PASADENA
SAN FRANCISCO
SANTA BARBARA

A Tuscan Style Desert Retreat
The Pasadena Residence of Architect Adele Chang draws inspiration from Mies van der Rohe, but also makes a strong personal and cultural statement.

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Modernist imagery and structural clarity greet visitors in the entrance foyer to the Chang Residence. Tension cables are used ornamentally in the staircase and a second story overlook. Beyond the foyer is a glimpse of the living-dining room, while floor-to-ceiling glass walls offer a view of landscape and water.

OPPOSITE Concrete pavers leading to the front entrance of the Chang Residence seem to float above a reflecting pool, providing both drama and surprise to the meandering walkway. The pool bottom is lined in smooth river rocks, a material found throughout the home, including the living room fireplace. At upper right, corrugated metal siding gets the high-art treatment as the exterior finish of an upper story bedroom.
Outwardly, the Chang residence in Pasadena is an elegant new Modernist house designed by architect Adele Chang for herself, her husband and an adult daughter. But the house is something more: it is a kind of family portrait, with layers of personal and cultural meanings alike. “The house is about memory, among other things,” says the Taiwanese born, California trained designer, who is owner of the architectural firm of Lim Chang Rohling.

Family heirlooms are one kind of memory. Here, recessed cabinets in the living room display antique jewelry and objects that serve as reminders of Chang’s family roots in Taiwan. Other details are equally personal: the arrangement of the upstairs bedrooms replicates the layout of rooms in an earlier family home. Similarly, the metal siding that appears on parts of the façade is a reference to the siding on another previous residence. (The architect says she always liked the material, in part because it doesn’t need painting.) Still, at the bottom of all those meanings is the traditional Chinese home with its intimate connection to landscape.

The living-dining area of the Chang Residence is formal but inviting. A classic Barcelona chair, designed by architectural great Mies van der Rohe, hints at the influence of the Modernist master in the design of the Chang Residence. At center, a pair of built-in glass cabinets displays heirlooms from the architect’s native Taiwan. At left, the southern wing of the house, here seen through a window-wall, provides privacy to the back yard.
As in some traditional Chinese houses, visitors first approach the house in an indirect way. As designed by Burbank based landscape architect Rob Pressman of TGP, Inc., visitors must navigate an L-shaped pathway to the front door. But the visitor does not mind because the path is so engaging and there is an array of concrete pavers that seem to float above a burbling, below the surface stream. The indirect shaped path is a nod to the design philosophy of feng shui, following a suggestion of the architect’s husband.

Little else seems traditional when one enters the front door. Spaciousness, formality and a clear visual orientation to a back yard that is one hundred feet deep greet the visitor. As a composition, the house is made up of long walls that continue from outside to inside, just like the walls of the Barcelona Pavilion, an experimental house built in the 1930s by Mies van der Rohe, one of Ms. Chang’s great admirations from her days as an architecture student at Cal Poly Pomona. Another modern touch is the living room fireplace, which is a horizontal slot in a masonry wall, hovering several feet above the ground. Behind the safety glass, a fire plays above a bed of river rocks.

The warmest room in the house, unsurprisingly, is the kitchen, which is large as a living room and a highly social space. The most powerful design element in the kitchen is a sort of heroic scale breakfast bar that allows a large group to sit within a few feet of the cooking range and the cook.
A large kitchen-informal dining area is the heart of the Chang Residence. An enormous breakfast bar with built-in sink provides an intimate gathering place. The curved ceiling above the breakfast bar, with a row of minimalist hanging spot lights, echoes the shape of the curving table top. Horizontal glass tile adds glamour and reflections of light to the backsplash behind the stove area.
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The formality of the house flows from the inside to the outdoors. The fireplace wall seems literally to glide through a wall of windows into the back yard. The walls of the house extend deeply into the back, framing the yard and making it into a kind of courtyard. Pressman’s landscape design also brings the formality of the house into the garden. Pressman chose some characteristically Asian plants, such as gingko and bamboo, but installed them with the same geometric rigor that informs the house. A lap pool stretches into the distance, bordered by a long patch of grass.

Chang says she and her family love to look at the backyard. It has its own dining room, enclosed on three sides as if a wall had been peeled away. The landscaping seeks to bring the Modernist vocabulary outdoors and also attempts to obscure the sight of neighboring houses. “We work very hard and value the time we spend here,” she says. “We see the house as our personal refuge.”

It’s all very Californian—and very Chinese.
Looking from the outdoor dining room, the landscape design of the back yard by Rob Pressman follows the formal lines of the Chang Residence. A lap pool with a parallel strip of grass stretch nearly the full length of the deep back yard. At center, river rocks make another appearance, this time as a garden element. At center, a home office clad in metal siding has a tranquil view of the back yard.