

The Bohemian Architect

Laura Burkhalter

Laura Burkhalter describes her work as “minimalist, with an ethnic touch.” Her travels around the world serve as her main inspiration: Wherever she is, she likes to look at the traditional architectures and the natural materials that are used to build things. In her own home and in many of the projects she has worked on, she appreciates what may seem like contrasts at first: “I like a modern look that also feels grounded and earthy, and I love combining low-tech and high-tech elements.” Laura insists she doesn’t really care about following a particular style: “If anything, I would consider myself anti style. Instead, I strive to discover the essence of a place; the feeling you get from a room when you’re inside it.”

Laura is a Swiss-born architect and designer who has lived and worked in California for over 26 years. Throughout her career, she has been drawn to work that leaves room for her to experiment and be creative. Inevitably with these kinds of projects, things don’t always go smoothly right from the start — but she’s not afraid of failure: “Most of the time, when you try something new, you don’t get it right until your third try,” she says with a shrug.

Laura’s latest passion project perfectly illustrates the philosophy behind her work: She is currently building another home for herself and her 12-year-old daughter — and their dog, Puma — in Oaxaca, on the Pacific coast in Mexico. The family now divides their time between their small apartment in Santa Monica, CA and the house on the coast of Oaxaca. The latter is a work-in-progress, she says, and things didn’t go exactly as planned: “I decided to buy the property after spending several vacations in Mexico. When the Covid-19 pandemic started, we had just arrived there and were going to stay for three months. But we ended up having to stay much longer.”

Laura admits that living in their unfinished home in Mexico “felt very much like camping” in the beginning. While there has been a lot of progress since

“I like to think of the USA as consisting of bubbles, or capsules — you can just pick one that works for you.”



At Joshua Tree National Park, one of Laura's favorite places in California

then, the project also suffered a heavy blow in May of 2022, when a hurricane swept over the town. It wasn't even the rainy season yet, and the storm caught the family by surprise. For seven hours, the hurricane caused havoc in the town and on the construction site. “Thankfully, we were able to bunker down and stay safe in one of the caves.”

Yes, you heard that right: caves. Laura is building the new home right into natural cave structures. Adapting to the cavernous surroundings means, for example, that there are no corners anywhere. Still, this is not your ordinary cave dwelling: “On the one hand, there are plenty of modern, luxurious amenities. On the other hand, it's a home that feels very simple and close to nature.” Here, too, Laura used natural materials and traditional techniques. She plastered the interior using clay, for example. But the hurricane also made for a learning experience: “Some of those things didn't withstand the storm and had to be rebuilt better or differently. It's a learning curve — you realize there's a right way to do things in a certain climate and environment.” It's something she has also learned over the course of her career in California, where earthquakes and wildfires have to be factored into the construction of new buildings.

Another rather unusual aspect of the house in Mexico: It wasn't designed with just Laura and her daughter in mind. Instead, it will allow for a shared living



Left: Laura's daughter and dog relaxing at their construction in Mexico
Right: Laura's daughter enjoying a day on the Oaxaca Coast



Laura and her daughter at Joshua Tree National Park, CA

arrangement between multiple people: “The basic idea is that there are individual, private spaces where you can be by yourself, but also communal spaces where you get to be with your roommates.” It’s not only a smart concept from an ecological standpoint, since people get to share their space and resources; but it also deeply resonates with Laura, who has come to appreciate the idea of communal living. “We have this notion in our Western society — that everyone has to do everything on their own every day. As a single mother, I just don’t think that’s the best solution.”

Laura is no stranger to the concept of shared living spaces — it was a normal part of life for her when she was growing up. Laura was born and raised in Bern, Switzerland. Her parents (and later, after her parents separated, her father) always shared their apartment with several roommates. It certainly wasn’t a conventional upbringing for a family in Switzerland in the 1980s. Bern felt like a very conservative place to Laura at the time, and her family’s liberal views were frowned upon by some people. “I remember playing in the streets, being loud. There were neighbors who would call the

When did you
first arrive in the
United States?

Laura: 1996

What do you
call home?

Santa Monica,
California

What's your
favorite place in the
United States?

In California:
Joshua Tree
National Park and
Catalina Island



Laura relaxing at her apartment in Santa Monica, CA

police on us, although we didn't do anything — we were just kids being kids.”

From a very early age, Laura felt like she didn't quite belong. It was a feeling that only got stronger once she moved from a Montessori primary school to a more conservative high school. At age 17, she spent a semester in Santa Barbara, CA as an exchange student. It was a freeing experience for her: “For the first time in my life, I felt accepted. People didn't judge me, and I didn't have to explain myself all the time.” She then decided she wanted to return to the United States to study architecture, which seemed like the perfect mix between her creative ambitions and her interest in math and social sciences.

Laura successfully applied to the Southern California Institute of Architecture in Los Angeles and relocated to California. She felt immediately at home in the international community of students at the school, but it was a hard-earned education. Her first lectures and textbooks in English left her feeling overwhelmed, and she admits it took her about a year to fully understand the language. After graduating from SCI-Arc, she started looking at various architecture firms and decided to pursue a position at a small studio — “because it seemed like the type of environment where I could have a real impact.” In the following years, Laura was able to work on a variety of different large-scale urban projects — from high-tech office headquarters in Germany and high rises and shopping malls in China to various



Sunset view from the newly built "cave house" in construction in Mexico



Panoramic view of the beach on the Oaxaca Coast

boutique hotels in urban centers. In 2007, she founded her own architecture and design firm, Laura Burkhalter Design Studio, which later turned into her current company, Matter + Soul.

"One thing just led to another," Laura says about her staying in California after her studies. It wasn't so much a conscious decision, she says; she just happened to stumble upon the one place that was a perfect fit for her. "That's the great thing about the United States. It's such an interesting and varied country with vastly different lifestyles. I like to think of it as consisting of bubbles, or capsules — you can just pick one that works for you."

The concept of different capsules also continues to shape Laura's work. "I would like to make a contribution to the shared living arrangement of the future," she says. "Commune 2.0, if you so will — where everyone maintains their private capsule, but also takes part in a larger community." Another vision Laura has for the future home is inspired by her own travels and her living in different places: Over the next ten years, she would like to build a network of creative spaces all over the world, where people can live for a few months at a time before moving on to the next location. In that scenario, she could even picture herself living in Switzerland again: "Why not spend one third of the year in the United States, one third in Mexico, and one third in Switzerland," she says.

Do you have a
favorite American
tradition or
national holiday?

Laura: My daughter and I
love Halloween

What's your favorite
American food?

A fresh salad from
the farmers' market

When was the
last time you visited
Switzerland?

2019

What characteristic
of yours is most "Swiss"?

I appreciate
good craftsmanship
and quality

Laura hasn't been back to Switzerland in 3.5 years because of the pandemic, but she's hoping to visit again in 2023. Her family and the friends she has kept in touch with are scattered all over the country; to make sure she gets to catch up with everyone, she usually tries to stay for at least two to four weeks. Even after not living in her native country for over 26 years, there are still certain qualities about herself Laura considers part of her Swiss DNA: "In Santa Monica, I use my bike to get around — that's a very Swiss thing to do," she says. "Also, wherever I go, I try to track down the best chocolate."

Laura Burkhalter is an architect and designer. She was born in Bern, Switzerland and holds an architecture degree from the reputable Southern California Institute of Architecture. She has since worked for several design-centric architecture and design firms on large-scale projects in the United States, in Europe, and in Asia. With her own studio Matter + Soul, she realizes design projects at the interface of architecture and interior, landscape and graphic design. She currently divides her time between Santa Monica, CA and the coast of Oaxaca, Mexico.