915 pool table from Blatt Billiards, and a photograph by Richard Learoyd; the rug was custom made by V'Soske. Marc Newson's spongelike Voronoi shelf stands next to the central hall. In the library, a midcentury Italian chandelier by Stilnovo and club chairs by Vervoordt in a velvet from Claremont join a marble cocktail table by Joris Laarman and a '50s FontanaArte mirror; at left is a circa-1970 Maison Jansen writing table.

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Clockwise from left: The great room features vintage pendant lamps from Wyeth, an untitled Wayne Gonzales painting, a Corian-top steel table by Martin Szeikely, custom-made chairs by Roman Thomas, and a '50s sideboard by T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings for Widdicomb. The pillows on the terrace furniture are made from Hermès terry towels; the sculpture, W7, is by Tony Cragg. The kitchen mixes bleached-walnut and lacquered cabinetry; the sink fittings are by Dornbracht, the range is by La Cornue, the backsplash tile is by Waterworks, and the stools are by BDDW. The window shades in the great room are by Conrad.



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Zaha Hadid's Dune table, paired with '60s chairs by Tobia Scarpa, commands the dining room; the chandelier is by Jeff Zimmerman, the cabinet is by Renaud Vuillat, and the painting at center is Column Structure V by Robert Mangold; the floor is laid with distressed wide-plank white oak.



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Clockwise from top left: A turn-of-the-century French mirror hangs above a Mattia Bonetti chest off the central hall. The master bedroom's custom-made four-poster is accented with Holly Hunt leather; the mirror above the headboard is by Sam Orlando Miller. In the sitting area, a fire screen by Christophe Côme complements the cocktail table custom made by Juan Garrido. FontanaArte sconces grace the master bathroom; the sink fittings are by Dornbracht, and the standing mirror is by Paul Evans.

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Calacatta gold marble and glass-front lacquered cabinetry give the master bath a cool sheen; the chandelier is by Emmanuel Babled, the tub is by Kohler, and the lounge chair, upholstered in Pratesi terry towels, is by Liz O'Brien.

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