

Into the Wild

AN OFF-THE-GRID GETAWAY IN COSTA RICA FOR TWO BROTHERS FROM NEW YORK CITY

Architecture and Interior Design by SPG Architects

Text by Jean Strouse/Photography by Michael Calderwood

Although Derek Ferguson intended to go to Costa Rica in 1988, he was accepted by Harvard and went to college instead. Eight years later he and a surfing buddy headed down to the Osa Peninsula in southwestern Costa Rica, an area famous for its wildlife, fishing, rain forests and waves. They ended up on a remote beach at the southern tip of the peninsula. Ferguson loved everything about it—even the snakes. He bought 17 acres of forest just behind the beach. Over the next several years he and his brother, Eliot Ferguson, acquired 80 acres in all.

An admirer of Modernist architecture, especially the work of Richard Neutra and Pierre Koenig, Derek Ferguson found a local builder with whom he drew up plans for a steel-and-concrete house that would

be set into a mountainside. They sited it to face east, looking across the Golfo Dulce and the Costa Rican mainland to Panama. The builder began construction. Derek, working in New York in music and film, flew to Costa Rica every few months to monitor the progress.

On New Year's Eve 2004, he stood on the structure's emerging first floor, looked out over the treetops and realized with a shock that the house was skewed off the best view, which was not due east but southeast, toward the rugged coastline where the gulf meets the Pacific. He called the architects who were renovating his New York apartment—Caroline (“Coty”) Sidnam and Eric A. Gartner, partners in the New York firm SPG Architects. “I’m about to throw myself off the roof here,” he told them. “Can you come

Derek Ferguson worked with SPG Architects to create a Costa Rican getaway for himself and his brother, Eliot Ferguson. The house, which boasts 18,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor living space, runs on photovoltaic and solar-heated-water panels installed on its special rainwater-collecting roof. LEFT: The floor plan of the lower level flows into the infinity pool's terrace. ABOVE: The site is in a rain forest 200 feet above the Osa Peninsula surf line.



LEFT: The living and dining areas. "The indoor-outdoor relationship is primary," says SPG's Eric A. Gartner. Sofa and armchairs, B&B Italia. ABOVE: The open kitchen's island has a swivel-mounted wood worktop that can be rotated to close off the space whenever the chef needs his privacy. Wolf oven and range. BELOW: Non-heat-conducting Brazilian quartzite tiles were chosen for the pool terrace.





"From the inside corner of the house to the outside corner of the pool, your eye travels on a diagonal to the perfect view."



down and see if the project is salvageable?"

They did—bringing to the job expertise in conservation and sustainable design. Over the next four years, working closely with Ferguson, the architects, along with SPG interior designer Andres Cova, indeed rescued the project, turning its rough beginnings into an entirely self-sufficient, 18,000-square-foot indoor-outdoor house that feels as alive as the forest it inhabits.

Sidnam and Gartner reconfigured the existing frame, reinforcing it with steel cross-bracings to meet seismic requirements, and completely revised the floor plan. They brilliantly solved the problem of the wrong view: The house now forms an L on two sides of a Brazilian quartzite deck; an infinity pool along the outer edges of the deck defines a complementary

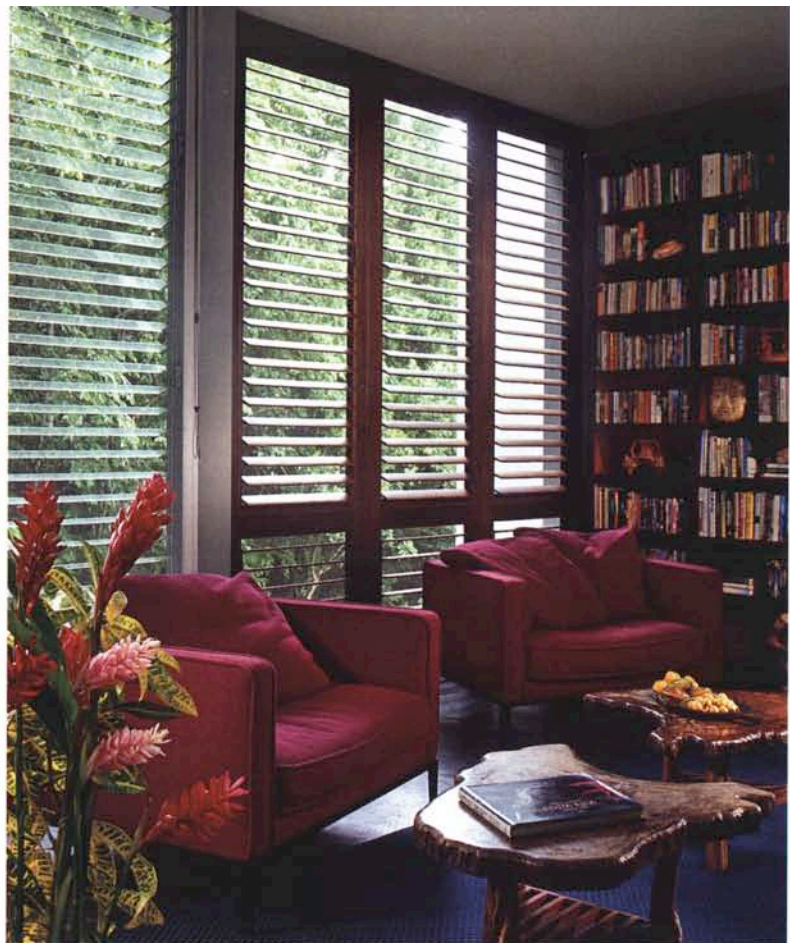
L, its corner pointing southeast. "From the inside corner of the L-shaped house to the outside corner of the pool," observes Sidnam, "your eye travels on a diagonal to the perfect view."

Eighteen feet above the forest floor, the living room's frameless sliding-glass-panel walls, opening onto decks and the pool, virtually disappear. "We wanted no sense of barrier between inside and out," notes Gartner. They more than succeeded. With polished-concrete floors and clean-lined contemporary Italian furnishings, this room—the closest to the water—seems to float into the trees and seascape. Vibrant fabric colors, inside and out, draw from nature: pink bougainvillea, scarlet macaws, blue parrots, bright green frogs.

Throughout the house, the architects used local woods, which Ferguson already owned, to warm up the cool Modernism—and for sheer beauty. "We were astonished by the extraordinarily bold textures of the lumber when we first saw it," recalls Sidnam, "but the finished cabinets completely took our breath away."

Two master bedrooms on the upper floor have magnificent views. Three layers of indoor-outdoor space compose the northeast suite: the sleeping area, protected by a retractable insect screen; a seating annex that can be enclosed within shuttered wall panels; and a private deck.

Ferguson planted fruit trees on the property and bought a several-thousand-acre cattle ranch nearby, which he converted to an organic farm. His co-owner brother,



LEFT: Dining alfresco on the roof, which overlooks the point where the Golfo Dulce meets the Pacific, is a tradition here. Richard Schultz outdoor furniture. ABOVE: The architects designed the library to serve as a cool refuge from the brightness and heat of the indoor-outdoor living areas. BELOW: A retractable insect screen, a necessity in this part of the tropics, was conceived to seal off the master bedroom's sleeping area.

Eliot, on leave from the gypsy punk-rock band Gogol Bordello, goes down to Costa Rica when he can. The house runs entirely on solar power and nature's water. It has a state-of-the-art sound system, a professional DJ setup—and probably a recording studio in its future.

With a self-deprecating sense of humor, Ferguson named the house Casa Torcida—*torcida* means “twisted” or “messed up” in Spanish. There is nothing messed up now about the house's aesthetics, its structure or its functions. Ferguson plans to spend six or seven months there a year. Looking out at the “perfect” view, he says: “Coty and Eric deftly integrated a Modernist '50s-'60s house with 21st-century sustainability. They made the dream real.” □

