

HEY, TWEEN! IT'S
TECHIE
beat
PAGE 81

San Francisco

FREAKS OF THE INDUSTRY

WHAT THE GEEKS OF HBO'S SILICON VALLEY REVEAL ABOUT THE REAL SILICON VALLEY

PLUS: ELLEN PAO, MODERN MARTYR | THE PUNCHING-BAG SHERIFF | S.F.'S STRIP CLUB MAGNATE

\$4.99 May 2015
sanfranmag.com
MODERN LUXURY



Poetry in Concrete

FU-TUNG CHENG SCULPTS A ZEN, FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT-INSPIRED COMPOUND OUT OF WOOD, GLASS, AND HIS SIGNATURE MATERIAL.

BY ZAHID SARDAR

WHEN BERKELEY CONCRETE fabricator Fu-Tung Cheng was first summoned to this site in Los Altos Hills—the future home of two electrical engineers and their three children—he was tasked with creating custom kitchen counters, a specialty of his. But one of the owners, a writer-artist and engineer of Indian descent, recognized a kindred spirit in Cheng, who was born to Chinese immigrants and graduated from UC Berkeley with a fine arts degree. “He clearly understood our chimerical world,” she says. “He, too, practices his art in unexpected ways.” The couple promoted Cheng from countertop fabricator to kitchen designer, then to principal architect of their entire 7,800-square-foot home.

Though Cheng isn’t formally trained as an architect, he has designed seven



1. The dwellings are linked by an atrium stairway, covered walkways, and open-air corridors.
2. The meditation room features a skylight and a low band of windows.
3. The home’s staggered design is a nod to Frank Lloyd Wright’s oeuvre, which architect Fu-Tung Cheng came to admire while growing up in Los Angeles. The peaked butterfly roof supports south-facing solar panels that power the water-heating systems.

homes since 1993. He views architecture as a collaborative art. “Making buildings is like making movies, where one can be a playwright, a director, and even become an actor,” he says. After a week of rumination, meditation, and tai chi, Cheng devised not one building, but a modern compound of wood, concrete, and glass structures that seem to unfold like origami.

The central structure, where the family spends most of their time, contains the open-plan living room and the kitchen; detached pavilions house the garage, a guest suite, a home office, and a meditation room with a low band of windows that “focus the gaze outward,” says Cheng. The main dwelling is connected to the outlying structures by walkways and open-air corridors flanked by low-maintenance landscaping and fruit and vegetable gardens.

Custom details abound throughout, from reclaimed old-growth redwood siding to striking copper gutters outfitted with rain chains made from Indian temple oil lamps. Embedded in a garden wall is a collection of family mementos that will be uncovered as the wall erodes, a sort of slowly revealed time capsule. And, of course, these are no ordinary kitchen countertops: The rust-colored concrete is studded with amethyst, permeated with glinting glass fragments, and incised with ancient Sanskrit culinary aphorisms.

For Cheng, the home provided a rare opportunity to express his notions of Japanese wabi-sabi imperfection and Chinese feng shui while embracing his clients’ Indian heritage. “I felt like a street musician with a real venue to play my music,” he says.



4. Rain chains made from Indian temple oil lamps dangle from the home's copper gutters. With time, the garden wall below will be eroded by rain, revealing the family mementos that were encapsulated in the concrete.

5. The bedrooms on the second story include the master suite and a sleeping porch.

6. The building's structure is revealed wherever possible. Corridors are left open, making the garden, designed by Ron Lutsko, an integral element of the home.