

# Over and Above

Johnsen Schmaling Architects builds flexibility into a Sacramento developer's own residential property.

BY LYDIA LEE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTIN LOPEZ

**AFTER SPOTTING** an open lot east of downtown Sacramento, Erica Bergsma, a local developer of multifamily infill housing, knew that it would be a great place to build a house for her own family. "I stalked it for three years," says Bergsma, who was then living in the suburban outskirts of the city. The 32-by-80-foot parcel was located at the threshold between a lively commercial area and a historical

residential district—in walking distance of shops and restaurants. Bergsma also knew who could help her tackle building on the challenging infill site.

Milwaukee-based Johnsen Schmaling Architects had already collaborated with Bergsma to design six other projects for her company, Indie Capital, including Broadway Housing in Sacramento





**A STEEL-CLAD plinth that conceals a garage (above) resists graffiti and wear and sets off a slightly cantilevered cedar volume (opposite).**

(RECORD, October 2019). All had tight budgets and many site constraints, and this one was no different. “There is a parking lot next door, so we wanted to provide a hospitable living environment that’s not burdened by the neighboring context but also responds to it,” says principal Brian Johnsen, who, along with partner Sebastian Schmalting, is working on two more projects for Indie Capital.

The Flex House, as it’s dubbed by the architects, is a dwelling for our uncertain times. The compact 3,040-square-foot, three-story

two-family house is physically partitioned into a 2,315-square-foot main residence on the top two floors, and a 725-square-foot ground-floor unit that can be rented out as an apartment or commercial space. For about a year during the pandemic, the lower unit served as the office for Indie Capital. It’s currently being used as a short-term residential rental, but Bergsma envisions it as a possible future unit for her parents.

The design team took advantage of the property’s zero-lot line and devised a structure that hugs its eastern edge, next to a two-and-a-half-story apartment building, and placed the laundry and mechanical services on that side. This strategy allowed them to create a 10-foot-

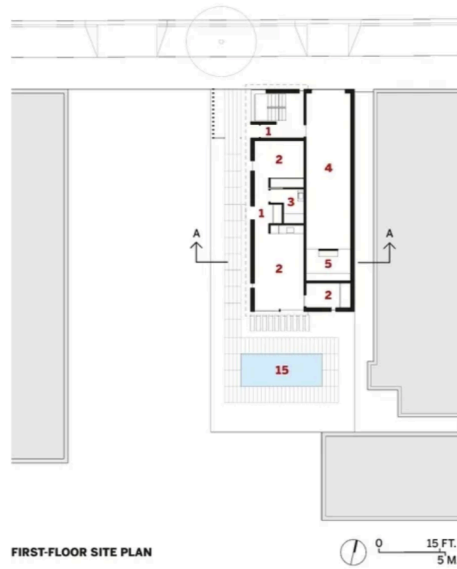
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wide buffer zone containing a linear bioswale for stormwater drainage on the western side, between the house and the parking lot, which serves a neighboring two-story commercial building.

The scheme negotiates the transition between the income-generating lower level and the private abode above it. The structure—framed in both wood and steel—is clad in industrial black-oxide-coated steel panels and a warm Alaskan yellow cedar. The steel begins at the ground level and continues up the building's east side, where the service spine, as well as the garage, are located. Most of the upper two-story residence is defined by the cedar. A continuous steel C-channel creates an elegant horizontal reveal between the steel and wood. The design team also used C-channels to construct a stylized portico along the west facade. Under the portico is Bergsma's front door, which opens into a glazed foyer at the building's northwest corner, activating the street by clearly revealing the stair to the apartment upstairs. A portal at the portico's far end leads to a separate entrance for the ground-floor flex space, as well as to a small backyard with a swimming pool.

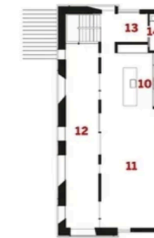
Because the view from the second floor consisted largely of parked cars, Johnsen Schmaling flipped the typical two-story dwelling plan. Instead of locating the bedrooms above the public spaces, the architects put the kitchen, dining, and living areas on the top floor, with



FIRST-FLOOR SITE PLAN



SECOND-FLOOR PLAN



THIRD-FLOOR PLAN



SECTION A - A

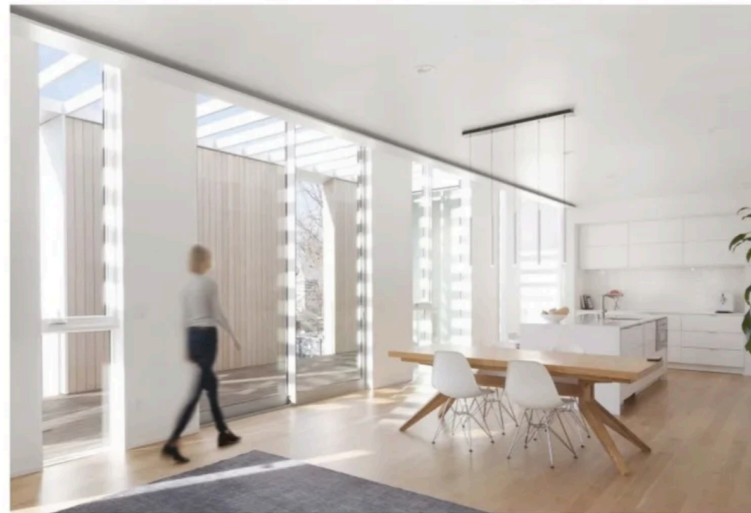
- |                |                  |                       |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 ENTRANCE     | 6 BEDROOM        | 11 LIVING ROOM/LOUNGE |
| 2 FLEX SPACE   | 7 WALK-IN CLOSET | 12 ROOF TERRACE       |
| 3 BATHROOM     | 8 LAUNDRY        | 13 READING ROOM       |
| 4 GARAGE       | 9 OFFICE         | 14 POWDER ROOM        |
| 5 BIKE STORAGE | 10 KITCHEN       | 15 POOL               |



**A TRELLISED** entry portico (opposite) and terrace (above) next to the kitchen and dining areas (right) integrate into the architecture.

an open-plan arrangement and a terrace running along its length. Overlooking the city, this generous outdoor space is reached through a sliding glass door within a glazed wall that brings the outdoors in. Three bedrooms are located one flight down. The primary suite at the end of the corridor is on the southwest corner, so when its floor-to-ceiling pocket door is left open, daylight filters through the internal space. Strategically placed operable windows throughout the two levels help keep the house cool and well ventilated.

To give the wood-clad residence on the upper two stories a more substantial presence, the architects constructed 22-inch-deep walls on its three cedar-clad elevations. Behind the siding, they furred out structural frames to accommodate extra insulation and a ventilated cavity, providing room for deeply inset windows that punctu-



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ate the wood with texture and shadow. On the top floor, they opened the deep walls to create a column-like effect along the terrace, framing views and controlling exposure to the intense afternoon sun. The resulting facade “has the tectonic heft of load-bearing masonry,” says Schmalig. “We wanted a clear contrast with the smooth steel cladding.”

The flipped design is not only practical but subtly psychological for those who dwell here. From the lofty experience of light-filled space and urban vistas on the third floor, one descends to the cozy cocoon of the sleeping areas on the second. “I love living like this, because the bedrooms feel very secure and homey, sandwiched between the two levels. When you go up to the top floor, you see the sun and the trees, and the morning greets you,” says Bergsma. “And, outside on the terrace, you’re part of the community every morning from the comfort of your living room.” ■

*Lydia Lee is a freelance writer in the San Francisco Bay Area, focused on architecture and design.*

### Credits

**ARCHITECT:** Johnsen Schmalig Architects — Brian Johnsen, Sebastian Schmalig, principals in charge; P.J. Murrill, project manager; Andrew Cesarz, Ben Penlesky, project team

**ENGINEER:** Core 4 Engineering (structural)

**GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** Indie Capital

**CONSULTANTS:** CABEC (energy analyst); Ultimate Fire Systems (life safety)

**CLIENT:** Erica Bergsma

**SIZE:** 3,040 square feet (main residence and flex space); 520 square feet (garage and bike storage)

**COST:** withheld

**COMPLETION DATE:** April 2021

### Sources

**CLADDING:** Wiemann Metalcraft (steel panels); Boral (poly-ash siding)

**ROOF:** Johns Manville

**WINDOWS & EXTERIOR DOORS:** Sierra Pacific; Supersneaky (garage)

**PAINTS & STAINS:** Benjamin Moore

**TILE:** Iris

**LIGHTING:** HALO; DMF; Artemide; Jesco; WAC; LuxR

**COUNTERTOPS:** Silestone

**PLUMBING:** Grohe; Blanco; Moen; Kohler

**WATER HEATER:** Rheem