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THE CRAFT IN THE MACHINE

Grant Kirkpatrick and the
Architecture of Essential Beauty

Feature Story on page 56 | Written by Constance Dunn



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A KAA DESIGN GROUP RESIDENCE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF DUBAI

WORDS: CONSTANCE DUNN | IMAGE BY: SHIMAHARA VISUAL



Beauty is essential," Grant Kirkpatrick declares. "Without beauty—much like water, air or love—we would cease to exist as human beings."

This isn't metaphor wrapped in architectural philosophy. It's a manifesto. And after nearing 40 years designing homes, it's hard to argue with him. It's underscored today, in a world where automation is galloping towards an unknown.

As he puts it: "Deep in our DNA is the ability to appreciate things that are beautiful. We know instantly if something is pleasing to the eye." In the design realm, this is the result of works that are ideally fitted to their place and purpose.

When the Bauhaus opened its doors in 1919 Germany, it faced a similar crisis: industrialization was reshaping craft and design in startling ways. There was fear it could erase the human hand from the making of things. The Bauhaus answer was radical in its simplicity: Don't reject machines, marry them to craft. Let technological innovation serve human detail, and vice versa.

Kirkpatrick understands this instinctively. "All of us architects say 'craft' and 'craftsmanship,'" he notes, "but the truth is, it's harder and harder to do and to find. I think part of that is because we've stopped valuing it." A century after the Bauhaus, he's answering the same call.

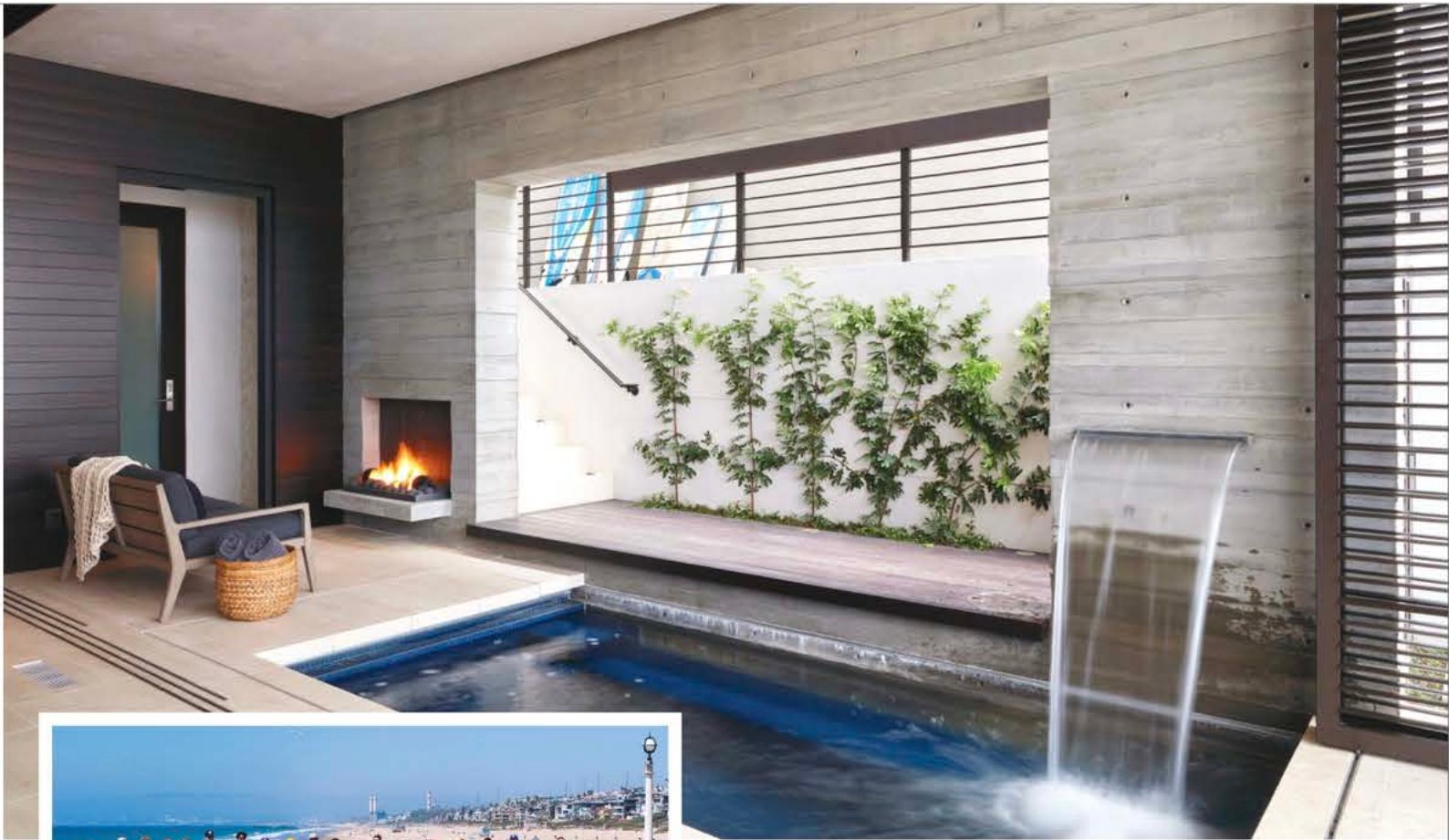
His KAA Design Group has created systems and processes—the machinery of a successful architecture firm—all in service of one thing: ensuring that craft, that irreplaceable human intention, is embedded in every detail of every home.



THE MODERNIST PARADOX

Modernism is supposed to age quickly. Clean lines, contemporary materials, forward-looking aesthetics—they're supposed to feel "of their time." Yet Kirkpatrick designs Modernist homes to last forever. "We're going to build this home for this generation and the next," he explains. "That's your sustainability agenda. Let's do it right. Let's do it once."

This is the paradox that animates KAA, the Los Angeles-based firm he founded in 1988 after turning down a lucrative commission rather than compromise on design. After nearly four decades, he could rest on reputation and formula. But Kirkpatrick has chosen differently. "There is, unfortunately, no formula to what we do," he says flatly. "We've never done the same project twice, which is what gets you up in the morning."



KAA DESIGN GROUP, PHOTO BY MANOLO LANGIS

Every home is a puzzle unto itself. Every site is unique. Every client demands a custom result—not merely because KAA Design is a luxury shop, but because each life is singular and cannot be reproduced.

Homes along the Strand in Manhattan Beach exemplify this. The canvas for nearly all of these premier slots is a slender, 33-by-100-foot oceanfront lot. Kirkpatrick and company have designed 35 Strand homes, and no two are alike, not by a mile. Why? Because each home is the reflection of a client's lifestyle—and more. "We're helping mine our clients' story, digging up the essence of why we're doing this," he says. Along the way, the design is meant to "embrace the imperfection, the one eyebrow-raiser that gives each home personality." What flamenco dancers call the *pellizco*, that spontaneous personal flourish that becomes a signature.

A COMMON LINGUA FRANCA

What's remarkable is how these principles scale globally. The California lifestyle—indoor-outdoor living, communion with nature, the co-mingling of interior and exterior spaces—has become an international aspiration. But KAA's answer

isn't to export a template. They won't drop an LA glass and steel structure, for instance, into the snowy mountains of Aspen or on a Jamaican beachfront.

Instead, they source local context: traditions, customs, and materials of place. A Costa Rican home uses native Guanacaste wood, each board requiring new learning about its comely, swirling grain. A Dubai project drew from local sandstone monuments. A new project, not far from Tokyo, is KAA to the core, but designed to be authentically of its place. Same philosophy. Infinitely variable solutions.

The board-form concrete throughout certain KAA homes also exemplifies the marriage of machine and craft. One client had a specific vision: a Strand home so rugged that "if a herd of elephants came through, it would be okay"—durability married to beauty.

Concrete is industrial, unyielding, structural. But when the formwork is treated with intention—the right wood selected, grain textures pronounced or muted through sandblasting, the pour timed perfectly—the result is a one-off beauty. An industrial surface becomes a textured landscape of light and shadow. Contrast it with warm stone or wood, and suddenly the eye finds elegance in the juxtaposition. This is craft serving machines, machines serving craft.

SWITCH OFF: ON

This approach connects Kirkpatrick to a design lineage running through Southern California, amplified by his own third-generation Los Angeles credentials. Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler bringing Modernist principles to life

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TOP LEFT, THE BALBOA RESIDENCE, IMAGE BY: SHIMAHARA VISUAL | TOP RIGHT, 3RD & THE STRAND, PHOTO BY ROGER DAVIES
INSET PHOTO: GRANT KIRKPATRICK, PHOTO BY: CARA ROBBINS



in the 1920s, the Case Study House movement of the 1950s with Julius Shulman documenting glamorous residences seemingly suspended in air. Kirkpatrick is emotionally tethered to this legacy and dedicated to carrying it forward—particularly in a world that increasingly tilts in favor of expediency.

Yet Kirkpatrick's own beauty switch—the internal mechanism that makes us yearn for the stuff—had, at one point, been off for years. In his TED talk "The Beauty Switch," he describes the slow fade: responsibility, maturity, media, technology all dimming this essential light. His practice was thriving. Clients were happy. Projects won awards and magazine features. But something was missing. Even as he designed a striking home atop a hill overlooking an entire city, something felt hollow. It was good. It wasn't great. The house and the landscape weren't speaking to each other.

Then came a trip with his young son to Fallingwater in Pennsylvania—a fountainhead for architects everywhere. The moment they rounded the driveway and Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece came into view, Kirkpatrick stopped. In that instant, something shifted.

Wright's genius was unmistakable: the house didn't sit on the landscape, it emerged from it. Boulders pierced the floors. Balconies extended over water as if the building itself was part of the cascade. Structure and nature were merged. When Kirkpatrick returned to the office, he understood the error of his hill project. "We were not connecting this house with nature," he realized. They started over. The house became the hill. The hill became the house. The twinkling lights of the city below completed the scene. Bells rang, and they experienced the high-five jubilation that happens when craft connects with intention.

A RADICAL ACT

The one-story offices of KAA Design sit along a busy commercial stretch of Washington Boulevard in Venice, just east of PCH. Fronted in slate-hued brick, these are unobtrusive, hardworking digs for a firm whose works span continents. Success comes from a principle held since its founding, and it guides everything the nearly 40-person firm touches. "We firmly believe that good architecture, good design, raises the human spirit."

Duan Tran, the architect and KAA managing partner, is essential to executing on this premise. "He allows me to do what I do best," Kirkpatrick says, freeing him to focus on what matters: working with clients, visualization, conceptual design. It's an ideal setup, as more and more, people want what KAA builds: connection to the earth, homes that calm through attention to proportion, material, and intention. But you cannot manufacture this with formula. The craft cannot be outsourced.

Some of their finest works appear in *Residing with Nature: The Houses of KAA Design* (2024), co-authored by Kirkpatrick and Tran. But Kirkpatrick notes: "That stuff in the book is terrific, but the stuff under construction right now is even better. The stuff on the boards that isn't under construction yet—that's better than that. And I can say that honestly, because in our business, you're constantly honing your craft."

In an age of machines—where efficiency is the goal and optimization is the highest calling—a radical act is still this: insisting that humans touch every detail. That beauty matters. That we would, quite literally, cease to exist without it.

That is the craft in the machine. And it is essential.

TOP LEFT, BARBUDA RESIDENCE, IMAGE BY: SHIMAHARA VISUAL | TOP RIGHT, COSTA RICA RESIDENCE, IMAGE BY: SHIMAHARA VISUAL | BOTTOM LEFT: WASHINGTON D.C. RESIDENCE, IMAGE BY: SHIMAHARA VISUAL | BOTTOM RIGHT: TOWER GROVE RESIDENCE, LOS ANGELES, IMAGE BY: JOE FLETCHER