The Architecture of
G.K. “Mickey” Muennig

By Brigga Mosca

I find Mickey Muennig, the world renowned architect, in his Big Sur studio-office amid drawings representing 50 years of creativity and the tools of his trade: architectural books and magazines, pattern and texture books, inspirational bits and pieces and works in progress spread out over a huge work table of his own design. Original prints adorn the walls as well as beautiful works in glass created by his daughter, Michele. Moroccan rugs dress up the floors of this simple, efficient space. Three staff architects are busy at work interpreting the master’s designs with Computer Aided Design (CAD) output. The CAD system now so necessary to communicate with planning departments, engineers and clients is of no real use to Mickey. He still does all of his renderings by hand.

How he came to live and work in Big Sur stems from a trip he and his former wife made in 1971 to visit Esalen. They both liked the general philosophy of Big Sur life at the time, Mickey being especially interested in Gestalt therapy. His first encounter at Esalen was an eye opener, as he recalls, “The lights were turned off in this room and we were instructed to both feel and get to know the first person you bumped into in the dark. Before I went to this first session, I thought I would be in a classroom setting, taking notes. I didn’t know it would be so participatory.” The couple stayed for a week vacationing at Esalen, neither wanting to go back to Denver where Mickey was with an architectural firm. They had been charmed by the Big Sur quality of life.

As fate would have it, before the week was up, a man named Al Drucker found Mickey at Esalen, asking him to help with the design of a house in the Coastlands plus a second home he planned to build nearby. The young architect agreed to do this — if he could find a place to live. Al happened to have a cabin available in Coastlands and so the couple decided to stay along with their two children; Peter, now a New York physician, writer and lecturer on health care and Michele, an artist who lives in Berkeley.

Not everything would fall perfectly into place, however. While Mickey was back in Denver to arrange to sell their home and to prepare for the big move, his wife found another man in Big Sur. Mickey stuck with his plan to move to Big Sur just the same and has lived here ever since. He has been in a long term relationship the past 25 years.

After the Coastlands project, Mickey remembers, “I didn’t think I would ever create another piece of architecture. Big Sur is a most unlikely place for an architect to practice. But the work kept coming in. I got one job after another.” The turning point in his career would be designing the Post Ranch Inn, a project that would gain him an international reputation.

Not surprisingly, Mickey claims “my work is influenced a lot by nature and the quality of life in Big Sur”. He continues, “Floods, highway closures, earthquakes, wildfires, torrential rains and wind — all of these things guide you in building. You have to proof a structure from the elements”. Though many lament the process of bringing a building to fruition in our strict-building-code area, Mickey does not share that negativity. Instead, he has an appreciation for the stringent building codes that keep it natural and beautiful.

Inspired by organic architecture, his work was also influenced by the late Bruce Goff, with whom he studied at the University of Oklahoma’s School of Architecture. Goff was a friend and contemporary of Frank Lloyd Wright and, according to Mickey, neither one of these two greats were celebrated nor appreciated during their time. In Mickey’s work you see the influences; attention to spatial effects, client and site-specific solutions. To this end, Mickey states “When I create a house based on the organic tradition, I believe it is always alive and a living tribute to the people for whom it was created.”

He is incredibly patient, sharing so many drawings and images of his work through the years. He answers questions honestly and in an uncomplicated way which is both uncommon and refreshing. For instance, wondering how a man whose given name is George Kay Muennig comes to be called Mickey, I get this: “When I was born and still in the hospital with my mother, my four year old sister came to visit and said I looked like Mickey Mouse and I’ve been called that ever since.” Though I don’t inquire about his middle name, he is on a roll and explains, “My father wanted me to be a dancer so the middle name Kay was given to me in honor of the entertainer Danny Kay. But I became an architect instead.” And although I’ve never actually seen Mickey dance, I’m certain it is a blessing that this was his destiny.