Tight Lot, Tighter Budget



In San Francisco, simple materials artfully arranged doubled the size of this small row house

BY ANDRE ROTHBLATT



before & after

This little row house in San Francisco's Bernal Heights was a transformation waiting to happen. A two-story addition (photo facing page) provides the house with a new living room and upstairs master suite. Photo taken at A on floor plan.



The sunny side of the house. *Just off the master bedroom, a rooftop deck makes good use of the space over the garage. Photo taken at B on floor plan.*

Designing and remodeling homes in San Francisco can be difficult for lots of reasons. The road to a building permit is arduous and complex, and neighborhood objections can be fierce. Given the city's hilly topography, just getting to a site can be tough. And as an architect, I have to balance the needs of my clients against the realities of zoning, design review and the high cost of construction in San Francisco, which can add another level of anxiety to the design experience. But this project was different: I finally found a house I could afford, and it had plenty of room for improvement. At last, I could be the client.

Room to grow up and out

My house is on the south slope of Bernal Heights, in a working-class neighborhood of houses representing a variety of architectural styles. The original house was a tiny two-bedroom cottage built in the 1940s (photo top right). It caught my eye for two reasons. First, it was a one-story house in a row of two-story houses. Second, it had an undeveloped front yard. In a way, I viewed this little house as a small vacant lot, affording me a fine opportunity to build a two-story addition in front. I would be adding what amounts to a brand-new house to the streetscape, and I wanted the house to look as though it belonged there without mimicking the older houses.

The collection of small homes that cling to this steep hillside has no defining architectural style. My house is, however, on a section of street where the houses alternate between flat roofs and gable roofs. To fit into this tempo, mine would require a flat roof. That was fine with me. A flat roof is consistent with the urban, modern home I had in mind.

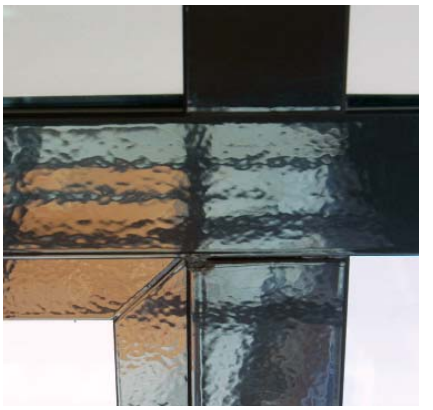
Keep it straightforward: outside

I wanted this house to be distinctive, and I didn't have a big budget. So I decided to keep things crisp and simple. The exterior is composed of rectangular shapes that step down the hill, following the slope of the street (photo facing page). On the uphill side, the parapet is slightly below the neighbor's roof. On the downhill side, it's a little above the adjacent house, creating a consistent progression.

I centered the entrance, dividing the house into two slender towers with the front door in the slot between them. I think

Top photo: Andre Rothblatt. Bottom photo: Charles Miller.





Commercial-grade aluminum window frames, powder-coated prior to glazing, add a sensuous texture to the minimal detailing.

this look gives the house a vertical assist and keeps it from seeming chunky and squat. The downhill tower is the original garage, reborn with a new skin and a rooftop terrace (photo bottom right, p. 75). The uphill tower is a two-story addition that includes a living room downstairs and a master suite upstairs. The new and the old are joined at the steps to the dining room, with the original house altered only slightly within its existing footprint (floor plans, p. 78).

Being a modernist at heart, I wanted the house to strike a note somewhere between stately and stoic: a contemporary home akin to an artist's loft on a small scale. Its simple shapes are finished in smoothly troweled stucco, painted buckskin tan, with industrial accents.

In such a simple facade, the windows become a key design element. In keeping with my industrial detailing, I chose commercial-grade aluminum windows with true divided lites (see "Sources," p. 79). Similar windows are used commonly in lofts and studios in San Francisco's South of Market area. This part of town used to be the manufacturing sector and now is being transformed into a mixed neighborhood of shops, offices, apartments and art studios.

I like the look of commercial windows from a distance. What I don't like is their metallic finish close up. They're just too cold. So I had the windows powder-coated. This finishing technology involves applying a combination of tiny resin and pigment particles to a surface. Once applied, the particles are fused in a curing oven to a durable finish. The sepia brown coating that I chose melted into a pleasing reflective glaze similar to a porcelain finish over steel (photo top right).

I made the windows as large as I could while still leaving enough wall structure to provide the stiffness needed to comply with seismic-code requirements.

Keep it straightforward: inside

As with the exterior, I kept the interior focused on simple materials and shapes played against one another. Most surfaces are wallboard, with wood accents. The sides of the stair, for example, are composed of Douglas-fir boards arranged horizontally with ½-in. reveals between them. These amber-colored boards continue around the room, turning the corner to become a cabinet beneath the stairs. The treads and risers are wenge, a chocolate-brown African hardwood harder than oak. The contrast between the two woods emphasizes the zigzag line of the treads marching upstairs (photo p. 78).

The kitchen and dining room operate in combination, separated by a low wall. On the dining-room side (photo facing page), the table is

Photo right: Charles Miller

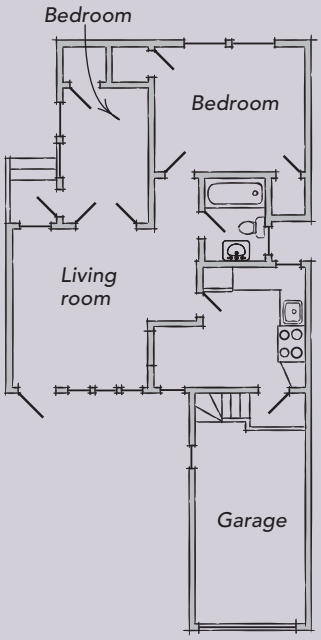


Centered daylight. *A splayed skylight well paneled with maple plywood is on axis with the dining table, creating a composition with an underlying order. Photo taken at D on floor plan.*

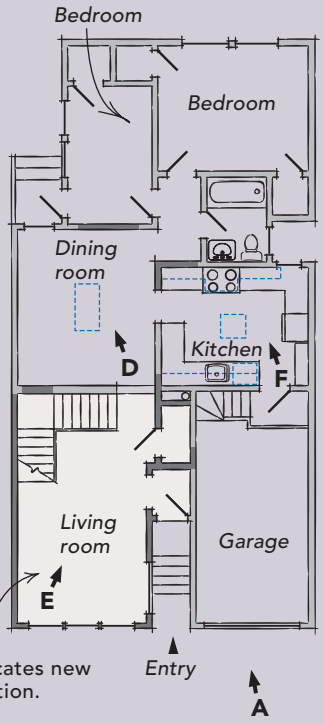
BUILDING ON THE ORIGINAL

Although transformed in appearance from the street, the original house is still in there, with an updated kitchen, some reconfigured walls and much-needed skylights. Unlike the original outdoor space, the deck on top of the garage gets plenty of sunshine.

Original house



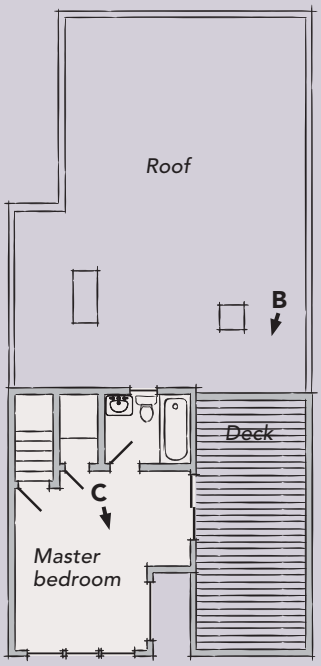
Updated first floor



Photos taken at lettered positions.

Tint indicates new construction.

Second floor



SPECS

Bedrooms: 3

Bathrooms: 2

Size: 1300 sq. ft.

Cost: $200 per sq. ft. (includes addition, kitchen and original bath)

Completed: 2002

Location:
San Francisco, California

Architect:
Andre Rothblatt

Builder:
Henry DeNicola, Excell Builders



Floor-plan drawings: Paul Perreault

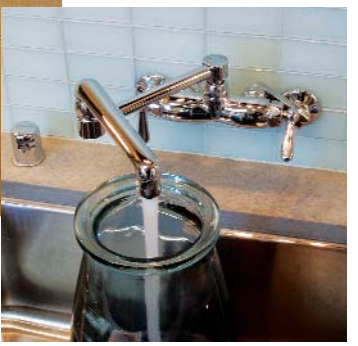




"I kept the interior focused on simple materials and shapes played against one another."

–Andre Rothblatt





More chrome and glass than an old Buick. *Glass tiles turn the backsplash into a restrained grid (photo right). The Chicago faucet can reach just about any corner of the sink. On the upper cabinets (photo above), L-shaped doors interlock in the middle. Photo taken at F on floor plan.*

Clean and crisp. *In the living room, bands of vertical-grain Douglas fir flank the stair, then turn the corner to panel the sides of the stereo cabinet. Photo taken at E on floor plan.*

placed under a splayed skylight well paneled in maple plywood. Cable lights span the well, allowing low-voltage pendant lights to be suspended over the dining-room table.

On the kitchen side, the upper cabinets feature L-shaped doors made of Sitka spruce and Douglas fir (photo left). Beneath them, sandblasted glass tiles from Ann Sacks create a cool backsplash in Coke-bottle green that's easy to keep clean.

Instead of purchasing a faucet at the pricey showroom, I decided to visit the local plumbing-supply company, where I could create a faucet from interchangeable parts exactly to my liking. I'm a longtime fan of Chicago faucets. They are constructed of high-quality durable materials and look great. I particularly like the wall-mounted models (inset photo below).

I selected H-arm model #445 as the mixer. This commercial-type piece seemed a more likely selection for a janitor's sink. It has a beefy, heavy-duty look that appealed to me. The spout is double-jointed (model #DJ13) and can be positioned easily and quickly to reach any corner of a sink.

The grand total

What did it all add up to? The final tally put the construction cost at just about $200,000, or a square-footage cost of around $200. I realize that in some parts of the country, that amount doesn't represent a tight-budget kind of job. But here in San Francisco, where kitchen remodels can run well over $100,000, my ultimate costs were relatively moderate. I was able to transform the existing cottage into a totally new house whose total area is about 1300 sq. ft. That's still a small house by most standards, but it sure manages to fulfill my dreams of having a house of my own. □

Andre Rothblatt is an architect practicing in San Francisco.
Photos by Ken Gutmaker, except where noted.

Sources

- Aluminum windows: Paramount Aluminum Co.; 510-832-2819; www.paramountwindow.com
- Glass tiles: Lake Garda by Ann Sacks; 800-278-8453; www.annsacks.com.
- Double-jointed faucet: Chicago Faucet; 847-803-5000; www.chicagofaucet.com

Photos this page: Charles Miller