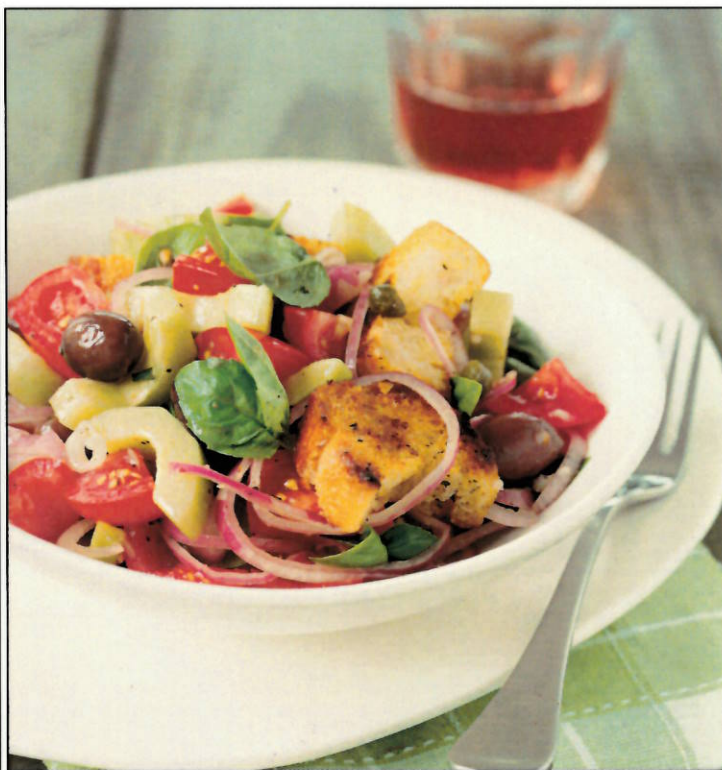


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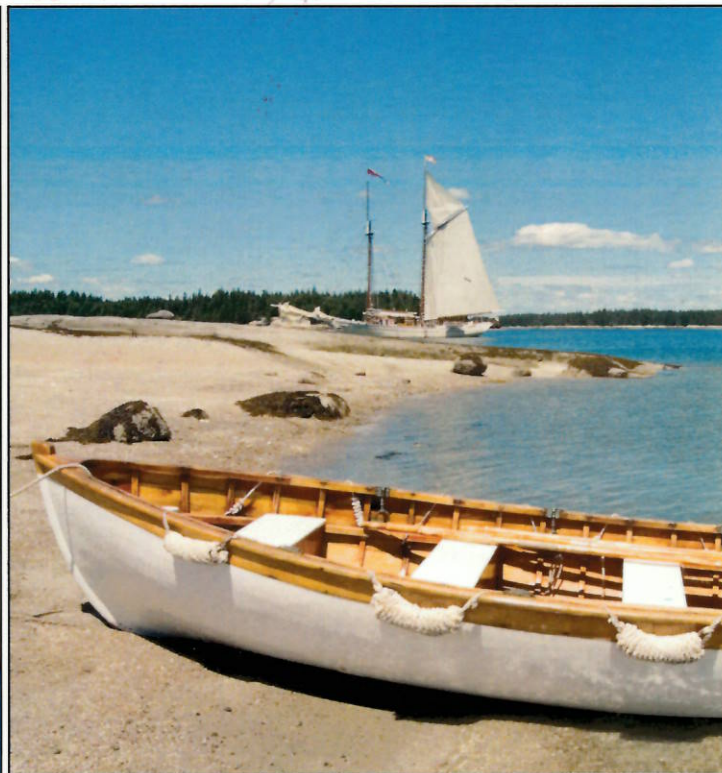
AMERICAN LIFESTYLE

THE MAGAZINE CELEBRATING LIFE IN AMERICA

MAY/JUNE 2009



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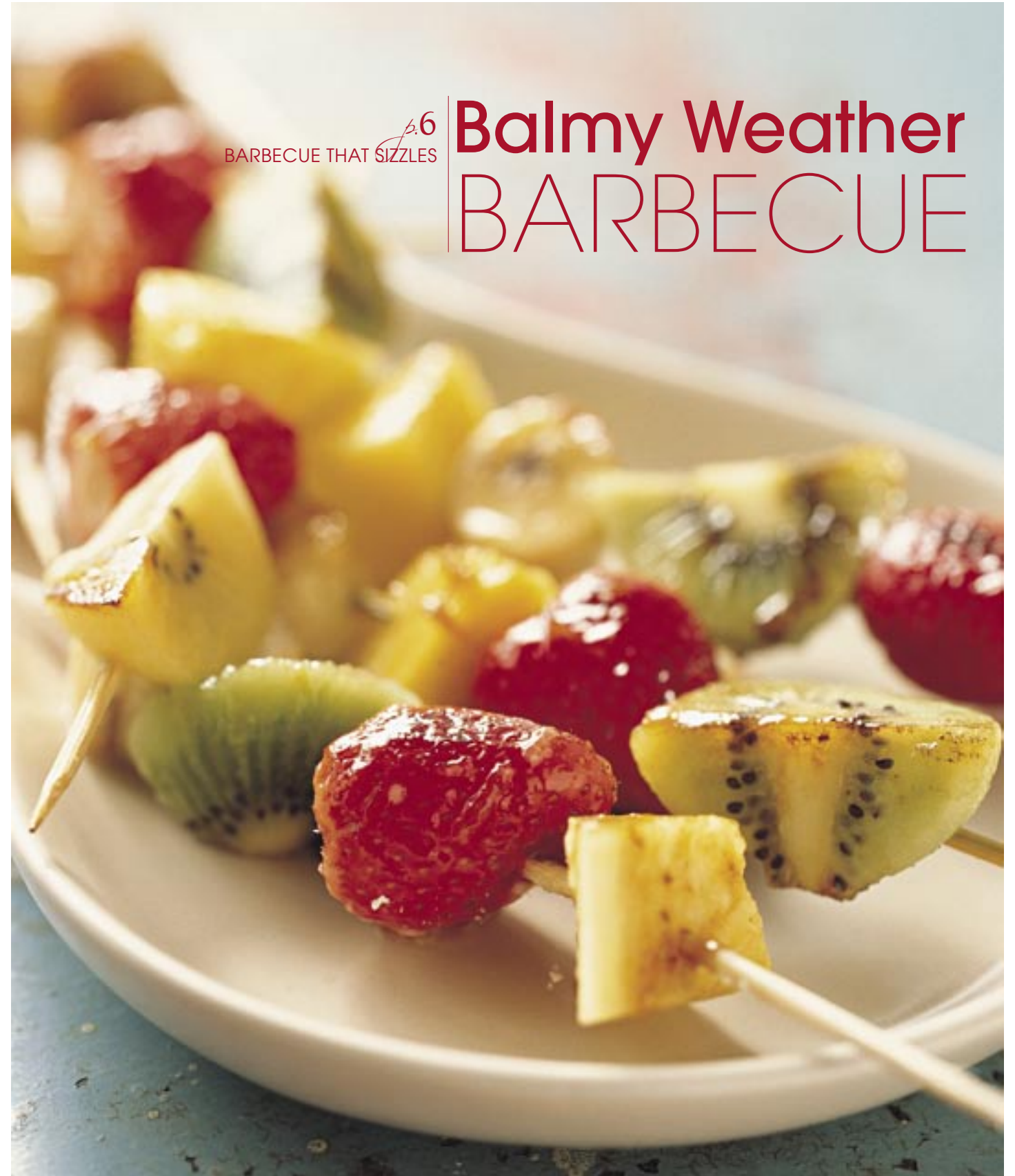
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American Lifestyle

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MODERNIZATION OF THE CRAFTSMAN

Article based on an interview with Assembledge founders, David Thompson and Kevin Southerland
Photography by Michael Weschler (www.michaelweschler.com)



HOW DID YOU COME TO BE A DESIGNER?

D (David Thompson, co-founder of Assembledge): I went to Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and then came back to L.A., where I am from. I worked for David Hertz and Syndesis for about five years. In 1997, I started the beginning stages of Assembledge. I was doing that for a while. I took the business to New York for a while, and then back to L.A. I've loved architecture my whole life. My father is an architect. He had his own practice.

K (Kevin Southerland, co-founder of Assembledge): I grew up in Southern California. My father was always interested in home building. Where I grew up, there were a lot of houses being built. After work in the summers, we would wander through the houses. That really got me interested in architecture, design, and building. When I was in high school, I took architecture classes at the local junior college. I went to Berkley as an undergrad, and worked for about three years before I went back to graduate school. When I graduated from Southern California Institute of Architecture, I worked for Frank Gehry for about two and a half years, and various other offices. David and I met while working at Lorcan O'Herlihy Architects.

COULD YOU SEE YOURSELF DOING ANYTHING ELSE?

D: No.

K: Surfing. ::laughs:: Architecture is by nature a frustrating profession. Everytime I think about doing anything else, I couldn't imagine anything that is as fun, interesting, and creative as what we do.

HOW WAS ASSEMBLEDGE STARTED?

D: I founded and started Assembledge in 1997. I had Assembledge in New York for three years doing projects there. I came back to Los Angeles. I was doing some small projects for a while and also working for another firm. Kevin and I met at this firm halfway through my stint there. I left to go restart up Assembledge. Kevin and I had been talking about doing development and possibly trying to find a development deal to do a larger

scale, multi-family sized project. We found a project about a year later. At that point, we decided to become partners and start a new stage of Assembledge.

K: David and I realized, as every architect knows but secretly doesn't want to admit, that developers have a much larger influence on the structure and shape than architects often do. We wanted to unlock some of that potential and become our own developers, and hopefully make the urbanization of Los Angeles a little bit better.

WHAT IS YOUR DESIGN PHILOSOPHY?

K: We are extremely committed to building and to realizing projects in a collaborative environment. We are definitely committed to a California interpretation of modernism, although we don't restrict ourselves to just a regional interpretation of that. We are trying to base the firm partially on being proactive developers and developing our own projects.

D: We take each project individually, and try and look at what the clients' requests are, who the clients are, what the site brings, and let that be incorporated into the project.

WHAT IS YOUR STYLE?

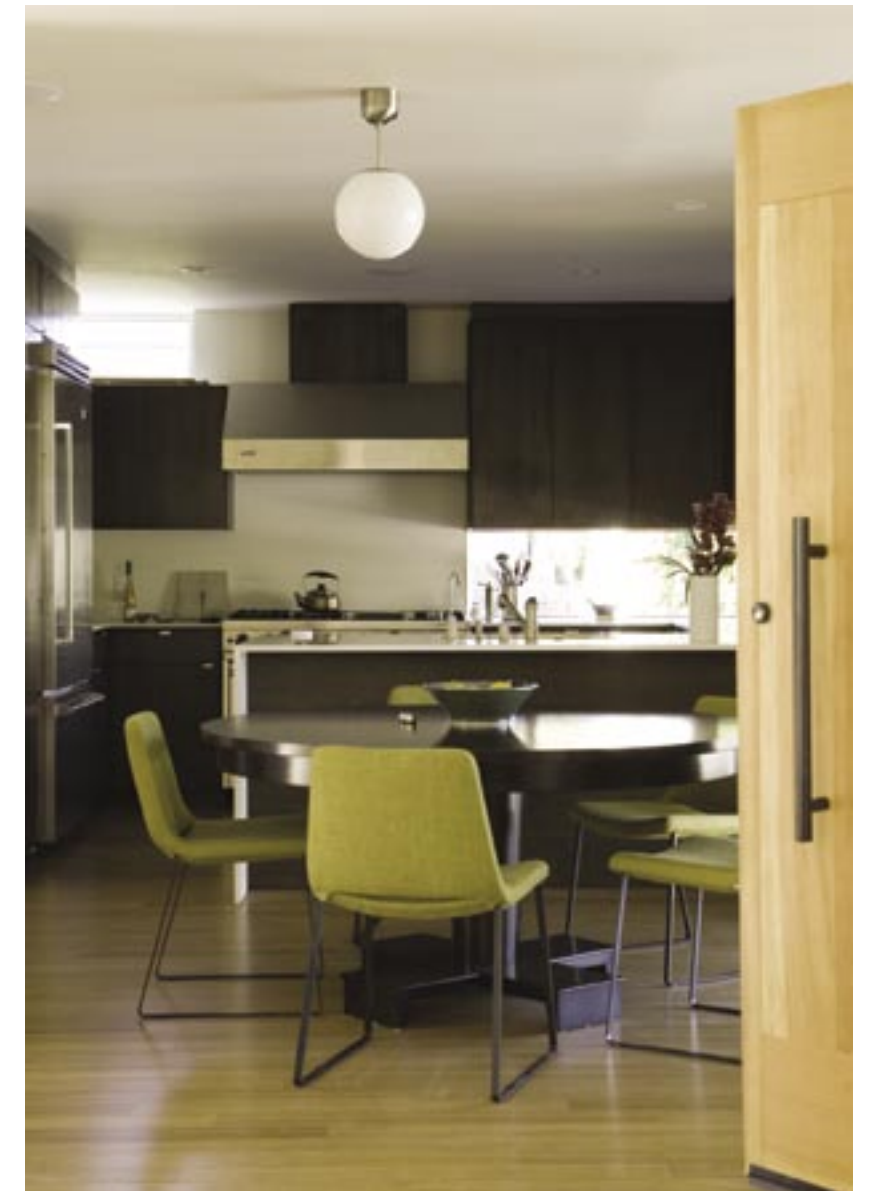
D: Modernism.

K: I would add that we are exploratory modernists, in that we are not trying to apply a consistent style over every project. We are trying to let each project, in a modern way, find its own voice.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR STYLE AND WORK ARE YOUR CLIENTS DRAWN TO?

K: There are a lot of architecture firms that know how to build, but aren't great designers. And there are a lot of architecture firms that are great designers, but

“There are a lot of **ARCHITECTURE FIRMS** that know *how to build*, but aren't great designers. And there are a lot of architecture firms that are **GREAT DESIGNERS**, but don't know how to build. We are trying to walk that **FINE LINE** of being great designers and understanding *buildings* and getting things built.”



The house is primarily clad in wood—**WESTERN RED CEDAR**—and white stucco. The **WOOD** was really brought in for its *warmth*. The rest of it is a **SERIES** of glass sliders that *open out*.”



don't know how to build. We are trying to walk that fine line of being great designers and understanding buildings and getting things built.

HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE SEEN AS A DESIGNER?

D: We would like to think that people are looking at the work and thinking it is innovative, not just in terms of design, but as a well-built structure. We want to create buildings that will last, and make a timeless statement of architecture.

WHAT FUELS YOUR DESIRE TO DESIGN EVERY DAY?

D: We like being a part of the changing of the environment and landscape that we live in. In the urban aspect of development, we are a part of the way cities are being shaped.

K: It also allows you to use your whole brain on a daily basis. You have to be creative. You have to be pragmatic. You have to be innovative and thoughtful. You have to be realistic. The staff here is just incredibly thoughtful and creative. They really care about what they do. We are all trying to make the city a better place.

HOW DO YOU GET A FEEL FOR WHAT A PROJECT SHOULD BE OR SAY?

D: There are a lot of factors: the clients, the site, the program. Those things are informative for us as a starting point.

K: We take those parameters—which are finite constraints in many regards—and we overlay the tangible clients' desires, thoughts, and feelings with our ideas and investigations and explorations in form, in materials, and technology.

TALK ABOUT THE RIDGEWOOD PROJECT:

D: That project is my house. My wife and I bought the property

five or six years ago. We lived in the single family house on the property for a couple years before we tore it down. It was very informative living there for a while, understanding what the site and the house were about, as well as the neighborhood. It is a house in a very old Craftsman neighborhood. All of the neighbors are very friendly, and we are a close knit group of people. The design of the house was certainly a response to the neighborhood and the people there. We wanted to create a modern interpretation of what we felt could fit in the neighborhood and be respectful to the neighborhood, but also be its own statement of design.

HOW DOES THE HOUSE RELATE TO THE ENVIRONMENT?

D: The property itself is a sub-standard lot. It is shortened by fifty feet. As a result, the garage side of the house slopes at a slight angle downward. We use the garage as the roof deck as well, which increases our backyard. Being in a substandard lot, we are able to use the full width of our property for the backyard. That was a definite cue from the property itself. The house is situated among a bunch of other Craftsman houses, and we weren't looking to attempt to recreate that. But we were certainly interested in what the Craftsman movement was about, which was detail and the way things were put together.

TALK ABOUT YOUR DESIGN FOR THIS HOUSE IN TERMS OF MATERIALS, LAYOUT, COLOR, AND LIGHTING:

D: The house is primarily clad in wood—western red cedar—and white stucco. The wood was really brought in for its warmth. The rest of it is a series of glass sliders that open out. The house is very integrated into the site and the exterior. There are a lot of movable walls that open and allow the exterior to come inward.

It really blurs the boundaries between indoors and outdoors. When we are designing, especially the single family residences, rather than look at the square footage of the house, we look at the square footage of the lot. In Southern California, where we have the luxury to be outside pretty much 365 days a year, we really look to engage the landscape and the exterior spaces by allowing walls and sliding doors to open these spaces up.

DESCRIBE THE PROJECT IN GENERAL TERMS:

D: It is a three bedroom, three bath. There is a living room, dining room, family room, and an office. It is two stories, and about 2,400 feet on a 5,000-square-foot lot.

IS IT HARDER TO DESIGN A HOME FOR YOURSELF?

D: I don't know if it is harder to design. I think it is harder to live in because everyday I come downstairs, and I see things that I would do differently. If I built it again, I'd make alternate material choices—not so much from a design standpoint, but more from a maintenance and weathering standpoint. Every building you do is a learning experience for the next one.

K: I think as an architect, we are constantly evolving. I know if David were to design another house in two years, it would have a lot in common with this one. It would also be different because we evolve. These projects we do are snapshots in time.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

D: I love seeing the enjoyment my family gets out of this house. It really works as a living machine. The neighborhood and the community seem to really love it and respond to it. I feel like it has strengthened that sense of community in our neighborhood.



People do a lot of walking in our neighborhood, and because we are out on our front porch, and our living room is made of all glass, people walk by, and they stop to look. We will wave and come out to start talking with people. It generates conversation between neighbors and people. And that is a great thing.

HOW DO YOU THINK PEOPLE SHOULD PREPARE AHEAD OF TIME BEFORE MEETING WITH A DESIGNER?

D: I think they should try and educate themselves about the process a bit. Part of what we do, certainly in a residential project, is educate people about the process. We want to learn what things in their home drive them or motivate them or excite them. We want to take that information and create an architectural vocabulary that works for them and inspires them.

K: I think also if they really understand how they presently live, they can understand better how they would like to live. Cutting things out of a magazine, bringing books that inspire them, writing a list of likes and dislikes are all helpful as a jumping off point to start the conversation about what kind of space they want to live in.

DO YOU THINK SHOWS LIKE TRADING SPACES HELP BRING AWARENESS TO THE TRADE OR BELITTLE IT?

K: For me, any show or any magazine that promotes good design or even exposes people to design at all and gets them thinking a little bit about it, is probably a good thing.

WHAT DESIGNERS HAVE INFLUENCED YOU?

D: I'd say definitely most of the midsection modernists: Rudolph Schindler, John Lautner,

Gregory Ain. I think we are inspired by good architecture and good design. All around us, there are people in contemporary art. There are people who are in the same position as us that we admire.

K: I think that we are both influenced by our time at Lorcan's office. I was definitely influenced by my time at Frank Gehry's office. Probably one of the most influential architects of our generation, certainly in academia, was Rem Koolhaas from Office for Metropolitan Architecture. There are some incredibly innovative Japanese architects that we draw from. We are fortunate enough to work in a city that has an incredible breadth and depth of talent. [AL]

“Part of what we do, certainly in a residential project, is **EDUCATE** people about the **process**. We want to learn what things in their home **DRIVE** them or **MOTIVATE** them or **EXCITE** them. We want to take that information and create an architectural **VOCABULARY** that works for them and **inspires** them.”

