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The DESIGN MAGAZINE for the Pacific Northwest

**36**

**UNEXPECTED  
DESIGN DESTINATIONS**  
(YOUR SUMMER  
ROAD-TRIP SHORTLIST)

**BAJA, FIJI,  
SAN FRANCISCO:  
PACIFIC  
NORTHWEST  
DESIGNERS  
LEAVE THEIR MARK  
ON THE WORLD**

**INSPIRED BY TRAVEL:**  
HOMES, GARDENS, & MORE

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9 NEW HOTELS YOU  
NEED TO KNOW



# DESERT HIGHS

IN A 180-DEGREE TURN FROM ITS DESIGNS IN DAMP NORTHWEST CLIMES, CAMPOS LECKIE STUDIO CREATES A MODERN DESERT OASIS IN MEXICO FOR FIVE CANADIAN FAMILIES.

Written by AMARA HOLSTEIN • Photographed by JOHN SINAL

DESIGN TEAM

*architecture:* Campos Leckie Studio

*construction:* Ian McGonagle, Thomas Perez

The four houses that Vancouver-based architects Javier Campos and Michael Leckie built in Los Zacatitos, Mexico, are modernist dreams: streamlined, sleek, and completely off the grid, yet harmonized with both their surroundings and the vacationing needs of the homeowners.





**I**n Los Zacatitos, on Mexico's Baja Peninsula, four modern homes rest quietly on a dramatic desert landscape. Surrounded by cacti and massive boulders, with volcanic hills and the Sea of Cortez as its backdrop, the place feels worlds away from the lush British Columbia homeland of its residents. And that's fitting. After all, when Vancouver-based architecture firm Campos Leckie Studio designed these houses, it was mindful of its Canadian clients' desire to connect with the local environment.

Created over a period of almost 15 years—from the inception of House One in 1999 to House Four's completion in 2013—the structures were a long time in the making, their construction slowed by rutted roads, limited access to materials, and the intricacies of the local building industry. First architects Javier Campos and Michael Leckie spent weeks getting to know the area and their clients, all Vancouver-area residents (with the exception of one homeowner from Whistler) who wanted vacation homes that lived lightly on the land. "You can't design a house in Baja unless you actually experience the place," says Campos. "What you can do in Mexico and what you can do in Vancouver are very different."

Forget the rainscreen envelopes, curtain walls, and other fancy building systems that are used in the Pacific Northwest; in Baja, those technologies aren't necessary for green design. Instead, as Leckie explains, "we've integrated relatively unsophisticated building technologies to create architecture that operates with a high degree of sophistication in response to the climate." In other words, it's the super-smart design, not high-tech systems, that keeps these houses off the grid. There's no A/C: the houses all use passive ventilation—combining good airflow with overhead fans and breeze-ways—to keep indoor temperatures comfortable, even when it's 100-plus degrees outside, and to mitigate often intense winds. »



**ABOVE AND OPPOSITE:** Functional elements of passive ventilation and solar gain are brilliantly integrated into the modern design of House Three. A series of concrete-reinforced insulation panels are artfully arranged to look like a streamlined sculpture—but they act like a smart passive-building system. Two families share the 3,800-square-foot house, sited on about an acre of land.

**BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT:** “These sliding glass window walls frame the landscape really beautifully,” says resident Greg Bellerby of the house he shares with his wife, Allyson Clay. “Little vignettes of big rocks and cacti surround the house.” The woven cane pergola is a modern interpretation of a traditional Mexican structure.



In the Pacific Northwest, moisture is a big concern, and architecture aims to capture as much natural light as possible. The opposite is true in Baja, where the weather is arid for the most of the year, broken only by two months of drenching torrential rains. “The challenge is to control solar gain, so the houses were designed first and foremost to create passive solar architecture,” says Leckie. Solar panels provide all the homes’ energy needs. Large concrete masses mitigate temperature swings between night and day by capturing heat when the sun is intense, and deep overhangs create much-needed shade.

The fact that all four houses are streamlined concrete structures is also tied to their location. Emphasizing a strong Mexican modernist tradition, the architects

stripped the designs to their most basic shapes. “We tried to create forms that are very simple and mirror the desert,” says Campos. “The houses have the most minimal but essential sense of domestic luxury. It’s all there; it’s just very pared down.” The use of concrete—rather than wood—makes sense here, where labor is relatively cheap. A cement plant sits near the housing sites, making the material cheaper still.

Each house is tailored to the needs of the individual homeowners, all of whom visit a few times a year, some staying up to seven months at a time. Sizes and layouts vary, ranging from a modest single-family home to a 3,400-square-foot complex consisting of four structures on 5 acres. Some homes have rooftop decks; others have covered patios. Yet they all share common themes. »



Purple bougainvillea provides a pop of tropical color in House Two's outdoor courtyard. The deep-set overhead oculus is a sun-shading device, drawing light into the space without overheating the house. Steps lead up to the roof deck, where the homeowners drink wine and watch the sun set over the ancient volcano cones.

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—JAVIER CAMPOS, ARCHITECT

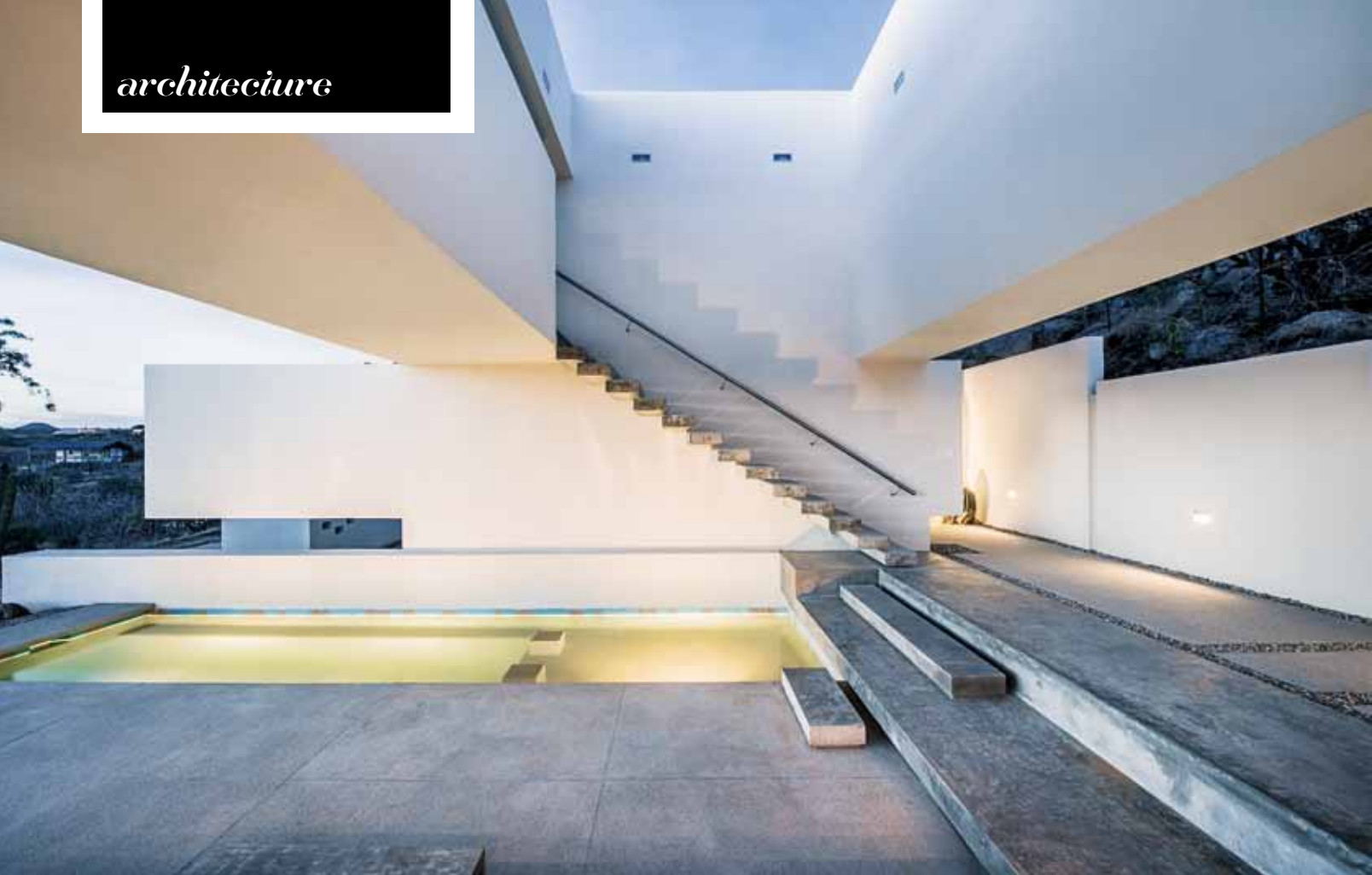


When residents slide back the glass walls, their houses commingle with the sights and sounds of the landscape, as shown here in the living area of House Four. "We tried to create a series of spaces that are neither totally inside nor totally outside," says Leckie. The houses have been designed with a privacy gradient that places the bedrooms away from the main living spaces. »



All the houses have a modern, minimalist feel, but the architecture of each one was tailored to its lot. House Four, shown here, sits on a steep, rocky site. The private rooms are elevated, providing shade for the more public areas below. Perforated walls keep the solar load off the bedrooms and allow for ventilation. »





**ABOVE AND LEFT:** “The light is intense here, so it’s easy to play with shapes in a way that doesn’t work in the soft light of the Pacific Northwest. In Mexico, you can create very strong, crisp shadows,” says Campos. This design element is shown to great effect in the pool/living area and interior hallway of House Four.

Swimming pools mimic the way rainfall naturally settles in wet months. Massive walls of glass slide open to let homeowners live in a semi-outdoor setting, and the houses are integrated into the landscape rather than dominating it. Small lizards skitter through the spaces, and windows frame views of the volcano cones and ocean. And, since there’s limited access to big-box furniture stores in this tiny expat community, the architects built in beds, seating areas, and storage.

Though each home looks and lives slightly differently, all four are perfectly attuned to their setting and ideal for true getaways. “It couldn’t be more different from Vancouver here,” says Greg Bellerby, a retired art-gallery director and curator who owns House Two with his artist wife, Allyson Clay. Away from the noise and lights of their Pacific Northwest hometown, the couple walks and swims along miles of deserted coastline, enjoys afternoon siestas, and watches the sun set from their rooftop. As Bellerby explains, “It’s very spare, and that’s what we wanted—a simple place that is part of the landscape.” ✱