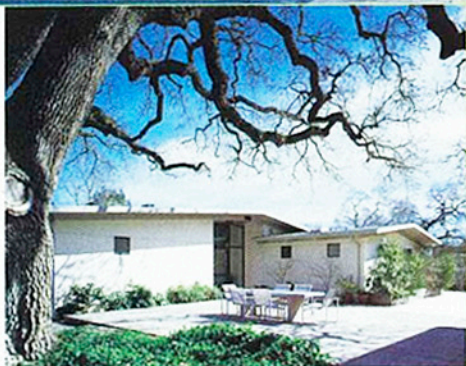


# the mood squad

**FOUR HOT ARCHITECTS ARE MAKING MODERN ART IN THE EAST BAY'S 'BURBS**

**O**n the frontier of East Bay architecture, four visionaries are reshaping our world. Their hallmarks are sleek, angular buildings, projecting rooflines, flowing interior spaces, and minimal use of decorative elements. Where there once was only a sea of interchangeable houses in countless subdivisions, modern structures are sailing onto the horizon, changing our suburban skyline.

Could these four modernists be the vanguard of a larger movement? It's possible, says Jim Jennings, a nationally known San Francisco modernist architect who has taught architecture at the California College of Arts and Crafts. "Today people seem to be looking less to the past," he says. "And I think, as a result, there's simply more tolerance now for contemporary design, as well a greater comfort level with it." Take a closer look at the buildings Bob Swatt, David Baker, Kava Massih, and Kurt Lavenson are creating, and you may find yourself voicing their rallying cry: Go mod!



## The Poet Kurt Lavenson

**W**hen residential architect Kurt Lavenson first met private investor and architecture devotee Karl Mills, he didn't feel he made a great impression on this potential client. "He was scared of me," says the 41-year-old Lavenson. "I was remodeling his buddy's faux-Tuscan mansion, [a 5,300-square-foot] home in Alamo that had previously belonged to [NBA player] Chris Mullen. And Karl had bought this property in Orinda where he wanted to do an elegant, poetic house. He didn't think we'd have a meeting of minds."

But as Mills watched Lavenson strip the gaudier trappings from his friend's home and expose its bones, he began to suspect that he and Lavenson shared a common aesthetic. These days Lavenson is immersed in two homebuilding projects for Mills—in addition to the Orinda home, he is designing a modern summer house in New York's Adirondack State Park for Mills, his wife, and their two preschool-age boys. Mills feels he and Lavenson "really connect on the idea that everything in architecture must exist to serve a purpose." Most importantly, the two men are of one mind about the need for the metaphysical in architecture—something both of them refer to as "poetry."

Lavenson explains it this way: "When you talk to an architect about a project, it begins with a puzzle. The problem was many people think they're making architecture when what they're really making is housing, because the puzzle they're trying to solve is how to get maximum square footage for minimum price. That's efficient, but it's devoid of poetry. For architecture, you have to include from the beginning metaphor, emotion, art. People's homes are metaphorical—they embody things that are going on in their relationships, their aspirations in life. It's mythic."

For the Mills family, poetry will be embodied by an Orinda hilltop home composed of a series of spacious, high ceilings that unfurl in a modified V shape with few compartmentalizing walls to separate them. The inspiration for the design is Mills's love of Asian architecture in general and his admiration for a Philippine resort in particular. Design plans for the home have already attracted some critical response: a staff planner with the county, when apprised of the concept, warned Lavenson that local planning commissioners "don't like exotic." In the end, Lavenson believes the commission will be won over by poetic. ■  
*Darcy Brown-Martin lives in a not-so-modern house in the East Bay hills. She frequently covers homestyle and design for Diablo.*

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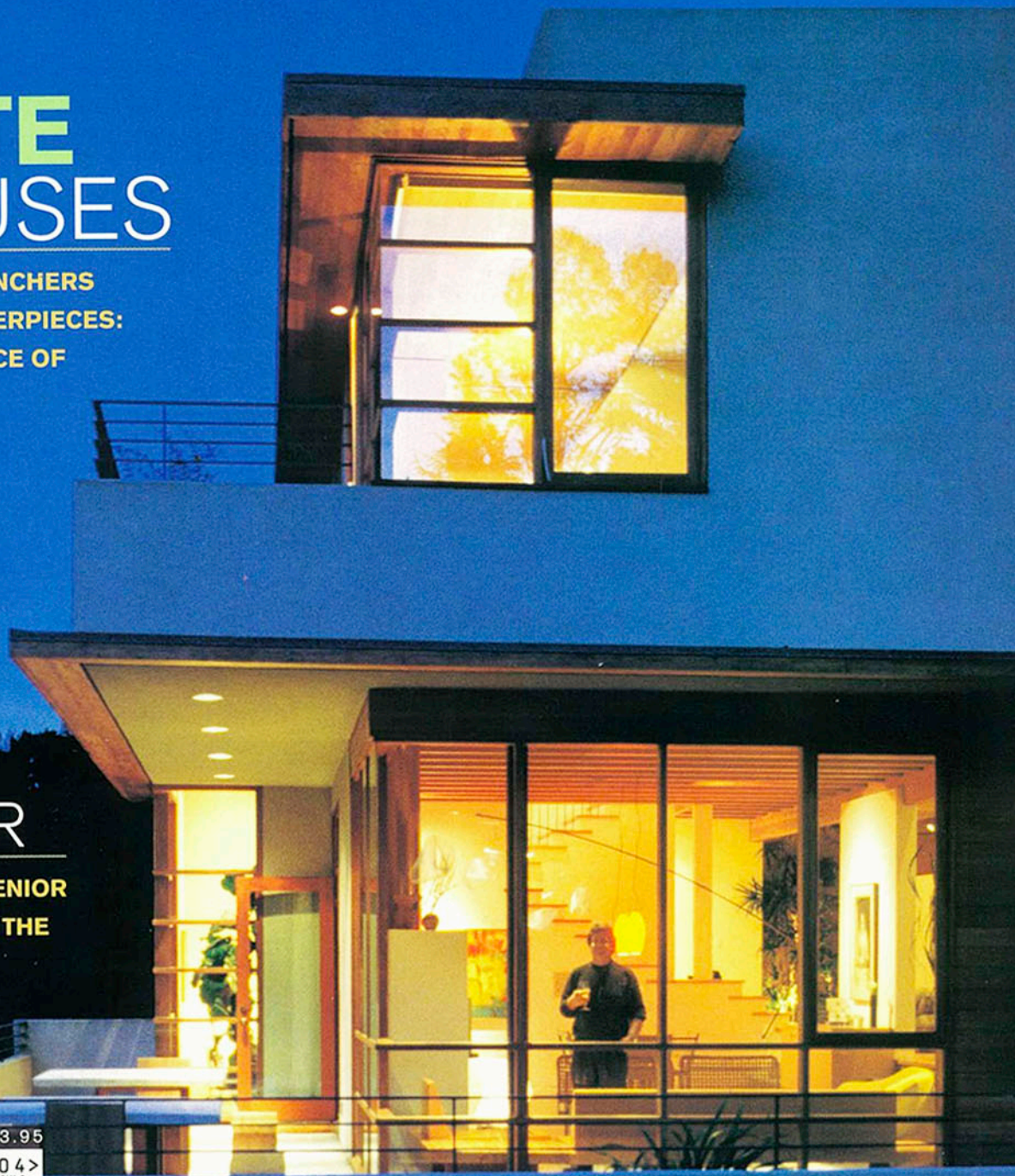
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