

HOME & GARDEN



A FAMILY HOME IN THE CITY

Creating space for a growing family

BY PAUL C. OKAMOTO

THE VIEW from Alamo Square, with its colorful Victorian facades, is classic San Francisco. But actually living in the historic homes on the post-cards is another story.

These homes were designed in more frugal times, when the average household had fewer belongings and made do with fewer bedrooms and bathrooms, less heat and light, and little more than a single coat closet.

Today's families want more than the rabbit warren of small spaces that make up the average Victorian flat. Many want master bedroom suites, separate bedrooms for their children, multi-car garages, home offices, game rooms, extra bathrooms and front and back yards. Those



A dark one-bedroom unit was transformed into a light and elegant two-story flat merging indoor and outdoor spaces.

who choose to stay in San Francisco rather than move to the suburbs have to get creative, usually with the help of an architect and contractor, to fit modern conveniences and add elbow room into apartments that average less than 1,000 square feet on city lots usually no more than 25 feet wide.

My firm, Okamoto-Saijo Architecture, worked with one Alamo Square family to address these design challenges, get the approval of neighbors and navigate the regulations imposed through the city's planning, building and fire departments.

Our clients wished to transform a dark, one-bedroom, lower unit into a light, elegant two-story unit with three bedrooms, two bathrooms and direct access to outdoor

living spaces. They were going to have their first child and needed more space and additional bedrooms. And they wanted a safe, clean, modern kitchen open to the adjacent living and dining areas for family-friendly activities.

They also hoped the remodel could bring more natural light into their ground floor apartment at the back of a four-story apartment building. And they wanted direct access to the rear yard where there was none.

To help meet all these goals, it made sense to design a new floor in an unused portion of the basement. Our final design nearly doubled the size of the apartment, creating a total of 1,450 square feet.

Once we established the schematic design, the next step was to get planning approval and a building permit.

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Complying with the city planning code presented several challenges, especially in determining how far to extend the new lower level into the rear yard. Our research revealed that we could extend the new living space 12 feet into the backyard and still meet the minimum rear yard setback requirements.

As a next step, we organized meetings with our client's neighbors. Even for remodeling projects that meet the planning code, neighbors must be notified of all residential additions in San Francisco. They have 30 days to respond with any concerns. One neighbor wanted to be sure the extension did not create too much shadow in his yard. We assured him the addition would be set back five feet from each side. Because there was no neighborhood objection to our project, city planners approved the project at the close of the 30-day notification period.

Gaining approval from the building and fire departments was another matter. Since the apartment building had an existing fire escape on the rear facade, the addition had to include a landing for the fire escape and then provide access to a new stair from the roof deck down to the rear yard. Most controversial was whether the fire department would require a new alley or hallway connecting the street to the rear yard, which



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A stairway leads from the deck to the back yard.

would have taken significant space in the new lower level of the unit. A pre-application meeting confirmed that there were already two means of egress throughout the apartment building.

Several construction challenges remained because of San Francisco's tight urban lots. We had to give careful consideration to the most optimal locations for new windows to add natural light and ventilation. Another challenge was the excavation for the new basement level, which had to be dug out entirely by hand.

To keep the building standing as we dug under it, we added an array of structural improvements, including concrete retaining walls, shear walls, composite lumber beams and steel channels added to existing wood beams.

Construction cost for the entire project was less than \$300,000, and the owners saved money by undertaking some of the interior finish work themselves.

Our clients moved in two months after their daughter was born. Their new ground floor apartment has all of the modern living conveniences and comfortably fits a family of three on two levels.

Upstairs they enjoy a great room with enlarged openings between the living, dining and kitchen areas, plus a new deck over the lower level addition. Their contemporary kitchen cabinets complement the old Victorian woodwork. Downstairs, they enjoy a more minimal look with a playful composition of windows and openings that frame the garden view outside. The deck's cable guardrails give a feel of openness to the rear garden, alternating with solid wall

sections to provide some sense of privacy.

The proof of the project's success is in the play of daylight that enters both levels of the apartment from dawn till dusk and in the feeling of serenity that comes from the visual connection to the rear garden.

"I am continually amazed at the closeness we feel to the yard and the natural world outside," says owner Egon Terplan. "When we're downstairs, we practically feel like we are in the garden itself because we have windows on three sides. And having a second level is heaven. It gives us much more freedom and flexibility when we are home."

Contrary to the stereotype, this project confirms that it is possible to create pleasant and comfortable housing for today's families in the heart of San Francisco.