

Building to One's Strengths / A trio of designers transform a cottage with sweat equity

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Photo: Cesar Rubio



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Marcel Wilson and Jennifer Carroll-Wilson, young landscape architects in their mid-30s, surmounted the challenge of finding an affordable home in San Francisco three years ago when they found a Spanish revival two-story cottage in Glen Park.

Within a few blocks of architect Jeremy Kotas' popular Post Modern constructions, their house, one in a row of buildings created in 1931, had been poorly remodeled by a former owner, but its grand Bay Bridge views made it bearable.

They soon found architect Andrew Dunbar, a California College of Art teacher whose wife, Zoe, used to work with Carroll-Wilson, to design the structure.

"There were goofy fireplaces, sponge painting and arches. It all had to be removed," says Dunbar. "We took it back to its bones and reframed, inset beams and added steel." In the process, although they did not alter the façade, Dunbar added a master suite in the rear of the top floor, a sunken living room in the middle and a workshop for the two designers in the expanded basement.

The stairs leading to the basement are narrow, so at Wilson's insistence they added a steel crane off the back deck to haul objects in and out of the workshop. To define the open-plan living space and raised kitchen, Dunbar designed a rolled-steel box between them that contains the fireplace and TV on the living room side and doubles as a counter and bar in the kitchen. Drawers on each side of the box contain firewood and emergency rations in case of an earthquake.

"That's the core of the project and the space unfolds from there," says Dunbar. "The lowest level has the greatest porosity, because a garage door opens the back of the house to the garden, the middle floor opens to the deck that overlooks the garden and views and at the top, where there is less outdoor space, the sky is let in through skylights."

Although Dunbar has worked as project architect on buildings for other Bay Area firms, this is the first project he has completed under his own banner.

Considering that Carroll-Wilson has a landscape practice, and a sideline making jewelry, and Wilson is a partner at the landscape design firm Hargreaves Associates, the design work for their home was "like a day at the office," says Wilson. "As clients we were more involved than an average homeowner. For us that was a prerequisite -- to be a part of the design."

But they resisted the temptation to design it themselves. "We had a great collaboration; doing it ourselves would not have been the smart way to work and we are glad we took our own advice," says Wilson. "It was easy for meetings to go too long because it was fun. Andrew would come with drawings and we would come with ours and we'd trade." Other architects, Wilson suggests, might think it was like bringing your own food to a restaurant.

"We could not afford full services," he says. So they built models, asked for do-it-yourself components and took on the finishing of cabinets, countertops and a wall of translucent polycarbonate and low-voltage lights alongside stairs to the new master bedroom. Most homeowners don't have such skills, but "my dad owned a hardwood lumber mill where I grew up in Indiana," explains Wilson. "I've always made things. To be separate from the making of one's own house is foreign to me."

Raimund Ferrara, who was in their contractor Structura's employ, was another secret weapon. He divulged many tips on how to finish things well, and although the two-story, 3,000-square-foot structure with its tough cement panel façade in back and hot-rolled steel floors in the living area is quite finished, Wilson's tinkering hasn't stopped. New plywood sheets and wood shelving are constantly brought in, carefully craned down and through the garden to be made into cabinets.

"The garden is something Jennifer and I really care about. It was overgrown but what sold us on it was a stream that bubbles up from the foundation each year," Wilson says. "We subtracted much, but what remains are a tea tree and rhododendron. We decided to keep those specimens and to insert a slender stairway between them from our back deck," says Wilson. Through this imaginary archway you are drawn into the yard by the light and the sight of a green lawn. "The backyard was also very sloped. To make the house structurally sound we had to excavate the basement and instead of hauling it all away we built a flat space for ourselves in the yard," says Carroll-Wilson. "That saved us a lot of money," she adds.

Another garden feature is a friendship gate they designed so the neighbor's daughter can enjoy the new lawn. "They have a lemon tree, so we thought we could share our resources," says Wilson. Besides, he and Carroll-Wilson like children and now have their own, a 2-month-old daughter.

She is one reason why the house got finished at all. "She was a big factor," says Wilson. "I worked on her room virtually till the day she arrived."