

HOME

HOW TO CREATE AN AUTHENTIC RAY KAPPE HOUSE  
IN CONTEMPORARY BERLIN?  
GET EVERY LITTLE THING RIGHT.

SO-CAL

SYNCHRONICITY



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STYLING PERNILLE VEST





Ray Kappe's ratio of windows to walls introduces the light-filled airiness and transparency of Southern California modernism to the Berlin countryside. The redwood used throughout, the Douglas fir beams, iroki and the red oak flooring were sourced in Canada and the United States by owner Lars Triesch. The double-sided fireplace of panica stone from Rauriser Naturstein, was designed by Quattro Architectura. The sense of openness and freedom that Kappe strived for in his houses is emphasised by the double-height opening above the living area. Beneath the Isamu Noguchi Akari Model 16A lights, a nod to the Japanese influence on the architect, is a Kappe-designed coffee table with midcentury chairs on the Nanimarquina Tres Perla rug; a 1960s Mini Lotus chair by Daniel Wenger, a 1940s upholstered Ray Komai lounge chair and a 1970s Jeremy Broun pine rocker. A sculpture by Daniel Rhodes stands by the staircase with a wooden sculpture by Doug Ayers on the table.

IN THE 1960s the architect Ray Kappe designed a new house paradigm in wood and glass, a California modern house nestled in nature with spacious and seamless indoor-outdoor living. Completed nearly 60 years later, Kappe's Triesch House in Berlin features many of its hallmarks. Foremost is the visual warmth of wood in various forms and finishes: the trim of the flat roof, wall panels, laminated beams, floating stairs. Critical is the presence of nature. Untamed native grasses, shrubs, stones, tall pines that appear to brush the sky. The entry sequence of the Berlin house, like Kappe's own house in Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles, California, takes the visitor on a meandering path through nature to a wooden bridge, crossing over a water element to the front door. There you see a Paolo Soleri bell hanging nearby and a butterfly chair on the front terrace, just like at Kappe's residence. What is this California house doing in Berlin? It is the only house Kappe designed outside North America.

Kappe was one of the most significant modern architects of Southern California. Among his many accomplishments are masterfully designed and constructed houses, pioneering work in prefabrication and sustainability, and the founding of two architecture programs, including in 1972, the Southern California Institute of Architecture, the experimental independent architecture school that he directed for 15 years.

Born in 1927 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Kappe moved with his parents to Los Angeles as a boy. Attending a junior high school designed by Richard Neutra made a lasting impression on him. He studied architecture at the University of California at Berkeley. While there, he worked on the design of Eichler Homes, influential modern tract houses for the middle class. After graduation in 1951, Kappe, his wife Shelly, and newborn son moved back to Los Angeles, which, he felt, was "alive with potential". After working for others for several years, he opened his own office. But Kappe's greatest architectural achievement is arguably the house he designed for his family in Rustic Canyon.

The Kappe Residence (1965-67) is the fullest expression of his design values, its form evolved in response to its site challenges, a steep hillside slope with a rivulet that flows from natural springs. Kappe devised a structural system of concrete towers bridged by wooden laminated beams, or glulams, to touch the earth lightly. The result is a wood and glass house of seven levels that steps up the hill. Inside is a breathtaking spatial tour de force. An uninterrupted space that flows diagonally through the open tray-like floors and out onto terraces and into nature. "[My] concerns were part of mainstream California modern architecture," he said of his buildings. "They make sense in places with excellent views, beautiful landscape and temperate climate. They were and still are meant to be suitable to a regional architecture."

What a surprise, then, that one of Kappe's last projects is a recently completed house in Berlin. It was Kappe's evocation of Southern California and its casual lifestyle, open floor plans, combined with nature, that attracted Lars Triesch, who commissioned this project. Triesch is a serious design enthusiast-turned-expert. He founded and runs the store Original in Berlin, which features midcentury modern and contemporary furniture and design, with craftspeople on staff for furniture restoration. Triesch's passion for 1960s Southern California began with garage bands, vintage cars and Julius Shulman's photographs of casual living in modern architecture. "It had the lifestyle feel that I always admired," says Triesch.

First encountering Kappe's architecture in the documentary *Coast Modern*, Triesch and his wife were "absolutely stunned by its beauty and the warm feeling this house expresses. It gave the feeling of a modern house that also allowed us to live there as a family. We could imagine having kids and collections around." A phone call led to in-person meetings in 2017 with Kappe, then 89, and still working. In many ways the commission was a real gift to Kappe at the end of his career: to have a client thoroughly dedicated to realising his architectural vision and an opportunity to build in Europe. Kappe never saw the house built as he died in 2019, but his two architect sons Ron and Finn oversaw and completed the house.

The essential challenge of the project was to create an authentic Kappe California modern house while accommodating the site and climate of Berlin, as well as differences of language, materials and building codes between 1960s SoCal and modern-day Berlin.





The house celebrates Kappe's midcentury work, while updating it with care for contemporary living. His architectural qualities are present, as are elements that refer to specific Kappe designs. The Triesch house can be seen as both a translation of the architect's Southern California language into a Berlin house and a fresh way to understand Kappe's architecture. Kappe designed in harmony with each building's site and in Berlin Triesch spent much time looking for a neighbourhood that would allow a house with a flat roof. The level site that Triesch found sharply contrasts with the steep hillside of Kappe's own house, but the chosen site had plenty of existing trees. Triesch created an appropriate landscape by hiring the same landscape designer who created the garden for Kappe's superb Keeler Residence in California and a local landscape designer adapted the plan and plants for Berlin conditions.

The Triesch house also harmonises with its site through its natural materials and shows why Kappe's work earned the designation "the apotheosis of the California wood house". Three different types of wood appear in the Berlin house – the same used in Kappe's own house – giving the house depth, character and visual warmth. As at Kappe's residence, the Triesch house has Douglas fir glulam structural beams, a Douglas fir floating staircase, redwood siding, and red oak furniture. Even the kitchen island, constructed of multiple materials, is like the one in Kappe's family home. Triesch's house also incorporates large expanses of glass, including an enormous panel of roof glass, to bring nature nearer. "Shadows, reflection in glass, flowers and leaves seen through vast glass areas all add to the excitement of any space," Kappe said.

The experience of space is a distinctive quality of his architecture, linked to his idea of expanding and sensing space through glass, sliding doors, terraces for outdoor living and step-down living rooms. Kappe highlights the open and flowing quality of space in two key features of the Berlin building, the floating wooden staircase and adjacent open shelving of lightness and air and the fireplace, its two-way design open and visually porous.

Another major spatial feature is the lightwell that allows abundant natural light from the roof glass while revealing trees and sky. The lightwell, with a glass balustrade on the second floor, enables diagonal views and aural communication with family or friends, creating a sense of togetherness at the centre of the house. Kappe opens indoor space to the outdoors with large expanses of glass, as he had admired in work of Neutra and Wright. Indoor/outdoor spaces – terraces, decks, balconies – become platforms for the enjoyment of nature. Kappe said: "To experience each tree to its fullest and to create an ambience sensitive to light and sound are prime goals." Whether a California Oak or a German pine, this architecture works beautifully with a tree.

Similar to Triesch's interests in restoring vintage furniture and cars, the project had the objective of bringing the past back to life through skillful interventions. Environmental requirements, however, proved particularly problematic. The typical wall in Germany is much thicker than the ones in Kappe's 1960s house. To achieve a narrower profile, Triesch worked with consultants to find new insulation materials.

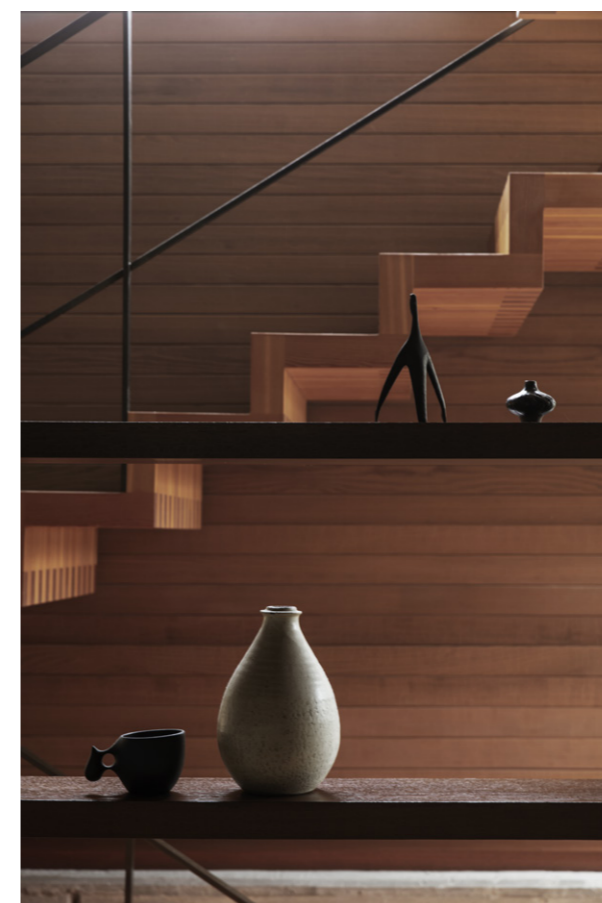
To achieve his exacting standards for construction, Triesch served as contractor, researcher, supporter and promoter, documenting his efforts along with the new products, materials, companies and craftspeople necessary for the making, on a Triesch Residence website. Triesch enjoyed the building process despite the many challenges, and he learned a great deal. But always at the back of his head was something he heard from an architect he interviewed: "Lars, whatever you do, please be careful that you get every little thing right because you don't want the Kappe-style house, you want the real thing."

The goal was not a house that resembled the work of Kappe in the 1960s-70s, but one built with the genuine materials, correct structural approach, original fixtures and details that Kappe used. "Let's get everything as close as possible to the original Kappe house," he says. For example, Triesch was determined to source real Douglas fir for the laminated beams that are a key component of the form and structure. It is not a wood typically used in Germany but he persevered until he found it.

The Kappe furniture throughout the house – from a new line that Triesch has developed and manufactured – is another crossover between his personal and professional interests. Back in the 1960s, Kappe designed and made one-off pieces for his family's residence, and after Triesch spotted them while on a research trip, he recognised the potential. His store now sells and distributes the Ray Kappe furniture line. Triesch is working on a documentary film about Kappe and the construction of his house.

Abutting windows on corners were a signature mark for Kappe that added to openness. The fixed glass and clerestory glass are framed by iroko wood while old-growth Douglas fir with its extremely tight and vertical grain was used for the doors and windows. The smaller lounge area on the other side of the fireplace is dominated by a 2020 work by American ceramicist Stan Bitters. A ceramic and steel artwork by Götz Löpelmann sits on the end table that is part of the Kappe RK4 sofa, with a Mini Lotus chair by Daniel Wenger and a Kappe coffee table on a Nanimarquina Telares Fog rug.





The PT Audio turntable is customised with a Thomas Schick 12" Tonearm and an Ortofon SPU Classic G MKII. Staircases lead on a voyage of discovery as spaces open up level-by-level. The floating staircase used in several of Kappe's Californian houses, was manufactured with iroko wood and steel by German craftsmen. OPPOSITE: A 1974 S31A tabouret by Pierre Chapo sits by iroko shelves with a turned-wood vase, a sculpture *The Architect* by Carl Auböck, a Robert Maxwell vase, a Susanne Protzmann vase, a Götz Löpelmann bowl, a vintage vase and a Jens Quistgaard pepper mill.



The dining area, adjacent to the kitchen and an extension of the open living area, is given a sense of intimacy by concrete walls, part of one of the two cement towers that underpin the house, along with the concrete basement. The Kappe-designed red oak dining table with a wooden sculpture by Doug Ayers and a turned Studio Bowl by Charles M. Kaplan is surrounded by Paul McCobb chairs, the ladder-backed maple Shovel Chairs and solid maple and wrought chairs. Carl Fagerlund lights for Orrefors are massed above the table with a gold-leafed aluminium mask by Michael Sailstorfer on the wall. OPPOSITE: A set of three Brent Bennett vases in an alcove near the entrance.





In the main bedroom, a 2020 stool by Michael Rozell sits near the banks of fitted cabinets designed by Quattro Architectura with a work by American sculptor Seth Gravette. On the way to the bedroom, a 1960s George Nakashima Captain's Chair. The minimal palette of wood, glass and concrete and meticulous joinery on the facade. Natural light falls onto the shower area of one of three bathrooms. Polished stone from Rauriser is used to tile the floors, the washstands have Dornbracht Meta fittings. OPPOSITE: A lifelong love of nature and the environment informed all Ray Kappe designs and the deck at the rear of the house with its fire pit integrates the house into the garden that in turn merges into the surrounding forest.

