



# UNDERCOVER LOFT

FOR A NEW HOME IN TOPANGA CANYON, LOS ANGELES ARCHITECT BRIAN MURPHY CREATED A CLUSTER OF INDUSTRIAL SPACES UNDER A GIANT FLOATING ROOF.



On the recommendation of a mischievous friend, Scott Sternberg called Santa Monica architect Brian Murphy to incorporate “my crazy thoughts” about a loft in a rustic setting. He had never seen the poodle-topped tree roses that Murphy, one of L.A.’s better-known architectural subversives, had planted in front of a Pacific Palisades house. But by the end of their first meeting, client and architect were in cahoots.

“Brian’s both practical and over the top,” says Sternberg, a television producer. “I like his wildness when it comes to creating things from simple materials.” The two embarked on the project, with builder Menelaos Saridakis, complicitous agents in a creative conspiracy that would last the better part of a decade.

Sternberg found a 3¼-acre site in the Santa Monica mountains. Temperature swings made a big barnlike space infeasible, so Murphy’s task was to reconcile his client’s dream with site realities. Today, Sternberg lives with TV producer Nicki Huggins and their kids (each has a 15-year-old son) in a village of wandering corrugated-plastic walls. Intimate and grand, idiosyncratic and classical, the house is at once village and villa, or as Murphy puts it, “Tupperware Palladian.”

Like an airplane hangar without walls, this off-the-shelf industrial shelter on flanged-steel supports contains a cluster of individual lofts, each with a separate function.

Produced by Linda O’Keefe and Laura Hull. Photographs by Tim Street-Porter. Written by Joseph Giovannini.



Unlike its urban inspiration, this loft living room has a wall of glass doors and clerestory windows (framed in unfinished wood). In typical Brian Murphy fashion, the architect made a chandelier from a bouquet of \$3.50 clamp-lamps.



The atrium entry (top left) is the geometric center of the house, and given the wide French doors and an eight-foot-square skylight overhead, guests may well wonder whether they are outdoors or in. Exterior and interior corridors all lead to this central space. "By going through the atrium, you can move around the house fairly quickly, between the office and bedrooms and kitchen," says Sternberg. "It has great flow." The angled geometries hide views from the atrium to the living spaces, but allow clear sight of the surrounding ridges, glimpses of which shoot through the two axes that divide the house.

Few of the rooms have formally designated functions. Loosely configured, they seem interchangeable, as though the master bedroom could become a light-drenched office or the kitchen a great room. "I really do use the living room as a studio," says Huggins; and the office, behind a roll-top garage door off the living room, can serve as a family media room (at least one

son does, in fact, sneak in to push a few buttons when Sternberg and Huggins are away).

"At work, I always try to get an industrial look into my shows," says Sternberg, who may have brought work home by designing his own TV studio to live in. "You create that sense with polished floors, high ceilings, big volume and minimal furnishings on a single floor. The ceilings here go from 14 to 24 feet."

"We're not rushing to decorate the house," says Huggins, "because we wait till we fall in love with a piece before we buy it." For someone with a second business refurbishing old outdoor furniture, Huggins shows great restraint. She is also a photographer. "The house is filled with such a soft and beautiful light," she says, "I can photograph anything here."

Corridors lead to the central atrium (top left) through French doors. The kitchen (top right) features a fireplace with a stainless surround. In the master bedroom, metal ducts hang over a bed that floats on a polished concrete floor.



**T**he roof is a prefabricated industrial shed that was shipped from South Dakota on a flatbed truck and assembled on-site. Light filters through translucent corrugated-fiberglass panels set into it above outdoor corridors and terraces. The shed covers 9,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor area, creating a high-tech verandah of cross-braced steel columns set in a gravel plinth that's reinforced with a concrete perimeter. Nature's own air-conditioning system scoots breezes under the canopy, preventing heat buildup and dropping the temperature inside by ten degrees. "The first time I came up here, it was 114 degrees, without any shade on the site," remembers Murphy, "and I thought that if I needed a hat, the house could use one too." (As for the landscaping, Huggins says it's now underway.)

Inside and out, Murphy used standard materials—"completely Brand X," he says. The one exception is the master bathroom, where an oversize tub creates a sense of almost indolent luxury that plays against the character of the otherwise austere interiors. But Murphy, a master at making the ordinary extraordinary, can also do the reverse, and he douses the glamour by immersing the tub up to its lips in standard-issue white tile.

Murphy is a rheostat of imagery, able to turn visual connotations up or down so you see objects anew, with fresh eyes: He redefines the context so completely that the normal can become giddily abnormal; he takes the old things that the eye refuses to see any longer and gives them a new calling. "I find the concrete floors and white walls soothing," says Sternberg. "They give me that warm at-home feeling. The house makes me feel creative every time I walk in."

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*See Resources, last pages.*

From afar, the house almost looks like a suburban home. Closer inspection shows how complex the orchestration of materials is: Steel cables cross brace the steel supports of the corrugated-metal-and-fiberglass roof.

