

BASIC
INSTINCTS
MANHATTAN
BEACH
CALIFORNIA

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Project: 137
Architect: Michael Lee Architects

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Matt Jacobson doesn't just abide by the mantra "less is more," he wholeheartedly embraces it. His Southern California home is a compact ode to minimal living.

Typography by Jeff Canham





Matt Jacobson is a collector. Point to any one of his possessions, and he will tell you a story—a rousing, passionate story—about its provenance. He has bathed with secondhand Bubble lamps, convinced that “the only way to truly get them clean is to hop in the tub.” For the better part of five years, he took biannual pilgrimages to western Michigan—wearing nothing more than a flight suit, with a couple pairs of clean underwear in his pockets—scouting for vintage Herman Miller treasures. Once, he purchased a load of first-edition art and design books out of a pickup truck, sight unseen, and he still regularly takes out display ads in the local papers kindly requesting leads on Architectural Pottery pieces or his “holy grail”—Raymond Pettibon artwork. Fountain-pen shows, watch exhibitions, and the Rose Bowl flea market are all on his regular agenda. Though Jacobson could fill a warehouse with the spoils he has amassed, the just under 900-square-foot Manhattan Beach bungalow he shares with his girlfriend, Kristopher Dukes, is a paradigm of minimal living, culled down and hypercurated to maximize personal satisfaction.

Winnowing his belongings was a choice, one motivated by his driving desire to live more simply. So earnest is this pared-down philosophy that he holds himself to a strict one-in-one-out rule that initially applied to T-shirts, eventually extended to his ukuleles (he’s kept only four), and now covers every new addition to the home. “It’s the perfect gut check,” Jacobson says regarding the practice. “As much as I believe that things do have meaning, editing is cathartic. It’s good to not get too attached to stuff.”

Naturally tanned and impeccably turned out, Jacobson speaks with the easygoing cadence common to lifelong surfers born and raised in this small coastal area of Los Angeles County known as the South Bay. After attending UCLA and a career stint in Chicago, he joined the team at Facebook in its very early days but soon settled down back in his hometown (he still takes weekly trips up north to Facebook’s HQ in Palo Alto). Jacobson’s history with his current cottage, located a few blocks from the Manhattan pier and a few feet from the sand, actually began with the much larger house next door.

In late 2004, he purchased that property to live in with his then-wife and twin teenage daughters. A subsequent amicable divorce had him looking for new lodging, but staying close to his kids was a priority. Fortuitous timing and a buyer’s market were on his side, and when the adjacent duplex went up for sale in 2009, he purchased it. Bucking the bigger-is-better trend that inexorably links nearly all new developments in the city, Jacobson opted instead for a renovation.

As such, the 1930s-era duplex, ancient by the area’s standards, is an anomaly. For a small town whose cultural identity is so prototypically Southern Californian—if the plaques on the pier are to be believed, beach volleyball originated on its sandy shores—Manhattan Beach lacks the pronounced architectural influences of its neighbors. Despite ►



Joined by architect Michael Lee and friend Gus McConnell, Jacobson shouts up to Dukes that they’re headed out for an impromptu surf session (opposite top), then walks down to the beach via the strand (opposite bottom). After meals are made, the sliding doors hide the anodized aluminum Miele fixtures, creating a clean, uncluttered look.





The Marmol Radziner-designed James Perse showroom in Malibu provided aesthetic inspiration for Jacobson, who outfitted his place with furnishings from the brand. More prized possessions that made the cut (opposite, clockwise from top left): A George Nelson Half-Nelson lamp sits atop an Alexander Girard bedside table; Jacobson, a goofy foot, prizes his Raymond Pettibon lefts more than anything; an original Eames shell chair manufactured in Gardena, California, before production moved to Michigan; a Nelson jewelry cabinet and Massimo Vignelli lamp.



being only a half-hour west on I-105 from the Los Angeles of Neutra, Eames, and Lautner, the South Bay largely missed out on modernism's manifest destiny. Instead it became what could generously be described as a melting pot in which Mediterranean-style homes abound, inexplicably sited double-wide Tuscan-style villas share property lines with fading shingled shacks, and some lots are seeing their third or fourth construction this century.

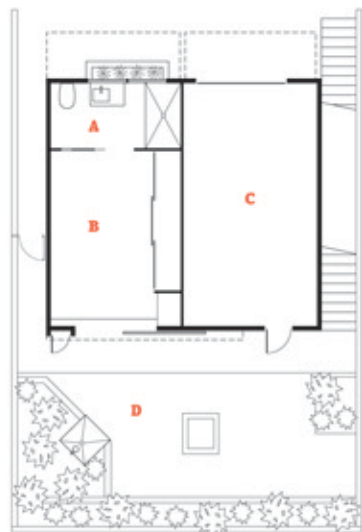
Jacobson spoke with a handful of architects before partnering with Michael Lee, a fellow Manhattan Beach native. He also called upon his friend and former colleague Steve Jones to act as a design consultant on the project; Jones now runs Better Shelter, a boutique that "slow flips" houses, fine-tuning fixer-uppers for first-time buyers. With the team in place and a time limit set at six months, the trio went about un-designing the bungalow. "The house was modest to begin with," Lee says. "We were just pulling back the whole time."

Following a plan to work within the existing 30-by-30-foot footprint, the top unit was to be transformed into the main living space, the ground floor would become a usable, distinctly separate office, and the two would be joined by a new set of steps connecting the upper level to the 15-by-30-foot backyard.

Stripping the structure down to its studs allowed for adjustments to the upstairs floor plan that streamlined the space, making the studio feel larger than its square footage might suggest. The flat ceiling was vaulted to a height of 12 feet and the bathroom, previously situated awkwardly in the center of the north wall, got shifted to the northeast corner. For Jacobson and Dukes, cooking generally consists of "miso soup from scratch or eggs for breakfast," so a bells-and-whistles kitchen wasn't a priority, so they found the ideal upshot by fitting the eastern wall with a set of compact 24-inch Miele appliances. When not in use, the built-ins completely disappear behind a trackless white sliding door that appears to float above the flooring sourced from Indonesia. (This same feature hides the Elfa storage system in the closet across the room.)

Downstairs, Jacobson wanted a place to focus on work but also to showcase one of his favorite finds: a George Nelson-designed Comprehensive Storage System (CSS). It's impossible to tell that the iconic piece was actually a mess when he acquired it from a former Herman Miller executive. "I had seen pictures of it, but when you take the CSS down it's a crazy pile of parts that you think will never go back together again," he says. The disarray, however, ►





First Floor



Second Floor

137
Floor Plan



A Bathroom
B Study
C Garage
D Patio

E Kitchen
F Living/Dining Area
G Bedroom

was predictably short-lived. “Luckily, I had picked up an original assembly manual in its muslin drawstring bag somewhere along the way.” In addition to being a place to bask in the warming glow of good design, the studio also employs radiant floor heating to tranquil effect. “When the sun’s coming up, I go downstairs first thing. It’s a meditation spot for me.”

A custom-built sliding glass door leads out to the secluded backyard, the clearing of which actually became the most expensive line item in the budget. The formerly “terraced” layers of dirt, broken glass, and chunks of cement is now a concrete-and-timber bamboo haven, where Jacobson and Dukes like to sit on clear nights. “The rustling is the best part,” Dukes says of the sound of leaves in the wind.

From his house, Jacobson can walk to surf the same breaks he did as a boy, oftentimes with the same friends from his youth. He thrills in the “get” of a sought-after memento, but subsists with what he truly loves in the town he adores. “It’s interesting how small you can live,” he says. Decades of collecting have honed his appreciation for the finer things but his simplest pleasures aren’t derived from items bought and sold. And when the sun sets, he can sit at home and watch it disappear over the Pacific. ■

“There’s a soulfulness in this small house that’s impossible to replicate in something completely new. The sweetness truly lingers.” —Michael Lee

Jacobson and Lee designed the long steel-and-ipe bench, which suspends from the low concrete wall. Dukes relaxes on a Willy Guhl Loop chair with her German Shepherd, Major. A bentwood Robin Day chair keeps the Herman Miller classics company (opposite). Through the office’s door, nestled in the bamboo grove, is an outdoor shower, fashioned after those found in San Onofre, farther south. 3

