

# The education of Michael Lee

How a modern architect learned to love shingles

by Mark McDermott

Three scenes in the life of an architect:

Michael Lee was fresh out of the Southern California Institute of Architecture and only interested in designing modern buildings. At a meeting with a client, he described how his design would create really nice spaces. The client interrupted him.

"Look," the man said. "I don't want spaces. I want rooms. I just want rooms, okay?"

A few years later, Lee found himself doing something he never thought he'd do.

He'd envisioned a career in which his work would be strictly modern – the way he'd once imagined his future, he'd probably be wealthy and well known for his bold, experimental designs by the time he reached 40 – but now he was well into his 30s, married and the father of two children. He'd entered the field in the early 1990s, right in the midst of a sluggish local economy and a flat housing market, and had for a while worked solely as a builder in order to make ends meet. He even considered leaving the profession entirely. Later in the decade things finally started picking up. But even in good times, there wasn't a big demand in the South Bay housing market for modern purists.

So in 1998, Lee took the plunge: he accepted a job to design and build a Mediterranean style home in Manhattan Beach – albeit one with a few modern elements, such as slightly askew, playful massing and an open floor plan not often found in traditional homes.

A strange thing kept happening as the project neared completion and the scaffolding started coming down. People stopped and admired the house. It was a revelation to Lee.

"It was like, 'Wow, people actually like this house,'" he recalled. "That was new to me. Most modern houses are not that well received by the neighbors."

Much of Lee's work thus far had been as an understudy and builder to Dean Nota, a Hermosa Beach based architect who had been one of his instructors at SciArc. Nota is a purist's purist, an uncompromising modernist whose body of work is revered in the more rarefied realms of architecture, that part of the profession that concerns itself with the advancement of the art itself, where projects are published and awards given.

Nota's work, however, isn't crowd pleasing, nor is it intended to be. His designs are admired for their austerity and elegance among those who have a taste for modern architecture, but to those who don't – decidedly a majority in the South Bay – the homes can seem too austere, even cold. Lee's first few projects after he established his own practice in 1991 were similarly modern, and he found it somewhat troubling that they were less than warmly received by



Architect Michael Lee at his office, one of two mixed-use buildings he has designed at the corner of Highland and Marine in Manhattan Beach. Photo by David Fairchild

their neighbors.

"The fact they didn't ever seem very happy, that was really kind of an embittering experience," he said. "I thought, 'Wow, this is not very fun!'"

On a recent Friday afternoon, Lee gave a quick tour to the few dozen houses he has designed locally. His career, of late, has taken off, but not in a way he ever would have foreseen.

He started at his own office, a four-story mixed-use building on Highland Avenue in Manhattan Beach whose playfully modern design is in keeping with his early aims as an architect. A drive through the El Porto neighborhood – where Lee grew up – quickly passes by a half dozen homes he has designed and begins to give a glimpse of the breadth of his

work: an Art Deco remodel that honors the home's original 1930s design while adding a sleek, glassy "modern intervention"; a quietly efficient four level modern rebuild – another remodel in name only – that maximizes its small lot by adding a basement level and is crowned with an airy, open top floor with an ocean view; and a large reinterpretation of traditional shingled beach cottage that features a prominent, slightly triangular stone chimney, a white fenced deck, and vaguely modern, asymmetrical multi-level massing.

But a drive to El Segundo finds a home that is most indicative of the education Lee has undergone working in the South Bay. The home, which sits on a corner lot in the heart of old town El



Segundo, at first glance appears to be a traditional, two-story cottage. It has a white-fenced porch offset nicely by its dark gray shingles and looks like many of its neighbors, only somehow sprightlier. This is largely achieved by its second story, which is set-back considerably and has three different masses: one rises from the center of the house, tower-like, with three small, somewhat nautical windows just underneath broad white eaves. Another is right beside it but set back further to the rear of the house. And a third element is up front and rotated diagonally so its white-paned, large windows look out sort of happily at the rest of neighborhood.

The house is a traditional cottage with a modern twist, quite literally. Lee regards the home as one of his most successful projects yet: it pleased its owners and neighbors and possesses a uniqueness and architectural integrity of its own. It manages to be bold and friendly at the same time.

"The builder told me that house shook up El Segundo," Lee said. "It's a happy, neat little house that is appropriate in scale for the neighborhood. It's got a fresh face but the soul of an old cottage."

Shingles, Lee said, don't get the respect they ought to in the architectural world.

"I took the design skills I picked up at SciArc and used them to reinterpret a very traditional architectural language," he said. "Shingle homes are beautiful. It's a great skin on a building, and the white detailing and trim is kind of a pure and beautiful language. Some of the massing and the way people thought out these buildings was kind of plain, but it turns out you can do successfully modern compositions and still use traditional materials to cloth them."

"It worked well with that shingle vocabulary," he said. "That was also a super fun adventure."

He acknowledged that he wouldn't have believed this was possible back in his more purist days.

"No way," he said. "Not in a million years."

## The surf kid architect

The journey from modern purist to shingle-loving apostate probably isn't as long as it might appear. Lee is a South Bay native - his family has lived here 70 years. He grew up as a surf kid among the fading beach cottage ambience of old Manhattan Beach. If shingle is indeed a vocabulary, it is, in a sense, his native tongue.

Lee isn't one of those who knew his vocation from a young age. He attended the University of California at Santa Barbara - which coincidentally is located near good surf - as a Spanish major. He took his time in school, traveling widely and trying to receive as broad an education as he could. He became interested in architecture as the result of a single conversation.

"I met an architecture student and he was telling me all about the classes he was taking," Lee recalled. "I thought, gee, that sounds like fun. I went to the library and started looking into what it would take, and it turns out there were quite a few masters programs with people from undergraduate degrees in other stuff...The thing about architecture is it's problem solving and some engineering and drafting, but it's more about being a well rounded person."

Rather than entering a graduate program immediately, however, Lee went to work for Barry Berkus, a Santa Barbara architect who ran one of the largest residential practices in the country.

"I started just as an errand boy running blueprints," Lee said. "But one day they needed somebody to do basic coloring, and someone said, 'Hey, come help us color.' Within a week or two I was drawing big maps and it turned out I was pretty good at it."

He worked at Berkus Design Studio for three years and finally decided to enter graduate school. It wasn't an easy decision. He was recently married and he and his wife, Beth, already had one young child and another on the way.

"That was probably the smartest thing I did, give up a good job and go back to school to see the breadth and depth of what I was really only seeing on the surface," Lee said.

When he entered SciArc, he was unlike most of the other students in several ways. The school, founded in Santa Monica by the famed modern architect Ray Kappe in 1972, was known as the most cutting-edge architectural school on the West Coast. It attracted talented young architecture students from around the nation, and they tended to come from rigorous academic and intellectual backgrounds. Lee felt somewhat out of place.

"You know, I was a laid back surfer kid," he said. "I grew up watching F Troop."

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don't want all eight foot ceilings in any house, whether it's Mediterranean, shingle, or modern. Of course, the more modern the house the more volume and openness."

Rather than trying to impose his ideas on a reluctant clientele, he learned from his surroundings. If he had truly wanted to be a devout modernist, after all, he could have lived in Venice Beach, but he chose early in his career to come home. Instead, he developed an architectural language that fit here. He went native. It turned out there was lesson here that was something like surfing.

"One thing about surfing is that you do learn how to work with the wave, to go with the flow, for lack of a better expression," Lee said. "There is an uncomplicatedness about it, and that's the way I am."

The fact that Lee is a beach person actually has a lot to do with his architecture. He still lives in an old stucco beach house in El Porto that he called "the ultimate surf shack." He and his family are too attached to it to move. And he said he feels almost like crying every time he sees another little beach cottage torn down to make room for a granite mansion.

In this way, it makes perfect sense that a significant part of his new work would be a reinterpretation of the shingle cottage. "The contrast between those soulful old cottages and the new soulless glass and black granite monstrosities...It's pretty tough to see that happen when I've been in this community so long," Lee said.

He discovered something new with every single house he built. Before he knew it, he found himself seeking out books on shingles. He experienced what he called a "design renaissance" and started to really have fun. He also started attracting more and more commissions.

Sara Warshaw, a Manhattan Beach based architect who is a fellow SciArc grad and also a former disciple of Nota, has watched Lee's transformation with interest. Her own designs are starkly modern, but she respects what Lee has accomplished. Lee, she said - in what among some modernists could be interpreted as fighting words - really wants to please people.

"He wants to make spaces that will make people happy," she said. "He is just not going to be that dictatorial about how he approaches the problem of design. His work is very clean, full of light, full of life, really. He doesn't apologize for going a more traditional route. I think there is a lot to be said to that, because, you know, that's really what people want. People don't really want to be dictated to about how they should live or what their taste should be. I think some modern architects can be a little intimidating in that way. And Michael won't go there."

Nota has also watched his former student's work with interest. One might assume he'd be troubled by Lee's trajectory away from purely modern work. Such is not the case.

"You know, I'm actually very happy for Michael," Nota said.

In fact, Nota said that Lee's reputation is deservedly growing and predicted that his work would soon attract even more attention. "He is going to be much more well known," Nota said.

When Lee talks about architecture, two words frequently come up that aren't generally associated with architectural vocabulary: regarding design, the word is playful, and regarding the experience of building a house, the word is fun. And when he says fun, he doesn't just mean his own experience, but that of his clients.

"It should be fun, actually," Lee said. "You are getting to build a house. Wow, this is great - I mean, how much fun is that?"

"I think Michael just really loves what he does," Warshaw said. "There is not a lot of angst involved with Michael. He's just really good with people, and that is a little unusual with architects, also. Some act like they would like to be left alone to do their own thing. Michael likes the whole process from beginning to end, all the phases. It just seems he has a good time with it. I think it's sort of infectious. People see that enthusiasm and want to be a part of it. In a field when people are placing all their dreams into your hands, he inspires a lot of confidence in that way."

If Lee's designs share any one really obviously distinguishing trait, it is their playfulness. His own office building on Highland Ave. has a design element that is somewhat emblematic of his practice. At the very top is a metallic curve, a sort of trellis-like figure that he admits looks an awfully lot like the shape of surfboard.

"I don't know the answer," he said. "It's so clearly half a surfboard, but whether that was intentional or not, I honestly don't know."

Warshaw, who is not one for such ornamentation, was somewhat aghast when she saw it.

"Michael," she said, "You just couldn't stop yourself, could you?"

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He had also grown up working, and he knew a little bit more about the non-theoretical end of the business – that is, construction. Few of the other students had experience actually building something.

"Everybody was interested in talking about architecture," he recalled. "I just wanted to do it. I wanted to make things and have them look good and be beautiful and practical and logical...Making buildings really is a tactile thing. It's not that you have to be smart, but you have to be able visualize something and put it together."

Nota, who was one of Lee's instructors, was struck by his inventiveness. "Michael is visually very talented," Nota said. "He draws amazingly well, and he's also very good at responding in a spontaneous way to a situation."

When Lee graduated, he went to work with Nota, who runs a small, two-person studio and picks his projects – and his associates – very carefully. It was an amazing opportunity for Lee. Nota was, and is, so widely admired in the field that he can accurately be described as an architectural hero of sorts, one who has fought a long, good fight for the purity of his design ethic. "He is definitely an architect's architect," Lee said.

Nota liked the differences between himself and the young architect. Lee, for example, would sometimes come up with "an idea on the spot" while out at a site that would actually end up in the design. "I rarely do that," Nota said.

Instead, Nota likes to go back to the drawing board. "Something about drawing for me allows me to access a thinking process that doesn't come to me in a spontaneous way, whereas Michael works in a different way," he said.

Nota also liked the fact that Lee was a South Bay native. In fact, Nota, who moved here in 1977, often looked for associates who were from the area.

"He was a local guy," Nota said. "I was less local than he was. He literally grew up here surfing, paddling, and doing all those beach-oriented things. I don't really have that background... It has worked out a lot better when they are from here. They are more a part of the uniqueness of what is going on, the lifestyle."

Lee worked as an associate with Nota a little less than two years then made a decision to go into general contracting. The decision was partly based on financial necessity, due to the economic downturn in the 1990s. But it was also made with a desire to truly know his trade from the inside out. He wanted to design and build.

Nota argued against the decision. His father was a builder and he'd worked as a builder himself – for Kappe, in fact – but he thought it was a dangerous road for an architect to go down. To both design and build, he said, can lead an architect to design things that are easier to build, sometimes to the point that it compromises the design process.

"I'd learned it's just a different mindset," Nota said. "We have to work



The Gervais Residence in El Segundo. Lee's reinterpretation of the classic single style house added a modern twist.

together to accomplish what we do – an architect without a builder is nowhere, and certainly builders need someone to tell them what to build – but when you do both, it compromises the process."

Over the next seven years, Lee was the builder on some of Nota's most highly regarded projects. "He built five houses for me," Nota said. "That was really my golden age. Michael knew exactly what I wanted to get out of building and he really built some outstanding projects."

One of their design collaborations remains one of Lee's favorite all-time projects – the Swedish Pro Tech auto repair shop on Pacific Coast Highway in Hermosa Beach. The design's unexpectedness and pure invention merges Nota's deft austerity with Lee's sense of fun. The resulting unlikelihood is an auto repair shop the doubles as a local landmark.

"It's been more than five years, but every time I drive by that building I get a little giggly," Lee said. "It's a really beautiful building and it's pure piece of design work."

## Going native

For several years, Lee worked almost exclusively as a builder, and it very nearly killed him. The long hours and ceaselessly unfinished work were hard enough. But during the late 1990s he also was diagnosed with hepatitis. Exhausted and disappointed at the way his career was going – there seemed to be no market for him as a modern architect – he pondered quitting the business altogether and going back to school to get an MBA.

His practice was saved by his ability to compromise and what he was able to learn from those compromises.

"Architecture," he said, "is all about compromise. If you are trying to make a living as an architect, you have to be able to compromise. I certainly had to."

He couldn't afford to be overly selective about what projects he took on. He had two children, after all. He began softening some of his modern designs, moving away from the gray stucco and more industrial feel that marked his early projects and the work he did with Nota. One of a series of "light bulbs that went off" occurred when he was building a house for an old friend of his.

It was a very modern design, a four-story house on Manhattan Ave. in Hermosa Beach. The friend insisted on colors that Lee just hated. He was shocked, however, when the house was completed with those colors, and it looked perfect. The lesson he was learning, whether by softening modern designs, taking on more traditional work, or developing the art of compromise, was one of inclusiveness. "It doesn't all have to be about struggle," he said.

By softening, he also found he was being truer to his own instincts. "I can do hard as nails, but it's not really me," he said. "Maybe it has to do with my background. I'm much more of a beach person."

The Mediterranean house he designed in Manhattan Beach led to other work in a more traditional vein. What he was beginning to realize is that what was important wasn't what so-called style he worked in, but the design principles that he could bring to bear on each project.

"I think there are design principles, a lot of them modern in conception, that work well across stylistic borders," Lee said. "You can transfer these ideas we have about modern architecture and make traditional buildings fresh, things like open floor plans, the use of light and volume. For example, you shouldn't have to turn on a light during the day in any house, and you



The Tyukody Residence, completed in Manhattan Beach in 2000, is a 4,000 sq. ft. home intended to provide room for a growing family. The solution involved a full basement, a large sunny kitchen, and a great room opening up to a pool deck and an outdoor fireplace.



## Lee profile cont. from page 13

"I couldn't help myself," he agreed, and he couldn't have been happier about it. The day he put the curve on the building was one of the best of his career.

"That was a fun day," he recalled. "It was rush hour and we had a crane on the street, and I was up there beating on that thing with a sledgehammer. It was a beautiful day. That was kind of the apex of my career as a builder, putting that crowning piece on the building."

Ironically, now that Lee has embraced traditional architecture, he has begun receiving more modern commissions. Another modern mixed-use building that will house a delicatessen and apartments is going up right across the street from his office on Highland Ave. Of six projects current-

ly in design phase, five are modern - including one prominent hilltop project in Santa Barbara that could be his most ambitious work yet.

But what Lee is most proud of is his ability to work as an architect here in the South Bay, regardless of what style is ascribed to him.

"I just feel lucky to be able to be here in the South Bay and have good clients and significant work in my community," he said. "The last couple of years have been really rewarding because people have people seem to like what I do. And I do think my buildings are on par, design-wise, with anybody's. They are artful and unique."

"I've taken these compromises and I've learned from them and developed a way of working that has been fruitful," Lee said. "And it's been really, really fun." *SBP*