



The doors swing open to allow in cooling air in the first-floor Venice home office of architect Warren Wagner. The second story of the structure, above, serves as wife Blue McRight's art studio. Opposite: The north-facing clerestory windows in McRight's studio are made of Lexan, which transmits light but minimizes heat loss in the eco-friendly building.

ECO-FRIENDLY

"I hate commuting with a passion," visual artist Blue McRight says. "Having a studio next to my house is ideal." A walk through a courtyard of fat pumpkins, blue forest pansies and a personal shrine made of found objects constitutes the artist's 58-foot commute to the home office space she shares with her husband, architect Warren Wagner of W3 Architects in Venice. "It's really delightful to walk to work," she says.

McRight's atelier is in a modern two-story building on the front of a large lot. The couple's small 1960s ranch-style home sits in back in a reverse paradigm of home and studio. "I wanted clients to come to my office without passing through my home," Wagner says. "Three years ago when we were looking for a property, I told the real estate agent, 'Think big lot, lit-

tle house.'" The office building, which faces busy Palms Boulevard, acts as a sound barrier to traffic noise and creates a courtyard between the two structures where the couple often sit and enjoy their garden.

McRight and Wagner occupy separate floors of the 2,200-square-foot space, each with their own entrances. Wagner's first-floor architecture office is outfitted with large frosted and clear-glass doors, which pivot open onto a drought-resistant garden of Caribbean copper and palo verde trees. Upstairs, fresh air is drawn in through the doors and vented through skylights and clerestory windows in an effective, low-cost ventilation system. A conference/lunch table floats in the center of the space, which also includes a kitchen and bath. The architect's drafting table sits behind



a simple glass-topped sawhorse desk.

McRight's northeast clerestory windows and five overhead skylights create ideal light for making artwork. "I rarely put on any lights until after dusk," the artist says. Her computer, set atop a built-in laminate and strawboard desk with file drawers Wagner designed, sits under a large corner window. "I sometimes get distracted birdwatching," McRight says. "I can see mockingbirds, sparrows, juncos and lots of migrating songbirds up here." Two large wood tables on wheels hold projects and move around as needed.

Wagner, an advocate of sustainable architecture, says he likes to "make the most efficient use of resources with the least impact on the environment. In designing the space, I wanted to create an example of what I believe

in." The south-facing studio building maximizes exposure to sunlight and provides both light and heat throughout the day. Water for the radiant-heated concrete floors and for the sinks and shower are heated naturally by the sun in two glass-enclosed 40-gallon water tanks. Throughout the structure the architect used recycled building materials such as Homasote (made from newspapers) for walls and strawboard (made with an organic soy-based binder and straw) for cabinets.

For the architect, working at home is all about flexibility. "My arrangement has not contributed to becoming a workaholic," he says. "I've tried to set up a life that integrates my life and work, but I've also separated my home and work space. This is the best arrangement you can have."

Home Office

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solution for many first-time home office users. "Shortly after I started my own business, I'm on the phone with a big client, and my 2-year-old is in the bathroom yelling." That's when Patton knew he needed "to separate the home from the home office" and give himself more space.

So the Pattons, who were considering moving anyway, began thinking of building a new home—one that would have separate office space as well as its own dedicated entry. And since Patton wanted the design studio to have a contemporary feel, the living spaces of their new San Clemente home, with colored concrete floors and a 20-by-20-foot great room with exposed ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows, followed suit.

Patton's 750-square-foot office has the feel of an ad agency, he says, which he hopes makes clients feel more comfortable when visiting. Not that that happens very often. "Fewer than one out of 10 of my clients ever show up here," he says. "But if they do, I feel very comfortable and so do they."

But while many home offices try to button themselves up to look more corporate, a number of architects and designers are finding that the influence works the other way as well. Stanley Felderman, whose Santa Monica-based firm Felderman + Keatinge was responsible for the playroom look of MTV's West Coast offices—which, he says, were designed to be "a home away from home"—recently finished turning a former residence into an office. "The idea was that the office became an extension of the home." It's complete with guest quarters upstairs in case visitors want to stay overnight.

East of Doheny, an entertainment production company, also borrowed design elements from the burgeoning home office trend for its Melrose office, which was once a theater. Lured by the contemporary folk art, comfy couches and toys such as remote-controlled cars, people often confuse the office for a design showroom. "It looks like a home-like cottage," says David Hamlin, head of business affairs. "This allows us to come here and feel like we haven't left our homes, which is to say that it was intentionally designed to be an atmosphere that makes people feel comfortable, even if it doesn't exactly look like anyone's real home."

This brings up an interesting point: an office, whether in the home or elsewhere, doesn't have to look like home to make us feel at home. "We tend to think of 'homey' as making reference to traditional residences," says Felderman. "But there's also a sense that something 'homey,' whether a corporate office or home office, is simply a place that makes you feel good. There's a visceral sense to it that makes us more relaxed."

That's certainly the case with Aron Orton's home office in a Silver Lake townhouse. Orton, who spends eight hours a day as a commercial editor for the Santa Ana ad agency DGWB, spends almost as much time in the evenings as chief executive and sole employee of Dahlia Page Post, his freelance gig, where he does graphics and editing for music videos of L.A. groups such as Powder. His home office, which consumes a spare bedroom, includes a high-tech editing bay full of computers and monitors as well as oddities such as antique cameras, X-rays of hands, taxidermied animals and jars of formaldehyde with bats in them.

Not everyone would appreciate Orton's "homey" touches in his home office, but, he says, they allow him to tap into his creative energies. "My office at the ad agency is rather sterile," says the 31-year-old. "But my home office visually inspires me. When I get tired looking at a monitor, I can just look around the room and get excited. This stuff makes me happy."

Orton admits that at first he was nervous about clients not feeling comfortable doing business in a home office decorated with lava lamps and ceramic hula dolls. But, like Patton, he soon discovered that there was seldom any need for clients to visit. "Everyone is used to working with people they never meet, or they meet in a neutral setting like a restaurant or coffee shop. Hardly anyone comes to my home office."

Still, as far as architect Dion McCarthy is concerned, the home office needs to take its cues from the corporate office, which means clutter

David Lansing last wrote for the magazine about pastry chefs.



Visual artist Blue McRight's home office includes her small paintings on paper that hang above a light table and are attached to an eco-friendly strawboard wall.

is out. And while the space should feel comfortable, it shouldn't be too homey. "In the last five years, the home office has gone from an adjunct or satellite to a 'real' office to where it is the real office," says McCarthy of DesignARC, a West L.A. firm that has done a number of high-end home offices. "When we take on a project, we no longer have the client making references to a mother office. So there's a desire to make the home office look as professional as possible, which means independent entries, so you don't have to pass through the kitchen to get to the office, and a sophisticated look that can inspire confidence in clients who visit."

The biggest challenge for McCarthy is figuring out ways to manage filing systems and communication equipment—computers, printers, fax machines and, in many cases, TVs, DVD players and recording equipment—in a 15-by-20-foot space. "This is all stuff that normally would have been spread out over a three-story high-rise," McCarthy says. "But not only do we have to get it into a much smaller room, we have to pretty much make it invisible." This means a lot of custom design, including running empty conduits behind walls for devices not yet developed, to eliminate clutter.

But while architect Brian Murphy agrees that his biggest design challenge for a home office is finding a place for all the high-tech equipment, he wonders how long we'll continue to make a big deal out of where we set up our computers. "It's just like the TV," he says. "When there's no cachet attached to having computers and fax machines, people will be less interested in designing rooms to house them. Frankly, as everything gets smaller and more integrated, there might be little reason to even have a home office. The home office will become Starbucks or even the car. And then people will stop saying, 'Oh, and here's our home office—and our computer.'" So, one wonders, should the home office fall out of favor in the years ahead, what will we do with the space? "Well," says Murphy, with a hint of mischief, "you could always turn it into a really nice guest room." Or, perhaps, a den? <