

AT ESALEN,
A HISTORIC BLUFF-TOP
HOUSE IS RESTORED TO
ITS NATURAL STATE

BACK FROM THE *BRINK*

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURE JOLIET





TOP: CAPTION FOR THESE PICTURES GO HERE. 7/8 ANTENNA LIGHT IN ALL CAPS. FLUSH LEFT. **TOP RIGHT:** CAPTION FOR THESE PICTURES GO HERE. 7/8 ANTENNA LIGHT IN ALL CAPS. FLUSH LEFT. **RIGHT:** CAPTION FOR THESE PICTURES GO HERE. 7/8 ANTENNA LIGHT IN ALL CAPS. FLUSH LEFT. **FAR RIGHT:** CAPTION FOR THESE PICTURES GO HERE. 7/8 ANTENNA LIGHT IN ALL CAPS. FLUSH LEFT.

Back in 1967, when Gestalt Therapy co-founder Fritz Perls moved into his house on the grounds of Esalen, the iconic Central Coast retreat that served as harbinger of the new age, he inserted a cutout into a living room wall where he could place a film recorder. Thanks to that cubbyhole—and YouTube—it’s possible today to see white-haired, bearded Perls chain-smoking in a chair near his giant fireplace while guiding patients in an authoritative German accent through their dreams and neuroses.

Carissa Duncan of Carmel-based design firm Salt+Bones decided to keep the cutout “as an homage to Fritz” when she renovated the magnificent, long-neglected Fritz House last year. After remaking 10 standard guest rooms as part of Esalen’s campus-renewal project, Duncan took on the Fritz House—a semi-circular structure of hand-hewn stone and redwood built into a cliff overlooking the retreat’s famous mineral baths.

After Perls left in 1969, Esalen co-founder Dick Price lived in the house for several years. By the time Duncan walked in, the space, which was actively being used for meetings and workshops, hadn’t been touched by a designer since the ’70s. Old carpet covered the concrete floors and Japanese paper lanterns were strung up on plant hooks.

“It was such a profound, historical spot,” Duncan recalls, noting how she could see nothing but ocean from the wall of glass that forms the home’s southwest boundary. “We didn’t want to change the design. We wanted to strip away all the layers and get back to the bones.”

The typical “good bones” reference doesn’t begin to describe Fritz House. Built in 1965 by Selig Morgenrath, a Big Sur designer who worked on many of Esalen’s buildings, the house is a combination of impressive masonry and old-growth redwood salvaged from ’30s-era wooden bridges on Highway 1. “Those timbers come from virgin heartwood, which you simply can’t get anymore,” says Esalen CEO Gordon Wheeler. “Most of them are more than a foot wide and harden over the years to a consistency almost like iron.”

Duncan wanted to keep the design elemental—as close to the land as possible in color, texture, and composition. She knew she needed to start with lighting—that is, after repairing the roof and the sea-facing exterior, replacing the windows, and sanding and sealing every inch of wood. While natural light floods the living-dining space during the day, Duncan wanted to transition to a candlelit glow at night without adding too many fixtures. She wrapped an eight-inch steel band along the walls and inserted LED lighting throughout. With the





exception of a few reading lamps, Duncan eschewed task lighting. “Part of being at Esalen is removing yourself from the day-to-day,” she says. “The lighting needed to help people decompress, not re-engage.”

Then Duncan pondered the room’s rare half-circle shape. Using surplus redwood Esalen had on property, she designed a deep sofa bench that followed the arc of the wall, topped with overstuffed pillows made of hemp and lambswool [are these, perchance, made by local artisans? I’d like to underscore a little more Carissa’s local, small-batch MO... no, she used Zak+Fox and Hart Made, both based in New York]. Across a circular Four Hands coffee table, two Janus Et Cie chairs were chosen for their size and transparency: Made of rope-wrapped steel, they offer comfort without adding visual bulk.

One of the advantages of working at Esalen was having access to its onsite artisans. They fabricated not just the sofa bench but a small desk in the living room facing the deck that runs along the length of the house, as well as headboards and cantilevered nightstands in each of the two bedrooms. Duncan kept the bedrooms simple, sourcing cotton sheets and quilts from Mateo Home in Los Angeles, and hanging white linen curtains on the sliding glass doors that also open out to the deck.

In the bathroom, Duncan kept the original wood walls, stone shower, and concrete countertop, but upgraded to brass fixtures from Waterworks, which play will patina over time. “Our concept was wabi sabi, the beauty of imperfection, on things that develop character and age gracefully. I didn’t want you to be able to tell the difference between the original and the remodel.”

In the small kitchen, Duncan added aqua-colored Heath tile backsplash with a gunmetal glaze to create a pitted texture echoing the rocks and sea. Over the round concrete dining table, she hung an Ay Illuminate bamboo “Nest” pendant that casts dramatic shadows at night. Two Eames chairs finish off the dining area, which opens onto the monolith fireplace where Perls liked to sit. Over the years, students have placed small flowers in the crevices between its stones; if you look closely, you can see how they’ve dried into a purple outline.

“I wanted the materials and palette to mirror the environment instead of stealing the show,” Duncan says, “to have the same grit and texture. The result is earthy and serene, so nothing takes precedence. You just walk in and you can breathe deeply.”

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