

# THE PULL of SPACE & LIGHT

ARCHITECT SCOTT MITCHELL  
MAKES HIS MARK WITH A UNIQUE  
BLEND OF CONTEMPORARY ZEN  
MODERNISM. **BY JOE DONNELLY**

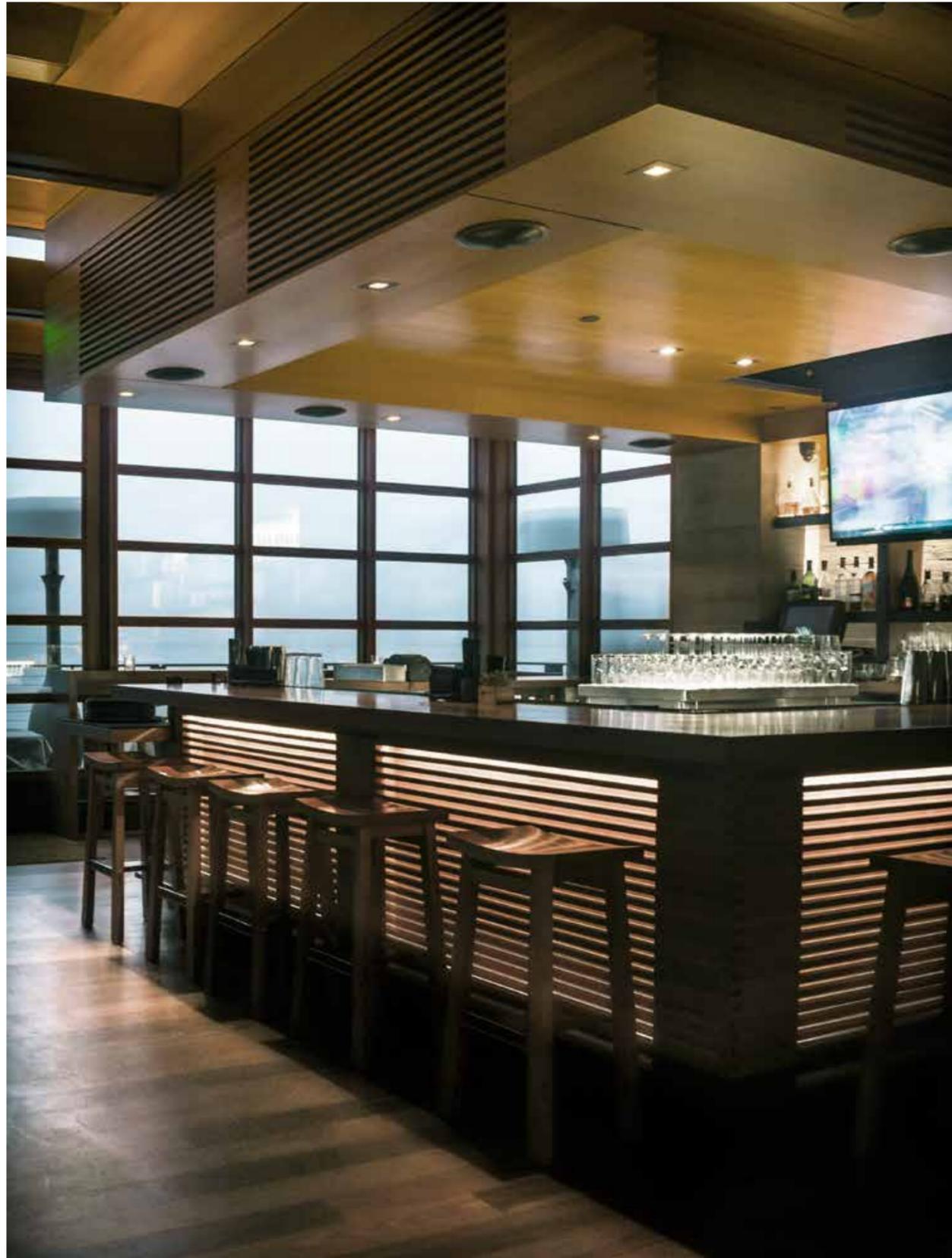
If you've ever driven up the Pacific Coast Highway looking for a piece of sandy respite away from the maddening crowds, or maybe you're lucky and this stretch is your way home, you've probably noticed Nobu restaurant, a sleek slice of contemporary modernism on the beach side of the road just south of 70s kitsch that marks the Malibu Pier.

Recently relocated from its home a couple miles up the road at Malibu Village and given a complete makeover in the process, chef Nobu Matsuhisa's eponymous sushi joint seamlessly mixes modernist and traditional Japanese values with just the right amount of sandcastle. Nobu's understated class may have put the world on notice about ascendant Los Angeles architect Scott Mitchell, but it's the house that sits a few miles further north that has, in a single construct, already sealed Mitchell's reputation as one of the most exciting voices of his generation.

The house belongs to real-estate maven Kurt Rappaport, by every indication a fine, as well as a very successful, fellow. It's located on a gentle bluff in that Malibu no-man's land between the pier and Point Dume and it's a masterpiece of what Mitchell would call a "humanistic" approach: employing the materials of design and build in a way that strives not to hide the hand of man, but to emphasize a building's potential for harmony with and enhancement of a beautiful setting.

It's a tightrope walk that requires a degree of subtlety and intention that would exceed the reach of a less confidant operator, not the least because the setting here is so exceptional: six sloping acres with a generous ocean-view panorama oriented southeast to northwest; tide lines visible in the sand at the cove below. Walk out onto the lawn and gaze at the water for a few minutes, nature slowly reveals itself in magnitude—rock





Nobu Malibu photography by: Chris Gill WestBoundary

formations beneath the surface, dolphins going about their business, kelp beds making a comeback along this stretch of coast, the collision of vast ocean and sky.

There's no competing with nature in this setting and that is, perhaps, the most important idea Mitchell brought to Rappaport when he ("mercifully" in Rappaport's words) talked him out of the two-story shingle, Hamptons-style house he originally had in mind for this site. Another architect might have been tempted to design something that follows the undulations of the sea and land around it. But Mitchell knew the right thing to do with a potentially overwhelming site such as this.

"You create frames, or rather, whatever nature's created, you frame it. I think that's really important," Mitchell explains. "It's actually a Japanese idea. I learned it from Japanese antiquity."

We'll make the pilgrimage to Malibu soon enough, but right now Mitchell is talking at his own house, a modest, third-generation modernist space full of wood, stone, and glass with a lovely yard where two large hound dogs hang out under a shade tree after offering a stranger a sloppy, wet greeting at the front door.

The house is set high enough in Laurel Canyon that the brilliant early summer afternoon sun, which could be migraine-inducing down on shade-less Sunset Boulevard, amplifies every aspect of the self-contained little ecosystem Mitchell has carved out here. The masonry, the art hanging on the walls, the fibers on the pillows on the couch, the books on the coffee tables and shelves, the flowers in the garden, the bees buzzing around the flowers in the garden, the trees refracting light onto the grass, the beams marking the views, the people buzzing round the house—it's all coming through in harmonious high definition.

One guesses the light never shines too harshly on this locale and that the vibe is welcoming even after a late night. Good thing, too, because that's the kind of night Mitchell just had. Don't get the wrong idea; he wasn't up doing anything too Hollywood. Rather, since he's become one of our hot city's hottest architects, Mitchell finds his days jammed with meetings and administrations. The wee hours are often when he finds himself following his muse—and the muse visited last night until about 4 a.m.

Despite that, Mitchell, a handsome chap who looks ten years younger than his 44, is full of energy and generous with his time. He whips up a decent homemade latte and ushers us into a gracious living room offering up views of the hearth, the south-facing yard and a slightly off-center painting taking up a good deal of the main wall in an

adjacent room. Mitchell sits on the edge of a perfectly lived-in leather couch and leans into the topic of the home he found ten years ago after a two-year search.

"I'd say it's a cross between the Brady Bunch house and a Japanese house," he says, half-joking. "This is the first one that I just walked in and when I left I couldn't get it out of my heart. I've done almost nothing to it, by the way."

Catching sight of the wayward painting mid thought, Mitchell is up off the couch in a flash, asking his guest to spot him as he straightens it out. With everything back in its proper place, he settles into a wide-ranging discussion of architecture, the amazingly pliable properties of concrete, Japanese antiquities, Middle Eastern ruins, and, of course, Louis Kahn.

But back to this house, which is neither flashy nor large, yet contains many of Mitchell's core values.

"There's something that really puts everyone at ease when they come in the door here, which is the same experience I had the first time. That resonated with me. I think the psychology of space and the way the experience of architecture affects you emotionally is really the most important potential that it has," he says. "One of the most powerful devices for manipulating the psychological experience of a space and the way an interior space relates to an exterior space, I've learned from Rudolph Schindler. If you look at the way he juxtaposed heavy masonry massing with delicate wood or steel and, whatever it is, glass enclosures...you

feel protected and safe when you're behind the masonry yet you can see out and see through the light, delicate glass. There's something really primal about *that* experience. It's almost like the psychology of being in a cave where you can see out, but you're protected because you know what's behind you. It kind of is really about feeling safe or not."

The psychology of space is something Mitchell intuited early on, before he knew what he was doing, really. Before he even knew he wanted to be an architect, a revelation that came to him both slowly and all at once.

Mitchell grew up the son of an Air Force fighter pilot. When he was a kid, his dad had an embassy assignment in Amman, Jordan, and during his teens he lived four or five years in Okinawa, Japan. These were indelible experiences.

"It's impossible in the Middle East to not find ruins everywhere. I mean, you can't throw a baseball and not hit some Roman aqueduct or some rubble and much later in life I think I realized that actually did influence me because I really love it when architecture erodes into nature," says Mitchell. "And then, the Japanese thing. The Japanese understand wood better than anybody else."

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Malibu residence photography by: Steve Shaw



Photographed by: Maarten de Boer

puts the dog-gnawed parts into place to reveal a series of modular components with sturdy frames, but with space, light and sightlines incorporated into the environment. It's all sewn together with a precocious solution to a vexing problem—how to engage with the environment while providing shelter from it.

In this early model, and in his best work, Mitchell's answer has been to move the central distribution artery to the view side of the building. The effect is to change the gravitational axis of the house from the usually more utilitarian and cloistered recesses to the pull of space and light.

"It's like walking across a stage. The whole space is transitional... This thing is really the concept for Nobu and for Kurt's house," says Mitchell. "Obviously, as a kid, I went to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth and Louis Kahn fucking spoke to me."

Kahn is responsible for the Salk Institute in La Jolla among other inspiring designs. "This thing came out of an emotional response I had to that building," Mitchell continues. "I worship this dude more than anybody else."

Even so, Mitchell says he had no idea he wanted to be an architect, though in retrospect he remembers loving Legos as a kid. "Totally predictable," he laughs. And during his teenage years, "I literally would draw house plans in my room at night, which sounds totally like a loser."

Still, when he attended Texas A&M, he was going to be a doctor. "I didn't know what an architect was. I didn't understand what an architect was. I started out Pre Med but at the end of my freshman year biochemistry kicked my ass," he laughs. "I hated it and I kind of just on a whim, I don't know what the catalyst was, I went over to the college of architecture and I just fucking enrolled.... Since that moment, I've been really lucky because I've always had a total singularity of what I wanted to do."

He's not exaggerating. He knew generally and specifically. Generally, it dawned on him that he wanted to be an architect. Specifically, he started pursuing his already-forming ideas about the psychology of space. These ideas, which are adaptable to settings and scalable to size, are encapsulated in a sort of talisman Mitchell carved from balsa when he was a sophomore after his first year studying architecture. He's kept it with him through school and through his dues-paying years at firms in London, New York, and the Hamptons before moving to Los Angeles where he continued his studies at SCI-Arc and eventually started Scott Mitchell Studios.

It's come a long way with him and if Mitchell could just find the damn thing it would explain a lot. He starts rifling through closets and drawers, looking behind piles of papers and plans searching for the damn thing.

Finally, he slides open a cabinet door and there it is behind some other papers, files and flotsam. Mitchell quickly

"I worship Louis Kahn more than anybody else."

Mitchell insisted on showing the Rappaport house to me in person. No amount of talking could capture it, he said. The owner was graciously amenable and we arrived on another postcard Malibu afternoon.

The house has been written about before, of course. And while the numbers—six years and \$60 million in the making, 22,000 square feet on six acres, 168-foot-long pool—tell a certain story, one that some could find hard to swallow in this polarized age, Mitchell was right: the experience is a whole other thing.

Mitchell had worked with Rappaport before on a Beverly Hills renovation, and the two developed a good rapport. But this project was different than anything Mitchell had yet taken on: the stakes were high even before plans were drawn and the huge financial investment was made.

"That was a vacant piece of land, six acres. There's not many of those left," he says, still wide-eyed at the thought of it. "I was really lucky because he really let me run with the ball... When I get the gift of somebody's trust, I will work twice as hard to make it extra great. It inspires me, you know."

It shows.

The house is located off the Pacific Coast Highway and set far enough back on the lot to skirt roadside site lines. A series of low, wood-grained concrete columns guides visitors down a gravel driveway to another series of columned waterfalls. The landscaping is minimal and well calibrated. The effect is sort of like entering a casual Zen garden (a conceit that often suffers from trying way too hard) of columns, water and green.

When you get out of the car, the effortless materiality of the structure is undeniable, the ease with which it complements its surroundings, mostly by not trying to be



Australian residence photography courtesy of Scott Mitchell Studio



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them. The concrete walls at your back feel as a home here as the glass in front and the sod on the rooftops. The geometry is subtle and the scale is perfect. When was the last time you could say that about 20,000 square feet of modernist architecture?

We could talk of that scale, of the conveyance through, and engagement with, the interior living spaces. The way the modernist lines and right angles interrupt the views just enough so that you'll not grow tired of the beauty outside the doors. We could geek out on the details—the blend of wood and masonry and of glass and metal. But the real point of all this is how it feels. And it feels confident without being cocky. It feels open and protected, sturdy and supple.

In the face of so much god, or nature, or whatever you want to call six acres of sacred north Malibu coast, it feels like the best that man can do. And isn't that what architecture is all about?

"It's a dialogue that goes back and forth," says Mitchell. "This thing that man makes that rests in this natural setting, this site that God makes."

I have no doubt that when nature—or God—reclaims it, as will surely happen, it'll look like it belonged here the whole time, just like those antiquities from Mitchell's youth.

"Architecture is the cruelest profession for the young because it takes so long to get the fucking ball rolling,"

Mitchell tells me. "That's the bad news. The good news is, I also think architecture is the most graceful profession to grow old in. That's the beautiful part."

We're back in Mitchell's home office and he's showing me drawings of a current project he's very excited about, a house on Lake Washington outside of Seattle. For Mitchell, it's that rare job that brings it all together: good money, creative opportunities and a good relationship with the client. From what I can tell from the renderings, this two-story modernist looking east onto the lake has every chance of matching the guts and grace of the Rappaport house. Like the Malibu house, this one neither shows up the surroundings nor strives to dress down in deference. It looks like what the site would want to grow if it could grow concrete, wood, glass and steel.

Most architects labor in obscurity and with little remuneration; Mitchell is well aware of his good fortune to be a hot architect in a hot city at a hot time. He's in the sweet spot of middle-age and the prime of his profession: neither a boy wonder nor an old faithful. He now possesses the right mix of fresh ideas and experience to finally have the ball rolling. His next step is to bring his business practices in line with his business. So far, he's been more focused on the

creative side of things than his profit margins.

"I'm a terrible business person. Horrible!" he laughs. "I'm working on that, though. I really am."

Aside from Seattle, Mitchell's got projects going in Australia, talks with developers in China, a high-rise garden possibility in Little Tokyo. He's excited about the possibilities that come with the revitalization of the Los Angeles River and the civic responsibility of building in a more sustainable and eco-friendly way.

"Let's really stretch ourselves to think about how that thing can be a contained ecosystem," he says of the Little Tokyo project. As for China, Mitchell thinks exciting architecture could be a medium to "totally revolutionize the way the Chinese think about environmental stuff."

He's hoping that his better business practices will soon afford him a chance to do these things—and more.

"My cheesy mantra is that I really want to make a meaningful contribution to humanity with my life through the medium of architecture. That's what fundamentally drives me. I came to that realization a long time ago. I don't care if it's a birdhouse, you can make a contribution in small ways and large ways, but I'd like to move beyond the paradigm of making really expensive, big houses for really rich people." ❗