

Contemporary Courtyard

Overlooking San Francisco Bay, this house wraps around a protected courtyard that soaks up the sunshine

BY CHARLES MILLER



If you've got a ridge-top lot in the East Bay Hills overlooking Berkeley and San Francisco Bay, you've got two sure things: one of the most spectacular urban views in the country; and a prevailing wind so robust and reliable that a nearby science center installed a "wind organ" on the adjacent hillside. It howls here, folks. And yet the mild temperatures and crisp, ocean-washed air invite outdoor living if you can get out of the wind.

Creating a sheltered outdoor space was at the top of the list when architects Helen Degenhardt and Max Jacobson began their design for this house. It's for a Danish woman who appreciates architecture with clean lines. She wanted the house to be peaceful, quiet, and restful, but at the same time to invite delight at subtle colors and beautiful materials.

Layering the view

The owner values her privacy and likes to keep a low profile. The exterior reflects this, with frosted-glass windows



The rhythm of the rectangles. Honed bluestone tiles in the entry give way to bush-hammered bluestone pavers in the courtyard. In the distance, the spine of the San Francisco peninsula stretches across the horizon. Photo taken at B on floor plan.



POISED TO AGE GRACEFULLY

The house has an open, flowing character, with living, dining, kitchen, entry, and office spaces open to each other and sharing the central courtyard. The main floor is wheelchair accessible, and the path from the driveway to the courtyard serves as a wheelchair ramp to deal with the grade change. The basement was designed to accommodate a live-in caretaker if that need ever arises.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 3

Bathrooms: 3

Size: 3600 sq. ft.

Cost: \$485 per sq. ft.

Alternative energy: 4kw PV, solar hot-water preheat

Completed: 2010

Location: Berkeley, Calif.

Architect: JSWD Architects; Helen Degenhardt, principal architect, with Max Jacobson

Landscape architect: Hugo Larman

Builder: Jetton Construction



Photos taken at lettered positions.



Galvanized. Orderly edges finished in galvanized steel frame the house as corner moldings and door casings, and set the tone throughout the yard in the gates, handrails, and fences. In the courtyard, a downspout with a recirculating pump splashes water into a scooped-out boulder.



THE CORNER CONNECTION

At the kitchen/living room intersection, 8-ft.-tall commercial-grade aluminum sliding doors open the house to the courtyard. Transom windows on both sides of the 13-ft.-high living area gather daylight and extend views. A Louis Poulsen chandelier of concentric haloes floats over the sitting area. Photos taken at C and D on floor plan.

at the entry level in a facade of simple rectilinear shapes that step back from the street. The walls are clad with fiber-cement clapboards, painted white with just a hint of lavender.

It's a downslope lot, with the entry to the house on the middle level, the main floor. Just inside the front door, which is recessed into a sheltering notch in the east wall, the view hits you smack between the eyes. On the far side of the courtyard, you can look right through the living room to a view so distant and layered that the Bay Bridge is just the opening act (photo right, p. 44).

Seen from the dining area (photo left), the courtyard reads as an extension of the living room. It's a connection made more emphatic by the 8-ft.-tall sliding doors that open the corner by the kitchen. The southern courtyard boundary is sketched out with a planter box and a beam that ties the two wings together. A downspout that includes a recirculating pump does double duty as a fountain, bouncing water music around the courtyard and into the house.

The main floor is wheelchair accessible. A clever ramp negotiates the 3-ft. 9-in. elevation change from the garage to the main floor by way of a path that



leads from the driveway along the south side of the house to the courtyard (site plan and floor plan drawings, p. 45).

The lower level of the house contains the mechanical room, a full bath, and a pair of guest bedrooms. This floor was designed to be converted into a self-contained flat if a live-in caregiver is ever needed.

Balance the daylight

This house is flooded with daylight, but it isn't blasted by it. Instead, its architects used a combination of strategies to get light where they want it and to control it where they don't. Here's how.

Courtyard: This is the big idea in this house, and it serves its sheltering purpose by putting the living room's shoulder to the prevailing westerly winds. The courtyard is a calm oasis. Just as important, though, the courtyard's light-colored walls and paving stones bounce light into every room that opens to it.

Transom windows: Reaching to the top of the 13-ft. ceilings in

the living room, these windows grab more light and extend the views.

Skylights: Discreetly located out of sight, skylights deliver daylight to numerous focal points in the living room, kitchen, and guest bath.

Motorized shades: Exterior Mecho shades on all west-facing windows (including bedrooms above) are on a timer. They also can be on a light sensor, with a wind override: If the wind gets too strong, the shade retracts.

A recipe for serenity

A combination of materials, construction techniques, and design creates a striking sense of calm in this house. The entire building envelope was insulated with soy-based open-cell foam. Dense-Glass sheathing under the fiber-cement siding, along with sound batts in the interior partitions and floors, limits sound transfer. In the mechanical room, two layers of drywall attached to resilient channels mitigate the sound of pumps and the boiler.

The rectilinear lines of the windows, the doors, and the shapes of the rooms, all painted white, make an orderly canvas for understated hardware and elegant materials. There is little in the way of applied ornament. Instead, the parts of the house and their substance set the tone.

For example, the stairs are white-oak treads, flanked by aluminum railings that rise like a lustrous pipe organ for three floors (photo top right, facing page). In the kitchen, ash cabinetry, lightly stained to emphasize the swirling grain, is topped with dark-green slate counters and splashes (photo right). Drawer pulls are stainless and simple.

This same aesthetic is at work outside, where galvanized-steel bars, wire mesh, stuccoed concrete, carriage bolts, and cedar boards are arranged with uncommon grace into rugged fences, railings, and screens. □

Charles Miller is special-issues editor. Photos by the author, except where noted.

The topography of cabinets. Lightly stained, the open-grain patterns of flat-sawn ash swirl like the contours on a map of canyon country. They are topped with green slate counters and splashes. Photo taken at E on floor plan.



▲ STAIR AS SKYLIGHT WELL

The stair landing on the way to the upper level stops short of the north wall, creating a lightwell that reaches to the lower level. Photo taken at F on floor plan.

Muted light from an unseen skylight casts a soft glow across the glass-tile walls of the guest bath. Photo taken at G on floor plan.

▼ SHOWER AS SKYLIGHT WELL



A trailblazing approach to water use and reuse



Ready for the rain barrel. Domestic water needs are partially supplied by rainwater stored in this 2500-gal. tank.

Brent Bucknum of Hyphae Design Lab asks rhetorically, "Why pipe mountain spring water hundreds of miles to flush a toilet?" Good question. California is prone to droughts, and first-rate potable water should be reserved for higher purposes than sending sewage to the treatment plant.

The team that designed and built this house worked with Hyphae and the city of Berkeley's building department to comply with a brand-new code that allows rainwater-catchment systems for indoor use. This house is the first such residential project in Berkeley to receive a permit.

Rainwater from the roof is collected in a 2500-gal. tank buried at the base of the lot. The water is pumped through a series of filters and then into the house, where it is used to flush toilets and do laundry.

A gray-water system puts another round of usefulness into this water loop. Everything but the toilets and the kitchen sink drains into a "structured wetlands" consisting of a cast-concrete pond filled with gravel and planted with reeds that filter the water before it flows to an underground sump basin. From there, the gray water is pumped to various irrigation zones.

Bottom photo: courtesy of Jetton Construction

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