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A Sense of Place



STORY P.J. BREMIER PHOTOS BARBARA RIES

Mill Valley home honors its past with unique blend of history and timeless spirit of international style.

"We never thought we'd ever live in just one place," says the owner of a restored Mill Valley hillside home. "It just wasn't our lifestyle. We've lived all over the world our entire lives and we always thought we'd have one place in San Francisco, another place in New York, and another one in Moscow. That was our plan."

Plans changed in 2001, though, when she and her husband both retired from dot-com careers and found their dream house on an acre high above downtown. "We didn't expect to fall in love with a place like we did," she adds. "And although we thought we might remodel, we never imagined that we would actually build a house. It wasn't in our realm of reality."

But when dreams and reality collided, there was only one choice: to lovingly honor this home's origins with an updated interpretation. "This house was a real showcase when it was first built," the husband observes.

"It deserved more than just a remodel. It deserved to be restored." The 5,000-square-foot contemporary Craftsman-style house had burned down at the turn of the last century, been rebuilt, and turned into five apartments during World War II. It was in clear need of a makeover.



Geoffrey Butler Architecture and Planning of Sausalito took the house down to its redwood frame, raised it up on a foundation, kept the original footprint, and referred to historical black-and-white photos to return the home to its earlier beauty. Those images were from "a chapter in a story that my clients wanted to rewrite for themselves," Butler says. "We had to create the story before we could start the architecture."

The ultimate goal of the two-year project, he adds, was to help the couple "realize their vision of a private sanctuary where they could be most happy in all aspects of their lives, including family, friends, and nature." The design directive: Reproduce the original spirit of the house using as many authentic materials as possible.

The owners supplied their personal list of must-haves: copper sinks; a beautiful fireplace with a hearthstone, and a red living room. Anything white was dismissed; but modern innovations such as solar panels, a whole-house water filtration system, and wiring for electronics and entertainment all made the cut. The underlying priority was an unrelenting commitment to quality materials and craft.

"We didn't have any budgetary constraints, which was great," the owner says. "We did what we wanted to do, we didn't make any compromises, and we used natural materials." A single old-growth redwood tree, felled more than 50 years ago and found abandoned in Mendocino by artisan sawyer and designer Evan Shively, supplied enough beautifully grained wood for the exterior trim, doors, and extra-long barn-shingle siding (true to the original exterior).



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Inside, five-inch-wide floor planks of dark mahogany ground the space, and energy is balanced by neutral-toned corridor walls leading into color-saturated rooms. "I knew that the clients, both being very visual and tactile, wanted a rich color scheme," says the architect's associate Julie Baker. "It's designed so that even the neutrals have an undertone of warmth."

That palette complements the couple's eclectic collection of furniture and art pieces from all over the world. In the living room are a chair, table, and wall hanging from Africa; two bronze figurines from the Ivory Coast; a desk from China; a gong from Burma; a coffee table from India; and sofas from Europe. The adjacent original ballroom is now a shared space for his exotic musical instrument collection and her painting studio.

In the kitchen, the clean, modern lines of mahogany cabinetry and unsealed slate countertops are a quiet counterpoint to the excitement of an upended peeled redwood log, which grandchildren clamber up to "tag" the ceiling. But there's no climbing on the inverted black acacia stump at the other end of the center island. Topped with a lovely circle of bay laurel, "it was supposed to be a chopping block," says the owner. "But when it was installed, it was so beautiful, we couldn't chop on it."



Although the couple has many photographs and paintings they could hang, the walls were kept free to provide negative space. “A lot of it is about the garden,” the husband says. “It’s so primal to the property. It’s living art that we can’t compete with.”

The property’s original garden was created by a Japanese gardener for Golden Gate Park; today, vestiges of his handiwork—a century-old rhododendron, wisteria, and Japanese maple—are incorporated into the new garden plan by Creative Waterways designer Ron Stotts. They happily coexist with lush plantings of azaleas, rhododendrons, ferns, and other lacy-leafed trees and shrubs in a setting that includes a pond-shaped swimming pool, a hidden spa, and a charming teahouse with a sauna inside.

“This garden is really peaceful from the minute you walk through it,” the owner says. “Even if we’ve just come back from the market, we feel that peacefulness. When it’s in bloom, it looks like Disneyland. It’s hard to believe that we live in a place so special.”

But even Disneyland doesn’t have the Dragon Wagon. This homemade camper shell, left by a previous inhabitant, slumbers gently in a lower garden. Restored and outfitted with a bed covered in colorful Russian fabrics, a wood-burning stove, a pair of chairs, and a collection of objects from the 1960s, it serves as a fun grandkids’ hideaway.

The biggest surprise on the property is the rooftop observatory. With the push of a button, the roof retracts; push another button, and a professional 14-inch telescope points to the sky. At night viewers can stargaze; by day, they can see spectacular storms flaring on the surface of the sun.

“Sometimes, we sit at the teahouse and just think of all the people who have visited this place,” the owner says. Since the restoration alone, that number is in the thousands; it includes friends, neighbors, and houseguests from across the globe; attendees of the various political fundraisers and business-networking parties the couple hosts; and groups of local schoolchildren invited to use the telescope.

It’s hard to imagine that the house, in its wonderful new incarnation, isn’t enjoying the company, too.