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Residential Firm

CRAIG STEELY ARCHITECTURE

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Surfing may seem an unlikely metaphor for architectural practice, but consider Craig Steely: Based in San Francisco, the 48-year-old architect commutes every two months or so to his other studio in Hawaii, maintaining a work routine that allows him to hit the beach nearly every day, in either locale. Both his work and his hobby involve the repetition of actions that sharpen his skills and deepen his insights. He chooses his projects in the same way he chooses waves, waiting for one he can ride from start to finish without getting thrown. And whether on his surfboard or at his drawing board, Steely seeks to align the human will with the forces of nature, striving for an economy of gesture.

Despite his love of the coast, Steely grew up far inland, on a farm in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, and that's where his interest in architecture began. His mother came from an artistic family and encouraged his love of drawing. His father, who tended a walnut orchard, was a talented mechanic with a farmer's knack for improvising tools and equipment. "We were always making things, hot-rodding things, making them more specific to their use," Steely says. "That was just a daily thing." The



combination of imagination and practicality was formative for Steely, as was the rural setting. “I grew up in the country, and I have this complete love and respect for cabins,” he says. “I’ve spent so much time in cabins and outside.”

That affinity for elemental structures lies behind Steely’s interest in designing buildings that embody “the minimal amount, the slightest amount of enclosure.” His residential work has become more structurally adventurous over the years, but the experience he seeks to create has become, if anything, more grounded in the earth. “My favorite space is some driftwood shelter my friends and I might make on the beach,” he says. Most clients expect more enclosure than that, of course, but under Steely’s influence, they often find that they need less than they had thought. The goal, he says, is “a more natural, more outdoor, more hippie type of building.”

Steely studied architecture at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, but it was during his last year in school—which he spent in Florence, Italy, on a scholarship for study abroad—that he first tasted how rich a life in architecture could be. Among the architects he worked with there, “[architecture] wasn’t just a 9-to-5 job,” Steely says. “It was connected to who they were in all facets of life. It was completely open to art, literature, music, culture. It became beautifully obscure when we were working and when we weren’t.”

“It basically made me unemployable when I came back here,” Steely says, only half in jest—and without a hint of regret. In California, “I could get into good offices, but I kept getting fired.” The Florentine model of a practice interwoven with life simply didn’t mesh with the buttoned-down culture of a conventional American practice. Steely shifted instead toward construction. “But I kept getting dragged back into architecture,” he says, “so I decided that I had to do it my own way, on my own.”

“I had a friend who was licensed, and I helped him do some jobs,” says Steely, who clocked enough hours to sit for the licensing exam, though “definitely without working in any conventional offices.” He had long been plugged into a network of artists and other creative professionals—including his wife, painter Cathy Liu—and when he launched a solo practice, he found in that same group a natural client base. “All of a sudden,” he says, “I was an architect in an arts community.” He worked within that community, doing both design and construction, from the mid-1990s to about 2000. “That’s when I started getting enough work that I could just design and not build.”

Notice of Steely’s work rippled outward, from local media to regional and national publications. But even as word spread beyond his immediate circle, he was—and remains—determined to work only with people who understand his creative process. Today, he credits much of his success to choosing the right clients. They tend to be “huge optimists, but realists too,” he says. “They can look around and see the beauty in things that other people can’t.” And they understand Steely’s body of work to be an ongoing project.

In an interview for a 2010 *RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECT* profile, Steely described his ideal client as “someone complex enough to want a simple house,”



REIN VAN REITHOVEN



Previous spread: Craig Steely on the terrace of the living space that he designed for himself and his family in San Francisco. **Opposite:** Known as Beaver Street Reprise, this infill rowhouse designed by Steely contains both the offices for his architectural practice and his living space. **This page:** Though primarily based in San Francisco, Steely has spent the last decade designing a series of houses in Hawaii. The latest, Lavaflow 7, the Mayer/Penland House, is a cast-in-place concrete structure on a 5-acre site near the Ohia forest.

and that was no idle quip. “I’m pretty demanding of my clients,” he says, totally lacking in patience for such things as professional kitchens for folks who never cook. “I really want them to be realistic about how they’re going to use this house,” he says. “Maybe I dissuade a lot of clients, but the ones I get are the right ones.”

A meeting at the architect’s San Francisco residence usually reveals who is and who isn’t down with the program. Dubbed Beaver Street Reprise, the infill row house distills Steely’s approach to urban dwellings. Forthrightly contemporary yet respectful of its Victorian neighbors, it combines modernist precision with a certain beach-hut quality. A treehouse-like roof-deck provides the essential outdoor connection. “And we’ve got a workshop and a half-pipe in the garage,” adds Steely, an avid skateboarder. “What more could you want?”

Steely located his 600-square-foot office on the second of the house’s three living floors. Family quarters—he and Liu have a young son—occupy the remaining 1,000 square feet of indoor space and 600 square feet of roof-deck. “I like that the house is a certain size,” Steely says. “I can’t have more than three or four [staff] people in the office,” a number that allows him to be intimately involved in every project. “Also, we wanted to have a compound where we live and work. I really like that transparency. [Prospective clients] come over, and they see how we live. And how we live is how I design. Some people get it, and some people don’t.”

Those who do get it sign on for a journey of intense exploration with no predictable outcome. Filmmaker Xiao-Yen Wang and artist Andy Martin hired Steely to rescue their seismically challenged San Francisco Victorian. Steely stabilized the building with an innovative external steel frame that also supports two outdoor terraces and shelters a rooftop suite with panoramic views of the city. “Craig actually has a technique to glean things from a client,” Martin says. “He tries to get as much as he can—and if he gets even more, that’s OK. Craig likes client input. He doesn’t always follow it, but he considers it each time.” And Wang and Martin learned to trust their architect’s instincts. “Craig moved a wall, and it looked like a mistake,” Martin says. “I said, ‘That’s going to look like hell,’ but Craig said no. And it turns out he was completely right.”

“He’s fearless,” says Bernard Trainor, a Monterey, Calif.–based landscape architect who has collaborated with Steely on two especially challenging in-town sites. On the Mullen Street project, Steely navigated seemingly insoluble access issues to create a house whose entry sequence is one of its strongest points. Instead of locating the entrance on a street elevation, Trainor notes, “he created the opportunity to depart [from the sidewalk] and go through the garden, which is one of the cleverest solutions I’ve seen on a city property.”

Since 2000, Steely has applied his skills to a very different environment: land created by a 1955 lava flow on Hawaii’s Big Island. “It’s an incredibly dynamic environment,” he says. “It’s brand new land. It’s so raw.” In contrast to urban San Francisco, “it’s contextless in a way. It’s this bold proving ground for form-making.” Steely’s response has been a series of houses (nine to date,



SHARON REISDORF



Opposite: The narrow infill site of the Mullen Street house in San Francisco presented little room for a traditional entry sequence, but the resulting stair through the landscape to an inboard courtyard became a defining feature of the project. **This page:** For Xiao-Yen Wang and Andy Martin's renovation, also in San Francisco, Steely turned the need for bracing (to bolster the structure's seismic resistance) into the benefit of steel-reinforced terraces and added a photovoltaic-topped roof deck to maximize views.



with three more under construction), that reflect the architect's evolving concept of shelter in this very particular spot. His own island home and studio, Lavaflow 2, with its radically simplified plan, light structure, and large sheltered outdoor space, most closely approaches what Steely calls "that cabin idea—throwing away everything superfluous."

Living and working in two such different places keeps his creative perspective fresh. "You just don't get bogged down," Steely says. "It makes you appreciate the place you live in more." And since it began, "the experiment of Hawaii has really informed the work I've done in San Francisco," leading him to make his city buildings more porous and open to the outdoors. A recent San Francisco project, Peter's House, shows the influence most strongly. A four-story building whose two middle floors are enclosed by a frameless glass curtainwall, the house has a rooftop pavilion that would look right at home on the lava flow. "There's no fussy detailing," Steely says. "There's a lack of detailing. It's a really strong idea that we've stripped away as much as we can from."

There are other exchanges between the poles of Steely's ambit: modular steel structural systems fabricated in California and shipped to Hawaii, wind-fall koa from the Big Island milled for cabinets in a San Francisco apartment, and, most importantly, the ideas that germinate in one place but find fertile soil in the other. What weaves through it all—connecting Steely's life, his work, and his world—is the ocean. "My day in Hawaii isn't so different from my day in San Francisco," he says. "I get up in the morning. I go surf. I come back. I do some work. If I don't get out to surf, I'm less productive."



JD PETERSON



Opposite: Steely designed the 1,400-square-foot Lavaflow 2 house on the Big Island of Hawaii as a space to serve as his home and studio when he makes his regular trips there. **Top left and right:** Lavaflow 4, the Fishman/Kurakawa House, is sited in a forested area that was left undisturbed by the flows. **Above:** Lavaflow 5, the Bennet/Yeo House, is located on the island's Hamakua Coast and was constructed with a prefabricated system of 8-inch-by-8-inch steel flanges that were bolted together on site.

TOP: JOHN GRANEN; BOTTOM: BRUCE DAMONTE