

DESIGN



CHRISTINE COTTER Los Angeles Times

The duplex is back, and this time the look is sleek, smart and unequivocally modern. But these homes showcase more than contemporary style. They reflect the changing way some Southern Californians live.

Double visionaries

By MORRIS NEWMAN AND DALE KUTZERA
Special to The Times

JUDY PREMINGER planned on renting her new duplex, not living in it. To understand why she changed her mind, just stroll along her street in the Sawtelle district of West Los Angeles. Preminger's home rises like some minimalist ark, its southern wall jutting out like a brassy prow. Recycled redwood forms a spare, organic facade, an Asian-inspired counterpoint to the Japanese nurseries and restaurants nearby. If it were not for twin entrances behind the garden gates, the duplex could pass for an intriguing single-family residence, which is precisely the point.

Distinctive in appearance and designed with thoughtful features that would make the average house dweller jealous, the not-so-humble duplex is back after a prolonged absence from L.A.'s architectural scene. Preminger's home and others like it are rising across the city with a level of ambition rarely seen since the 1920s and '30s, when graceful Spanish and Mediterranean Revival duplexes rose alongside houses in several pockets of town, most notably the tree-lined boulevards near Highland Avenue and 3rd Street.



ALLEN J. SCHRAMM Los Angeles Times

FLOURISH: A niche, above, in the entry of Judy Preminger's duplex. Preminger, at top outside the dual units, chose a recycled redwood facade to give the Sawtelle district units an organic feel.

These classic residences remain fashionable addresses, with barrel ceilings and hardwood floors, wrought iron and leaded glass, arched doorways and hand-crafted built-ins. By contrast, some new duplexes are wholeheartedly modern visions, sleek assemblages of polished concrete, stainless steel and glass tile that rise above the pedestrian style and sensibility that has long defined rental properties here.

What makes these new duplexes so interesting is not only their modern aesthetic and practical solutions for life with shared walls, but also their owners' motivations. After all, why would anyone forgo a traditional house in favor of a space they have to share?

Real estate agent Stacy Babbitt, who specializes in dual-unit properties, says 95% of her buyers are owner-occupants. Many are baby boomers intending to live in one unit and provide separate housing for an adult child or another relative in the second.

"A duplex is a great alternative to the single-family home," Babbitt says, adding that rental income from the second unit can allow some owners to live in a neighborhood they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford.

With real estate prices still rising in many desirable ZIP Codes, demographic shifts fueling interest in dual-unit properties and the mayor calling for creative solutions to L.A.'s housing shortage, it's no surprise the duplex is rising once again. An accurate count of duplexes (excluding mother-in-law units) is difficult to discern, but the potential for more multifamily housing in this region is clear.

According to U.S. Census statistics on population density from 2000, the most recent year for which statistics are available, Los Angeles has 2,832 units of housing per square mile. That may sound adequate until you look at our neighbor to the north. In San Francisco, the figure is 7,421. In this context, well-designed duplexes suddenly look less like a throwback to the past and more like a potential solution for the future.

MATHEW MITCHELL does not call himself a pioneer, but his newly finished duplex near downtown L.A. says otherwise. Standing amid older frame houses on the hilly streets near the Belmont High School construction site, the minimalist tower sports views of the city skyline and an unconventional floor plan that's a response to the narrow, steep lot.

Inspired partly by the walk-up town houses of San Francisco, architectural designer Tim Campbell crafted the duplex as back-to-back units, each three stories tall with about 500 square feet of living space on every floor. Two bedrooms and a bathroom sit at street level, the kitchen and living areas are on the second floor and the master bedroom and bath are on the third.

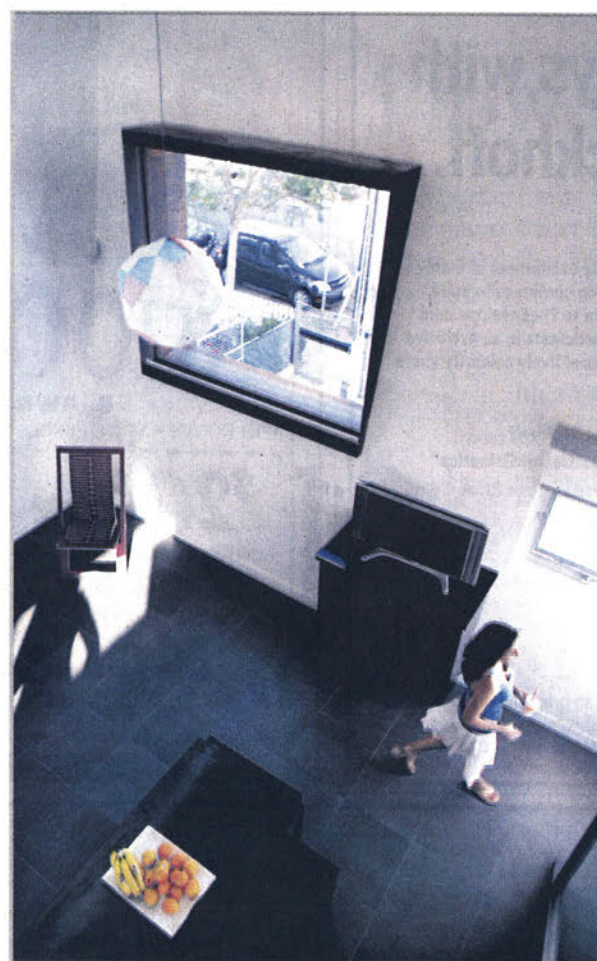
Life in a three-story home means a lot of time spent going up and down stairs, but Mitchell says the vertical layout works for him, particularly when he has guests.

"Different parts of the house seem more separate from each other, so those places seem more like destinations," he says.

The layout supports a "very European or very San Francisco way of life, in which parents and children may live on separate floors," Campbell says. "Then everybody meets on the second floor, which then becomes the public area of the building."

To make the duplex's snug rooms seem more spacious, the designer raised the ceiling to 10 feet and called for glass on at least two sides of every room, "so that light itself becomes a design feature," Campbell says. In placing the windows, he followed the traditional Japanese principle of borrowing a view — making the room feel larger by guiding

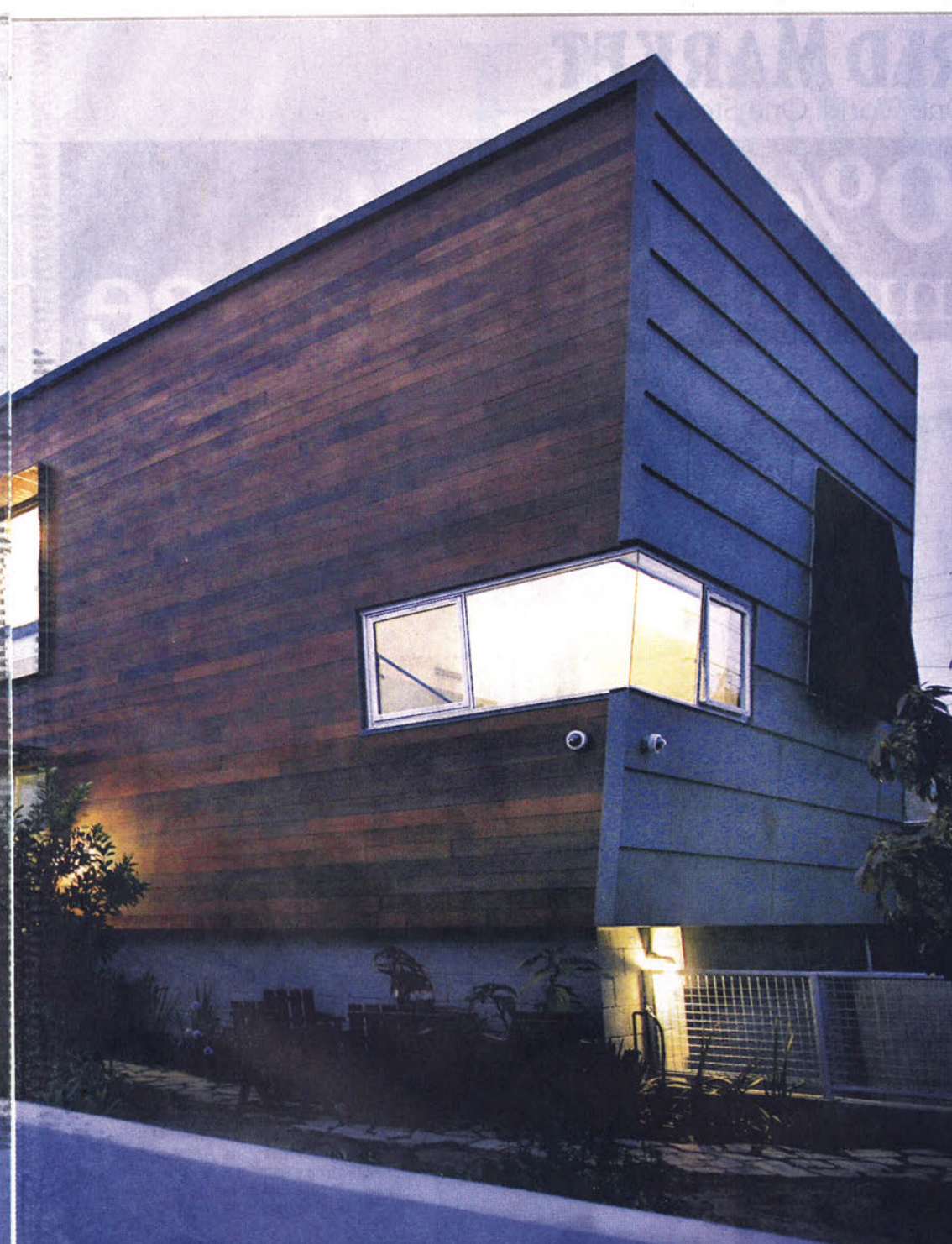
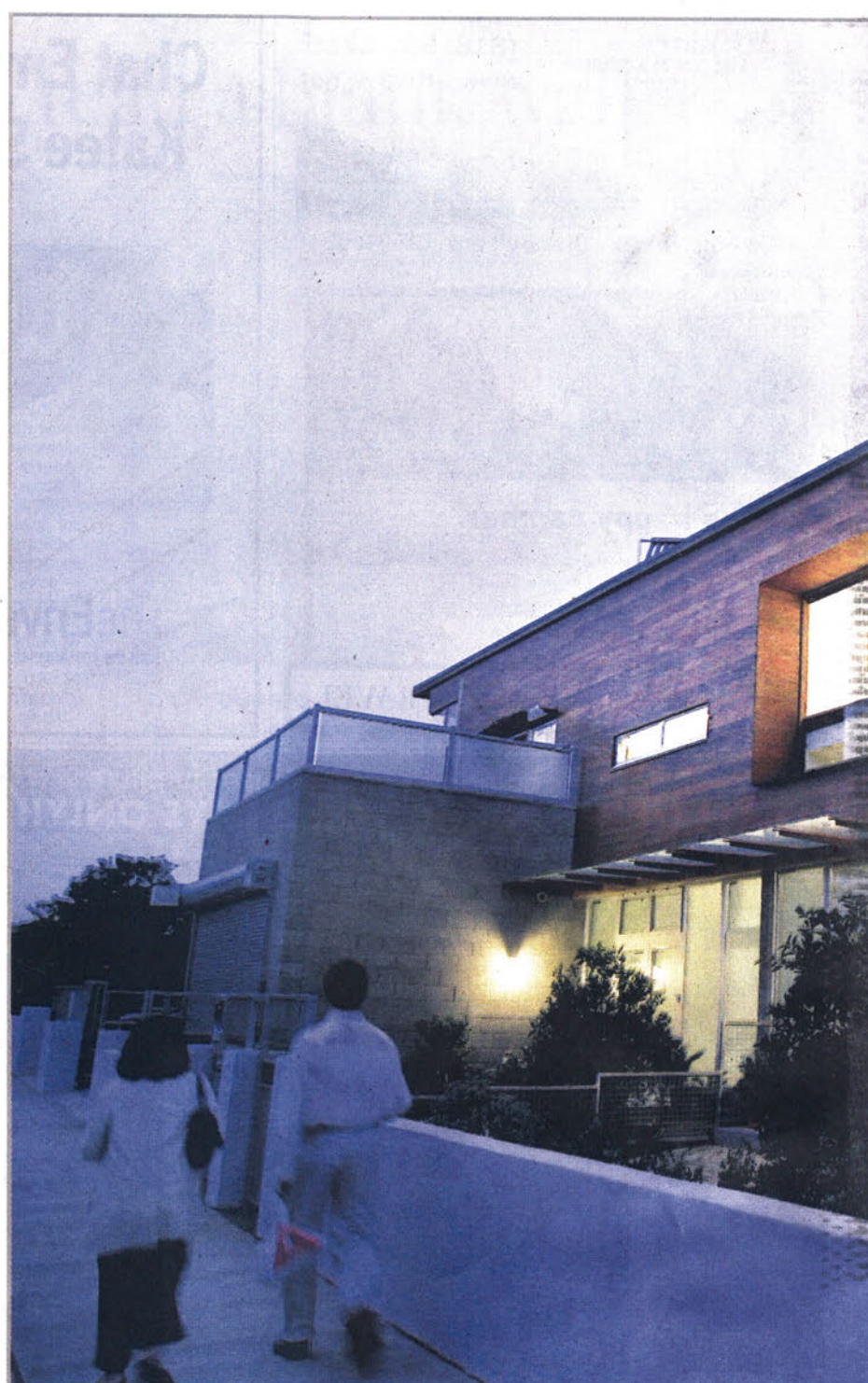
ABOVE AND BEYOND: Judy Preminger's daughter Liza walks across the main living area, right, on the first floor which achieves a spare aesthetic with white walls and dark Inca basalt flooring. Light comes through windows of the oblong duplex, far right, which Preminger had under-built at 2,700 square feet to accommodate a garden. The dual units also have environmentally conscious features such as a concrete-block first-floor exterior that moderates temperature by absorbing sunlight during the day and emanating heat at night, and thermal panels on the roof. A Japanese sliding door and glass tile are elements of the bathroom, below. Rental income is a significant incentive for many who choose duplexes over single-family homes.



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DESIGN Doubling up on potential

[Duplex, from Page F1]

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TURNED INSIDE OUT: The sleek, loft-like interior in Hillel Nachum's West Hollywood duplex, above, complements the boxy cube exterior, left. Because of its departure from the area's Spanish architectural vernacular, neighbors had to warm up to the Modern design. "They drop notes in my mailbox. I get compliments on my doorstep," Nachum says.

the eye to an attractive sight outside. What is most appealing to Campbell is the big picture: the prospect of achieving a higher population density on what is essentially a single-family-sized lot. "A lot of people are very concerned about L.A. becoming a city of high-rises," he says. But by building two units

on the same footprint as a single-family house, "you can address density without destroying either neighborhoods or neighborhood scale."

Mitchell seems less worried about the novelty of his vertical house than his new role as landlord. He plans to live in one unit and rent out the other for

\$3,500 a month.

"It's a bit of an unknown for me," Mitchell says. "I have jumped from the plane, and I hope to God the parachute's attached."

FOR Hillel Nachum, the leap of faith wasn't becoming a landlord but choosing to build in an undeniably Modern style. When he purchased an English-style duplex at the corner of Harper and Waring avenues in West Hollywood, his intention was to tear down the tired structure and build in the Spanish architectural vernacular, much like the classic duplexes in his neighborhood.

"But once we started construction, I'd come home and I wouldn't be happy with what I saw," Nachum says. "I told my wife, 'That's not the house I want to live in. It didn't speak to me.'"

So he started over, interviewing three architects and eventually hiring Amit Patel, a Woodland Hills-based designer to whom he gave these simple instructions: "Do what you want, but just give me something that will look good in the neighborhood."

Patel looked around and decided what would look good in the neighborhood was change — a hint of the future rather than an ode to the past. The result is a sleek, gray-on-gray urban cube, a series of boxy volumes that create the illusion of single-family residences within a shared-space setting.

"Duplexes are different from condos," he says. "The minute you go to more than six units, the residents want to feel part of a community. When they have five units or less, they want individuality. They want to feel like they have their very own space."

At Nachum's duplex, doors are situated so that residents are oblivious to the comings and goings of the neighbor. Windows are few so as to limit noise and to ensure that no part of one unit is visible to the other. Natural illumination comes from skylights. Most important, bathrooms are set away from shared walls. "You do not want to hear the neighbor flushing," Patel says.

glass tile. Railings for the stairs and mezzanine are glass too.

For Nachum, the choice in architectural style inside and out brought some initial anxiety.

"In the beginning, every day neighbors were asking, 'What kind of house is that?'" he says. "I was getting phone calls left and right."

Since he completed construction three months ago, he says, most skeptics have been won over. "When they walk their dog, they drop notes in my mailbox," Nachum says. "I get compliments on my doorstep."

Patel points to that kind of validation as proof that residents are open to departing from the neighborhood's Spanish-style roots. "I'm all for historical preservation," he says. "But rebuilding the past from scratch doesn't make sense. These aren't the same people as in the past. They don't have the same lives."

AS A SINGLE WOMAN with two almost-grown children, Preminger liked the idea of downsizing from her four-bedroom house in the Santa Monica Canyon area. A duplex offered flexibility. Her two-bedroom unit could accommodate short-term guests, and someday the adjoining unit could be a home for an aging parent. In the meantime, rental income would help with the mortgage.

But what ultimately convinced her to move in herself was the striking, environmentally conscious design by Warren Wagner, founder of W3 Architects in Venice. A fan of Asian design, Preminger gave Wagner magazine photos of a contemporary house in Japan with a clean, spare aesthetic that was her inspiration, and what started as an investment property quickly became a home.

"It thought it would be interesting to not only build a green building, but to live in one," says Preminger, a nonprofit consultant turned developer. "This seemed like the perfect time to do it."

Outside, concrete block around the first floor helps to moderate temperatures, absorbing the sun's rays during the day and emanating heat at night. The primary living areas are passively cooled by vented skylights. On the roof, a bank of thermal panels provides hot water and radiant heat. Preminger plans to install photovoltaic cells and live as much as possible off the grid.

But the biggest sustainable feature, a vacationing Wagner says via e-mail, is the duplex's size. "The most amazing thing about the project is that it is so small — 2,700 square feet total for the two units."

patio shielded by frosted-glass panels.

The second unit is slightly smaller and more loft-like. The split-level entry connects to a subterranean garage tucked on the side of the building. Upstairs lie the kitchen and great room with double-height ceiling. Floating metal stairs lead to a sleeping area and bath above. Two custom picture windows, each framed in broad bands of steel, fill the space with natural light.

Whereas other duplexes in this gentrifying neighborhood maximize square footage, Preminger under-built to accommodate her love of gardening.

"For a developer to understand that a garden and open space is as valued as

more interior space was a great thing," Wagner says. "This is an incredible example of how we can build a little less, but of a higher quality and still come out positive."

With a few exceptions, her new neighbors have embraced the duplex, however different it may look.

Preminger says she likes her garden of fruit trees and vegetables, but her yard work is often interrupted by passerby commenting on her building. "Not a day goes by," she says, "when someone doesn't stop and compliment the design."

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VERTICAL: Designer Mathew Mitchell stands on the balcony of a three-story duplex near downtown L.A. that he built with designer Tim Campbell. The back-to-back units have about 500 square feet of living space on each floor and city skyline views.