



PA

PROGRESSIVE
ARCHITECTURE

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Things In Motion



1

Artist James Hubbell has created a place of meditation at Sea Ranch that seems virtually kinetic;

a school for the impoverished in Tijuana is a work in progress.

Inspired by drawings of winged forms, the Sea Ranch meditation chapel resembles a fluttering object that has alighted in the meadowland between the ocean and the coastal mountains, a UFO that was summoned here and may one day take off again. For now, it is cradled in a stonework base; a stone path surrounds it and merges with other stone formations that trail off into the earth. The summoners, Betty and Robert Buffum, commissioned the chapel from artist James Hubbell and dedicated it to the memory of Kirk Ditzler, the amateur artist/naturalist son of friends and neighbors at the Sea Ranch. Hubbell used the young friend's drawings as a basis for his design.

The chapel is, of course, at rest, but because it is small — only 360 square feet — the viewer walking around it can experience it as if it were in motion. The four roof planes collide like waves; the perspective is never the same from one footstep to the next. Three stopping points, like rests in a musical composition, occur where the roof eaves lift to accommodate windows and doors. The fourth opening is a long slit filled with stained glass which, near the roof's peak, emits a feathery bronze sculpture that suggests sea spray.



2

Hubbell is not only an artist, but a master craftsman who designs buildings as habitable sculptures. He also views the design process, particularly of public buildings, as a collaborative effort and involves his co-workers in it according to their abilities. Since Sea Ranch was too far from his San Diego home to allow constant supervision, he sought and found a contractor, Tambe Kumaran, who had trained with temple carpenters in Japan and had built boats; Kumaran assembled a team of talented artisans. Skill was at a premium, because what Hubbell provided his crew to work with were 1/4-inch engineering drawings done for building permit purposes and a small, take-apart teakwood model. He expected his team to plot the construction process, but he also participated during periodic visits to the site.

After pouring a 6-inch concrete slab foundation, and building foundation walls of 12-inch filled concrete block, the crew faced the major challenge of constructing the roof, which had four major planes, each with its own undulating surface. An A-frame of primary rafters and beams was erected; the rafters were anchored to the sill plate of the concrete block wall with joist hangers. To achieve the

curves of Hubbell's model, the workmen strung ropes and 3/8-inch rebars across the plane of the roof rafters and studied the results with model in hand from distant vantage points. Often they had to tear out and re-do their work, but if capturing the form was difficult, it was only a preview of the challenge of creating the smooth shingled surfaces that Hubbell wanted.

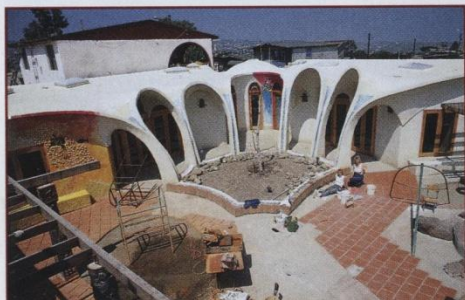
Outrigger rafters were added to the common roof rafters and built up in places with thin strips of wood to produce smooth curves; the eaves were thickened with layers of shingles. According to the foreman, Tim Carpenter, laying the shingles to reflect the curving roof planes was an unpredictable exercise that had to be redone when the patterns, which had a life of their own, collided. The upper part of the roof was clad with redwood cut on site into tapered boards of various sizes.

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The building might easily have biological origins. Sweeping roof forms part where tall (1) or low (2) stained glass windows seem to grow, emanating from the low stone base.

Across The Border

At home in the collaborative world of craftsmen, Hubbell believes that the best way to learn an art is by watching others make decisions and mistakes. To assist this kind of education he helped establish the Ilan-Lael (Hebrew for "a tree belonging to God") Foundation, in 1982, which has the goal of creating a bridge between the poet and the pragmatist, the thinker and the doer. One of the foundation's projects, a school for impoverished children in Tijuana, Mexico, is a collaboration with the Americas Foundation, which has developed the educational program for which Hubbell is designing the buildings. The preschool, where 205 children are



James Hubbell



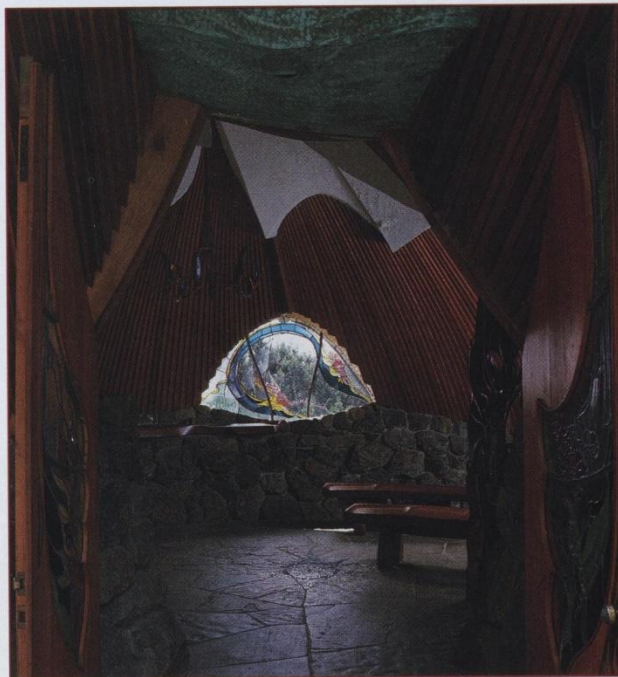
James Hubbell

enrolled, started construction two years ago, and the primary school, which will serve 800 students, is nearing completion.

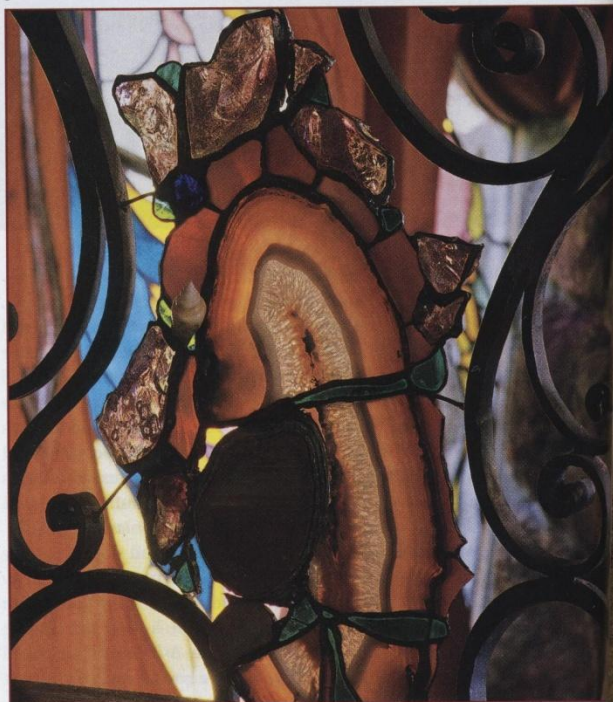
Another building for the school will be a training center for those who wish to apprentice at the school and learn a variety of building crafts. Volunteers came from near and far to participate in the previous building campaigns, performing a variety of tasks including welding pipe into a truss for the concrete shell roofs of the buildings.

Although Hubbell has a pragmatic approach to working with people of varying levels of skill, he believes in pushing all of them to surpass themselves.

Seen from the entry doorway (3), the tiny chapel interior just seems to grow out of the irregular datum of stone. Hubbell created a ceramic fountain near the entrance, a metal lighting fixture, the stained glass (4), and elegant teak and glass entrance doors (5). Copper sheets were hammered and pushed into the contours of the siding where it joins the roof. At the school in Tijuana for the Ilan-Lael Foundation, volunteers performed various duties, including forming pipe trusses for the shell roofs (a). Like Hubbell's other work, the school is decorated in various ways, including episodes of mosaic (b).



3



4



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 The form taken by the plaster ceiling (6) seems to emulate an inverted flower, hovering over the space. Mosaic work appears to seal up a fissure-like opening in the center of the stone floor, and subtle, delicate patches of it intervene in places between the top of the stone wall and the slats above. Representing a traditional Japanese tokonoma bashira, a striking sculpted redwood post rises from the floor to the ceiling (6, 7).

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Project: The Sea Ranch Chapel, Sea Ranch, California.

Designer/interiors: James T. Hubbell, Santa Ysabel, California.

Coordinating architect: Donald P. Jacobs.

Client: Betty Buffum and Dr. Robert Buffum.

Site: gently sloping area of about three acres of coastal meadow, with pine forests to the rear of the site.

Program: nondenominational 360-sq-ft community-use chapel for small services such as meditation, memorials, or weddings; to have no formal altar, and remain uncluttered to allow seating for up to 40 people.

Structural system: concrete slab, concrete block walls, and wood frame shell.

Major materials: wood, stone, glass, and copper.

Mechanical system: two small electric space heaters.

Consultants: Dan Cole, structural; Tambe Kumaran, mechanical; George Wickstead, FASLA, landscape.

General contractor: Kumaran Construction Company.

Costs: not available.

Photography: Alan Weintraub, except as noted.



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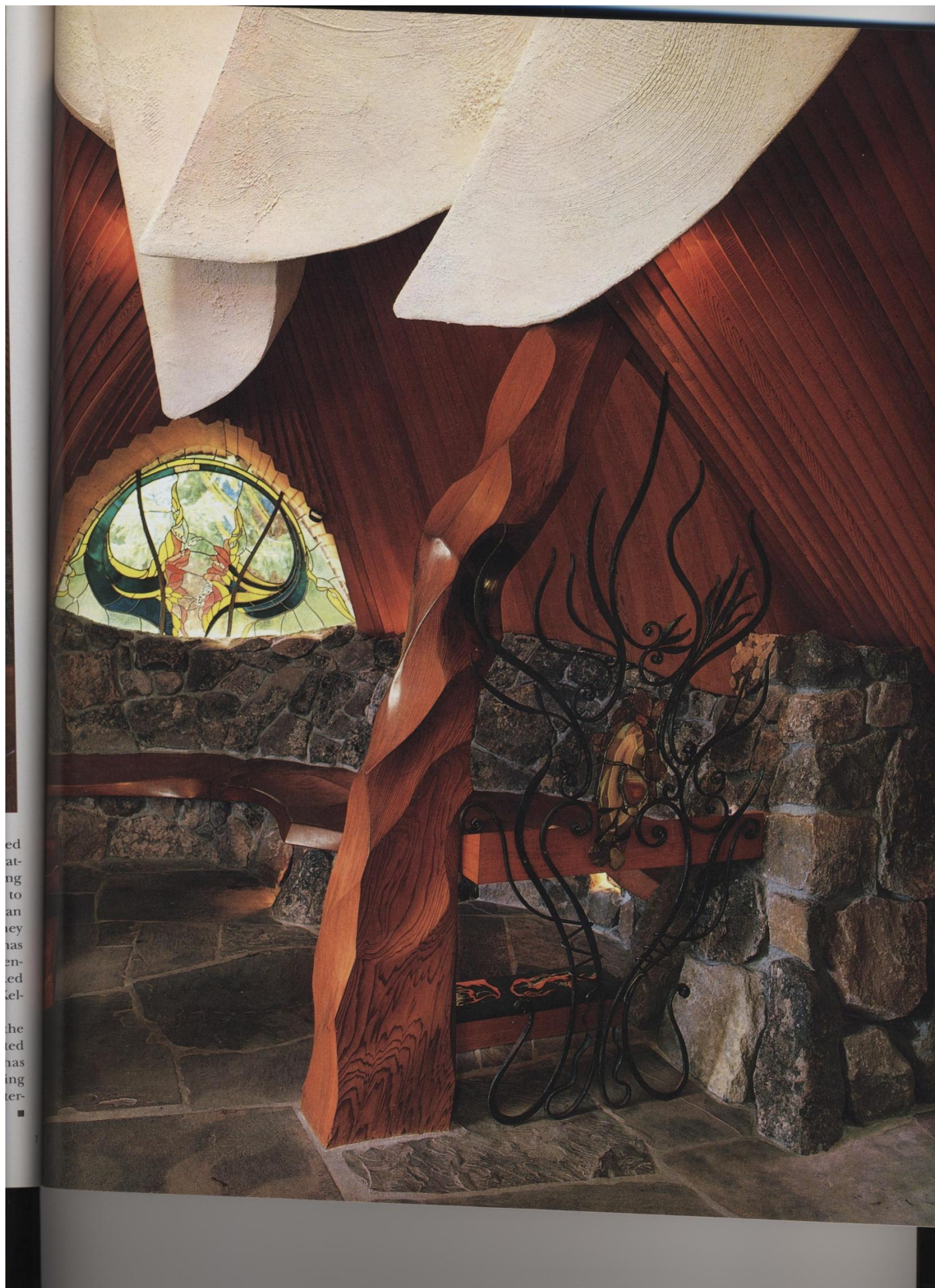
Cladding the surface between the roof and the stone base walls also presented problems. Wood was desirable, but Hubbell had told his team that they should not try to force materials into place, and the curvature of the area between the eaves and the stone base suggested a lot of bending. By using green redwood 2x4s milled diagonally into a beveled shape, the workmen were able to push the flexible members into the right place. The bevel made each piece fit smoothly, avoiding the problem that flat pieces have of bending unevenly. The siding dried in place, creating a permanently molded shell.

The same lapstrake siding was used on the interior, but Hubbell decided to cap the space with a feathery light-colored plaster sculpture. He also made the elegant metal lighting fixture that hangs from the ceiling and the glass and metal screen that shields a corner near the entrance as well as the stained-glass windows and the teak and glass entrance doors. A single redwood pillar and contoured redwood benches were carved by sculptor Bruce Johnson from Hubbell's designs. Set on the stone wall near the entrance is a ceramic fountain made by Hubbell that suggests a set of wings folded protectively around the miniature metal and mosaic water source.

As exemplified in the chapel, Hubbell's favorite media are stained glass, ceramics, metal, and plasterwork, all of which he has incorporated into free-form structures that flow out into their sites, embracing rock outcroppings and vegetation. Hubbell's goal in architecture is to create structures that physically comfort and instill in their users an emotional attachment to the gifts of the earth. Trained at the Whitney Art School in New Haven and at Cranbrook Art Academy, Hubbell has many executed works of sculpture and stained glass that are independent of his building projects. At the beginning of his career he worked with architects of the organic persuasion, such as Kendrick Bangs Kellogg and Sims Bruce Richards, in the San Diego area.

When he and his wife began building their handmade house in the mountains in 1958 — he has since built other houses — Hubbell wanted to retreat from the world. But in the last 20 years, his world has expanded with his desire to engage others in the work of building with nature, a process that Hubbell believes involves continually entering chaos to create order. **Sally Woodbridge**

The author is P/A's Bay Area correspondent.



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