

HOME & GARDEN

A Modern Patchwork in San Francisco

On Location

By DAVID KAUFMAN SEPT. 15, 2010

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San Francisco

THE Mission district here has long been a place for experimentation, from alternative lifestyles to artisanal cuisine. And that is the spirit in which Andrew Dunbar, 45, an architect, and his wife, Zoe Astrakhan, 43, a landscape architect, approached their 26th Street home.

Bought for \$350,000 in 2000, it now houses a growing family — the couple have two daughters, Anaïs, 7, and Miika, 4 — as well as the offices of Interstice Architects, their eco-focused design practice.

It took a decade, another \$350,000 and a foundation-to-roof renovation to get there, though.

“We didn’t have the resources to simply walk in and finish the home overnight,” Ms. Astrakhan said. “So we had to sink in and interact with the house — really become comfortable with the environment.”

Part of the challenge was finding a way to accommodate both work and living space.

Their solution was to turn the ground floor, a 1,100-square-foot commercial unit, into a home office (although it now sometimes doubles as the girls’ playroom). Its dominant feature is a 50-foot sliding wall that serves as a room divider; opening off it are the library, a storage space, a conference room and a small kitchen. Out back is a simple garden with a patch of native grasses and a slim swath of bamboo.

The street front of the office space is a patchwork of glass panes salvaged from local construction sites. “We liked the idea of absorbing the waste-stream into our assembly process,” Mr. Dunbar said. And it gives the facade “a Mondrian quality,” he added — something they have replicated in projects they have designed for others. (On the second level, the facade retains most of its period details.)

Upstairs is the living space: an open-plan communal area, a pair of bedrooms and a bathroom with an open-air light shaft and plastic walls (since “plastic is cheap and easy and 100 percent recyclable,” Mr. Dunbar said, and withstands exposure to the elements).



The main living room of Andrew Dunbar and Zoe Astrakhan’s house in San Francisco is a contrast between old and new.

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Brightly colored walls in the hallway are covered in magnetic paint, which allows them to serve as bulletin boards. (On a recent afternoon, one wall was filled with the magnetized letters that Mr. Dunbar, a Montreal native, is using to teach his daughters French.)

The furnishings are a child-friendly mix of midcentury Danish pieces collected by Mr. Dunbar's mother, with an ample dose of Ikea and several custom-designed items, including a podlike closet and a wall-mounted shelving system. "Our furniture choices really reflect either a level of historical significance or all-out performance," Mr. Dunbar said.

The highest-performing part of the house may be the smallest — the rooftop garden, which is outfitted with a hot tub and equipped with solar panels. It also provides the home with energy and the family with organic vegetables and, on warmer days, a place of refuge.

Although still a work in progress, the roof offers proof of how far Mr. Dunbar and Ms. Astrakhan have come in the last 10 years.

"Even in winter, we get all the heat we need just from the solar panels," Ms. Astrakhan said. "A major improvement, considering we didn't even have heat for the first two years we lived here."

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