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## Bay Area Architect Mary Maydan on Taking 'California Modern' Outside California

The former journalist and Palo Alto-based architect has a flair for breathe-easy design

As a toddler, Mary Maydan had a rare proclivity for maths. "My mother noticed that I was very good and she would keep asking me harder and harder questions and delighting in my answers. Like any first-time mother, she bragged about me to everyone. I grew up seeing myself through her eyes," recalls the former journalist and founder of Palo Alto-based Maydan Architects. But for Tel Aviv-raised Maydan, architecture was never part of the plan. After all, she had a flourishing career in journalism, and as U.S. Correspondent at Israel's largest and oldest financial newspaper, *Globes*, she had interviewed some of the most inspiring figures of our time, including Mikhail Gorbachev, Mike Bloomberg, Barbara Waters, Larry King, Dan Rather and Jerry Seinfeld, to name a few.

"I fell in love with architecture by accident," Maydan admits. "I met my husband and relocated to Silicon Valley. When we were planning our first home, I wanted glass walls and sliding doors that would bring natural light and a view of beautiful green lawns into the interior. I wanted an open floor plan too—something unassociated with most houses in the Bay Area. I soon realised that if I wanted something like this, I would have to design it myself." Going against the grain worked in her favour. While her house was still under construction, it was featured in the Palo Alto Weekly. "People started visiting the job site and asking me to design for them. I had clients before I even officially decided about a career move!"

Her family, however, had reservations. "They supported my decision, even when they did not necessarily like it. My father, who was a well-known and influential editor in Israel told me, 'Journalism is not something that you leave. It's a calling, not a job.'" But their support remained steadfast, she remembers. Knowing that she couldn't keep two jobs and be a good mother to her children, she pushed back and took a leave of absence from *Globes*. Maydan Architects was born soon after.

Maydan's aesthetic is deeply informed by the places she has called home. "When I lived in New York, I was used to seeing all the Wall Street guys going to work in a suit and tie. In California, it's more common to see computer scientists conducting even very important meetings in a simple button-down shirt. Ties are reserved for more serious occasions. I call my style of architecture 'California Modern' and I always think of my California Modern as a house without a

tie. The shirt is still pressed, neat, clean-cut, but free of unnecessary ornaments," Maydan explains.

Her California Modern style is none more evident than in San Francisco Home, a fading 1930s apartment she was tasked to turn into a flexible and ultra-modern space for a family. "Prior to the remodel, the flat was very compartmentalised. Each room was enclosed. Getting to the kitchen from the front door was like going through a maze. As a result, the spectacular view of the Golden Gate was seen from very few points in the house." The solution, Maydan found, lay in knocking down walls. She designed a communal space, about 900 square feet, that included the kitchen, living room and dining room, and prioritised multi-functionality for every room. Now, a four-panel glass wall can be closed to cordon off the kitchen for cooking and opened to connect the living room to the kitchen when needed. "We also installed a concealed Murphy bed in the library, allowing the space to serve as an additional bedroom." The true highlight, however, is the glittering vistas of the bay, visible from almost anywhere.

A typical Maydan build has a distinct signature: unassuming, open, airy, warm, caring for the environment and comfortable in its skin. Her Floating Boxes project, a labour of love she designed for her own family, is a classic case in point. The 7,000 square-foot home in Palo Alto is named so because the facade creates an illusion of three floating boxes. The boxes, which appear to float separately but are structurally interconnected, symbolise the three generations that share the home: Maydan and her husband, their four children, and her parents. "My home was designed to give each generation options for privacy and togetherness. The two teenagers have suites in the basement that feel like a separate apartment for each. The grandparents, on the ground floor, have an exterior entry as well as a door leading to the rest of the house," she avers. The ultra-modern style stands out in the neighbourhood, but the story behind its construction is equally fascinating. "Both our structural engineer and the general contractor had to be creative. For example, the contractor told us that he had to choose the thinnest guy in the crew to stucco the gaps between the floating boxes."

Four years ago, the first house that Maydan ever designed was bought by one of the tech billionaires of Silicon Valley. "When a billionaire who can afford any house he fancies chooses a house that you designed at the beginning of your career, it is very flattering," she notes. But her builds have caught the attention of all manner of Bay Area denizens. Recently, she designed a house in Los Altos, christened Geometry House, for a local artist and her husband, a senior tech executive. "The clients wanted a stand-out exterior, but the city prefers facades to be unimposing and blend in with the neighbourhood. We had to figure out how to please both parties with a design that broke up the mass of the building. We incorporated unique overhangs angled in different directions and added horizontal elements to mitigate the perception of height." Since it was an artist's home, Maydan designed the interior to frame a curated selection of art pieces. "The art collection throughout the home displays various styles and compositions, from paint and printmaking to mixed media and photography, creating a distinct experience in each room."

Maydan cites furniture design studio Paola Lenti as one of her biggest inspirations, owing to their kaleidoscopic palette and their ability to reimagine outdoor furniture using textiles. "In

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architecture, I admire Rem Koolhaas. His designs are phenomenal and he is one of the most important architectural thinkers of our time. He was, like me, a journalist before becoming an architect—one more aspect that I love about him," she muses. After almost two decades of designing high-end residences in California, 2021 marked her maiden project in New York City. In a way, for Maydan, life has come full circle.