

Interview **Suzy Zail**
 Photography **Deanne Fitzmaurice**



Nolan Zail

Architect and developer Nolan Zail, 43, lives with his family in Mill Valley, near San Francisco.

“Before I moved to San Francisco, I thought you had to be insane to live here. No one in their right mind would choose to live in a city where there is a 70 per cent chance of a major earthquake. I have a back-pack in the garage with emergency gear like flashlights, batteries, a radio and blankets, and a box with food rations. I have only ever experienced ‘a roller’. It was gentle, but it is weird, living this paradise lifestyle with an earthquake around the corner.

“Like New York, San Francisco is an elite, liberal society. While most of America is insanely conservative, San Francisco represents freedom of choice – anything goes. Like the Bay to Breakers race, a five-mile race from San Francisco Bay to the ocean beach. Runners can wear whatever they want, or nothing at all. I wore running clothes but I passed groups of naked men and women of all ages and sizes. They looked cold and uncomfortable, but they were exercising their choice, and that’s what San Francisco is all about.

“Right now, I am partner in a private real-estate investment trust and we specialise in quality family housing apartments and condominiums. I am working on a project for the University of California to open a community for students and faculty and staff, for about 5000 people, about 128 acres, using cutting-edge sustainable design.

“The biggest drawback to living here is not having the family around. I left Melbourne (for New York) in ‘93, after hooking up with Jen, a 26-year-old law graduate, at a party in Sydney. I asked her where she went to university and she said NYU, as if I knew that NYU was one of the top schools. To an Australian, it could have been NYU or VB beer.

“Americans love Australians, so fitting in socially in New York was easy. Professionally, it was harder. The early ‘90s in New York was a really tough time to get a job in architecture. I didn’t have working papers and I’m going into interviews talking about RMIT, a place no one has ever heard of. On top of that, sitting on the desk are resumes from Harvard, Columbia and Oxford. I eventually got a job working on the refurbishment of Grand Central station. I went to NYU, did a masters in real estate, and worked for a not-for-profit housing developer.

“Being born in South Africa – we left Durban when I was 12 – I was more sensitive to black issues. When I first moved to the States, I’d see black women pushing white kids in strollers, and it reminded me of South Africa. It’s sometimes hard to communicate that to Americans.

“After our first child, Dahlia, was born, we moved to Melbourne. Living opposite the beach

in Elwood after living in Manhattan was like being on a different planet. I got a job consulting to the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, assisting them through their design and construction of Federation Square. It was really exciting. New York had been all about commercial risk and here was a government-funded project with no apparent concern about dollar return. As public architecture, it was great. It created a space for the people of Melbourne to enjoy.

“Jen never really bought into Australia. Wherever we are, there’s always one of us living in a place we don’t want to be. When we started out in New York, I was convinced there was some kind of magic formula to expat happiness, like alternating 1.5 years in Melbourne with 2.3 years in New York. There isn’t, but you make it work because you want to be together.

“We returned to the States in 2003, but not to New York – not after living in Melbourne. San Francisco has been a great compromise. It’s the perfect blend of urban life and outdoor lifestyle. I describe Mill Valley as my little bubble. It’s a world of wealth and beauty, completely insular from the real world. It’s a generous, concerned community but it’s devoid of poverty.

“We live about 25 minutes from downtown San Francisco, over the Golden Gate Bridge in preserved parklands. Mill Valley is surrounded by mountains. We can hike from our back door and there’s some premier mountain-biking terrain nearby. Sausalito is 10 minutes away, the surf at Stinson Beach is a 20-minute drive, and it’s three hours to the slopes at Tahoe.

“San Francisco is ‘New York-lite’. Instead of 100 theatres to choose from, you’ve got 30. There is a great live music scene and phenomenal food. Ten minutes from our house are the world’s best burritos, we have fresh seafood and, because one-third of the population is Asian, we have excellent sushi, Vietnamese, Burmese and Chinese food.

“There are things I miss about Melbourne, like driving down the peninsula for a surf. I have windsurfed here – there’s the Golden Gate Bridge, which is fun. It gets a little hairy because boats go dipping past and there are some pretty hairy winds and currents. I still think the best windsurfing I’ve had has been down at Point Ormond. And you can’t beat Melbourne coffee. I miss the Australian sense of humour, too. Australians can laugh at themselves and their country.

“The most important thing to me is my kids (Dahlia, 7, Marli, 5, and Sam, 1). They are half-Australian and I want them to feel comfortable in Australia so we visit their grandparents and cousins every year. I want them to be touched by that relaxed Australian attitude.”