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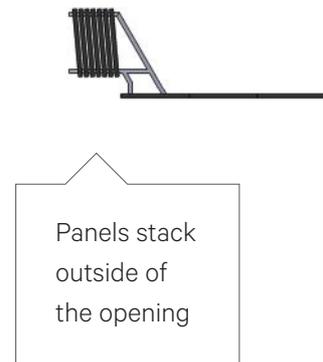
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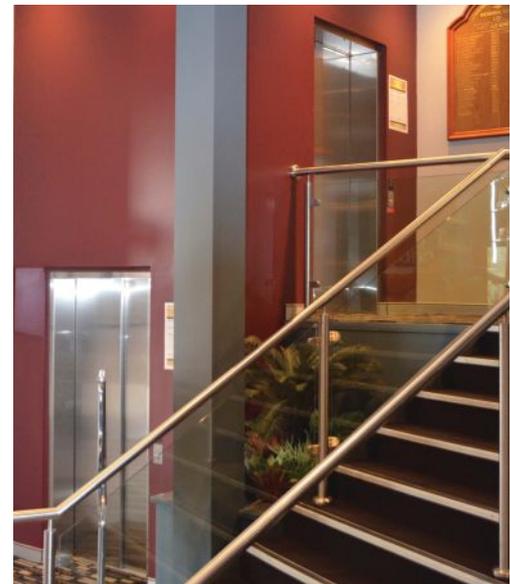
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Building for empty nesters

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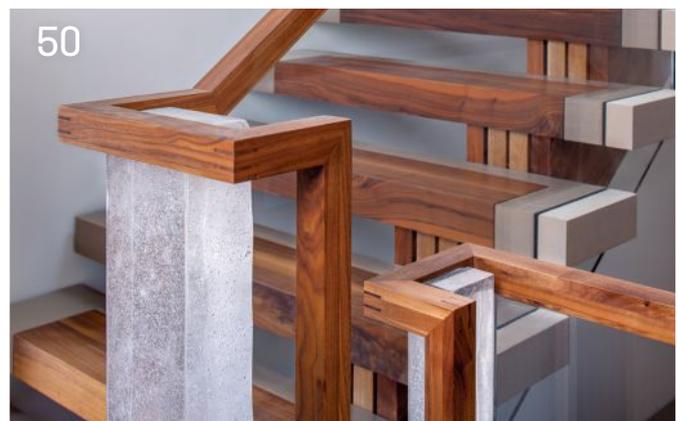
COVER: An Edmonton, Alberta, home by local firm Jillian Builders and Tucson, Ariz.-based Ibarra Rosano Design Architects meets the needs of owners in a new stage of life. Photo: Bill Timmerman

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Arlington Heights, IL 60005-5025
847.391.1000 • Fax: 847.390.0408

STAFF

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Denise Dersin
703.992.7640; ddersin@sgcmail.com

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Amy Albert
818.308.6648; aalbert@sgcmail.com

SENIOR EDITOR

Susan Bady
847.391.1050; sbady@sgcmail.com

SENIOR EDITOR

Mike Beirne
847.391.1051; mbeirne@sgcmail.com

CONTENT MANAGER

Ingrid Bush
202.780.9591; ibush@sgcmail.com

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Kate Carsella
847.954.7965; kcarsella@sgcmail.com

DESIGNER

Jazmin Huerta

GROUP DIRECTOR - PRINCIPAL

Tony Mancini
610.688.5553; tmancini@sgcmail.com

DIRECTOR OF SALES & DIGITAL

Adam Grubb
941-518-2395; agrubb@sgcmail.com

DIRECTOR OF EVENTS

Judy Brociek
847.954.7943; jbrociek@sgcmail.com

SENIOR AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

Deborah Byrne

CREATIVE SERVICES COORDINATOR

Dara Rubin

MARKETING MANAGER

Nancy Lewis
847.558.2189; nlewis@sgcmail.com

SUBSCRIPTION INQUIRIES

Circulation Department
Custom Builder
3030 W. Salt Creek Lane, Suite 201
Arlington Heights, IL 60005-5025
circulation@sgcmail.com

REPRINT COORDINATOR

Adrienne Miller
847.391.1036; amiller@sgcmail.com

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EMPTY NESTS

Last year Zillow reported that more than 15 percent of American households are empty nests. As the silver tsunami continues to swell—and as many of us attempt to ride it—that number will grow. This month’s cover story looks at two homes designed for clients embarking on a scaled-down stage of life.

Contributor Cheryl Weber, who wrote “Home Alone” (page 10), had her own experience as an empty nester confirmed in the reporting. Weber and her husband deliberately downsized when their second daughter went off to college. Many of Weber’s ideas about what was most desirable for her own downsizing dovetailed with what she observed in profiling two new homes for empty nesters: one in Oregon, and the other in Alberta province, Canada.

How is designing for downsizers different? “Empty nesters don’t want to be knocking around in a big house,” Weber observes. “There’s some space for guests, but it’s not for having all the children come at once.” Each home has at least one guest bedroom, plus overflow space meant to be shared. “The main living spaces become a top priority,” Weber says, “ancillary spaces less so.”

What surprised Weber was that both homes are on two floors. “You always think about empty nesters wanting one-floor living,” she says, adding that architect Nils Finne said his clients “are looking forward to the stairs helping them stay strong and active into old age.”

Indeed, life’s changing stages and aging in place were top of mind in the design of both projects. Sleep becomes more of a challenge as we grow old, but recent research shows that sufficient exposure to daylight can help counter insomnia. Sure enough, both homes boast abundant natural light. In the Alberta house, the stairway becomes a light well. In the Oregon house, an interior courtyard permits light to travel through the home and offers clear sight lines throughout the house, which maximizes its riverside perch.

Empty-nester clients have often had long and accomplished careers, Weber notes. “Adding a piece of that to the house is important,” she says. The Oregon home features a ceiling sculpture designed by Finne, the assembly of which the builder was hesitant to tackle. But the homeowner, an engineer with a woodshop, know-how, and spare time, put the sculpture together himself, engaging in the project and trimming the budget. “Sometimes opportunities are greater when you have clients in that demographic,” Weber notes. “You can get around budget restrictions and add something extra.”

Amy Albert
aalbert@sgcmail.com

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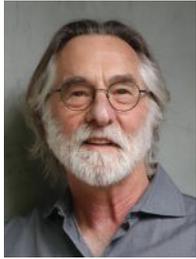
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LANDSCAPING ADDS VALUE

On designing a great outdoor program and making sure it gets built

By Rob Pressman

After 40 years in business, I've seen it too many times: Landscape design, perceived as a finishing touch, falls victim to tight budgets. But exceptional landscaping gives any project a distinct advantage. As densities increase, a smart landscape program unlocks even greater potential, transforming scarce open space into a rich asset.

Landscaping needs to be brought into the discussion early in the design process—as soon as there's a preliminary floor plan and a general site plan developed by the architect. That's because responsible landscape design will influence both of those. Landscape architects develop critical relationships between the interior and exterior, addressing issues that neither the homeowner nor architect consider because their focus is elsewhere. We are trained to examine those linkages and integrate them into the overall design.

There's a balance between respecting the architecture and honoring client wishes. I always present what I consider the best and most appropriate landscape design, taking into account budget and site constraints, client objectives, and the design elements of the house. But I remain flexible should the client—whether a homeowner or developer—disagree with our concept. There's always an alternative solution, and as the design goes through its iterations and refinements, an

acceptable answer can always be found. The first pass at a design is rarely the version that is ultimately constructed.

Coordination with the architect and the interior designer is key. These team members can interpret the client's wishes, especially since they are typically involved before we enter the picture. We try to respond to or reflect the other designers' intentions in the landscape, resulting in a fully integrated, comprehensive product. The other designers' buy-in to the landscape plan is crucial.

Here are questions to ask in choosing a landscape architect:

Is she or he experienced in getting projects built? It's essential for the landscape architect to see that constructability and budget affect the design.

Brilliant concepts are worthless if they aren't buildable.

Does the landscape architect have skill in hardscape and softscape? If not, you risk ending up with an unbalanced project.

Is the price reasonable? Find someone whose price is competitive but who isn't the least expensive option—unless, of course, they meet all of the other criteria.

Finally, new products and technologies—permeable pavers, stabilized decomposed granite, and the use of commercial materials



in residential applications—have changed the business of landscape architecture. Interest in drought-tolerant plants, smart irrigation systems, and hardscaping has transformed landscape design. Expectations for outdoor living are evolving. Find a landscape architect committed to creating beautiful environments that accommodate evolving lifestyles.

Rob Pressman is president of TGP Inc., a full-service landscape architecture firm in Burbank, Calif.



A modern home in Bend, Ore., by Seattle-based architect Nils Finne and builders Tim and Trevin Duey, clad in corrugated metal and red cedar, met the constraints of a tight riverside lot and the desires of a couple embarking on a new phase of life.



PHOTO: BEN BEINSCHNEIDER

HOME ALONE

For empty nesters, the world of design is their oyster

By Cheryl Weber

Empty-nester homes offer clients a rare chance to make a space-efficient dwelling that checks only their own design boxes, without having to consider the competing needs of children. These clients are in a unique position to take all of the opportunities good design has to offer. And, as the following two projects show, the homes often connect with nature in a deeper way.

RIVER VIEW

The town of Bend sits in the high desert of central Oregon along the Deschutes River, a magnet for water lovers. Architect Nils Finne's clients, Bob and Deborah, deemed it the ideal place to retire, and the outdoorsy Portland transplants asked the Seattle architect to create a light-filled home that takes advantage of its perch 25 feet above the river. The 2,945-square-foot house offers a sense of prospect and refuge, and its wall-size doors are an open invitation to the river.

"During summer I'd call it a highway of water fun," Finne says of this stretch of river. "There's a flotilla of inner tubes, rafts, canoes, swimmers, and paddleboarders; it's quite the scene."

Finne managed to make something poetic out of the site's constraints, which include a narrow 50-foot-wide by 119-foot-long lot, a volcanic rock outcrop and precipitous slope to the river, and close neighbors on both sides. The

clients got a variance to push the house about 7 feet into the front setback to keep the rock outcrop exposed in the back and maintain a more deferential relationship to the river.

With the street on the west side and the river to the east, the house wraps around a south-facing landscaped courtyard, which scoops direct light into the center of the transparent living space. A long, skinny, two-story volume runs along the northerly edge—a datum line for the lower modules placed against it. This long volume, clad in horizontal corrugated metal, cantilevers the farthest toward the river. It houses one of the two garages, a corridor, and the kitchen on the first level; and two bedrooms, a laundry, and the master bath upstairs. The abutting red-cedar-clad lower volumes face each other across the courtyard, with the massing on the street housing another garage and the entryway, and the river-facing volume containing the kitchen and living room downstairs, and the master bedroom and study above.

The volumes and their wavy roof-lines, like cut-apart ribbons, keep the house from overwhelming the narrow lot. "These ribbon-like volumes create a stronger sense of scale," Finne says, "and the undulating roofs suggest the flow of the river."

As on the exterior, interior materials are skillfully crafted and used in unexpected ways. There is a 1 ½-foot elevation change from the front to the back,



“It’s a highway of water fun,” says architect Nils Finne of a stretch of the Deschutes River in Bend, Ore., where his clients chose to retire. Built on a steep site and a volcanic outcropping of rock, the home’s design maximizes its relationship to the river.

which results in generous 12-foot ceilings in the living spaces. This allowed Finne to suspend two undulating wood panels, which echo the river beyond, from the ceiling over the kitchen island and in the living room. They’re also a curvaceous foil to the boxy living and dining areas. “I often create living spaces with a sculptural roof form when there is no second floor above the living area,” he says. “Because I couldn’t do that—the master bedroom is above the living room—I introduced panels that drop down and form a sculptural river landscape that ripples above you when you’re sitting in those spaces” (see page 14).

The two fireplaces, in the living room and the upstairs study, share a chimney and a vocabulary of local stone and steel. The stones’ horizontal cut ties into the horizontality of the house, and their earthy colors reflect the high desert region. A local steel fabricator, Ponderosa Forge, made the sculptural fireplace mantels and the blackened steel staircase. Another local company, Eco Crush, made the kitchen counters out of a terrazzo-like cementitious matrix with pieces of embedded glass.

Finne kept the glass theme going on the sapele mahogany kitchen island, which contains a display case made of low-iron

textured glass. “Behind that glass we have some LED lighting, so the glass case glows like a piece of ice,” Finne says, and the kitchen backsplash is a variegated glass tile.

During construction, the riverfront lot made staging difficult. “There were some big steel members in the great room and roof on the river side of the house, and we had to erect everything by hand because we couldn’t get machines in to do that,” says Tim Duey, who built the house with his brother, Trevin Duey (they now have separate companies). “We had to dump our lumber up front. The most difficult part was organizing the front end of the house and carrying all the wood to the river to build it.”

Empty nesting touches on a range of home design issues, one of which is how much exterior maintenance retirees are willing to do. Finne’s affinity for wood prompted a frank discussion about upkeep with his clients. “They were comfortable with the idea that they’d have to monitor and maintain the stain,” he says. “It made it more palatable that half of the house is covered in metal.”

And if an active lifestyle is the key to aging well, the riverside house is the perfect vessel for these empty nesters. “Bob and Deborah are

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AT RIGHT: Architect Nils Finne's ceiling design features virtuoso woodcraft that's executed using the latest technology. The plywood ceiling sculpture—a nod to the river on which the house is sited—brings cohesion and flow to the open plan.

very outdoors-oriented, from skiing to canoeing to hiking," Finne says, "and the outdoor environment is very much integrated into this house."

COLD COMFORT

Most empty-nest projects have a mandate to downsize. They're laser-focused on creating just-so spaces where the owners will spend most of their time and letting gratuitous square footage go. That was the case for Tucson, Ariz.-based Ibarra Rosano Design Architects, whose clients were Canadians who planned to retire to Tucson, where they spent their winters. The clients are both pilots, and Ibarra Rosano had proposed a strongly horizontal house in Tucson, called Desert Wing, which focused on distant views, with a curved roof swooping out like an airplane wing, providing shade in the hot desert climate.

That plan was scrapped when the reality of giving up Canadian health care set in and the clients reluctantly embraced plan B: building on the lot they owned next door to their existing Edmonton, Alberta, residence. With the region's long, gray winters, "the big issue was getting maximum light into the house because of the tall evergreens and relatively close neighbors—the opposite of working in the Sonoran Desert," says the firm's principal architect Teresa Rosano. The one commonality between the two plans, however, was their space efficiency. "We concentrated on the main living space where they spend all their time, and the outdoor patio," Rosano says. "The master bedroom is simple and the two guest rooms are relatively spare."

The design played out as two stucco volumes with a vertical Cor-Ten steel-clad connector that delivers a constant glow to the living spaces. "The home's form had a lot to do with bringing in light and having that light in the places they use the most," Rosano says. The main living spaces, including a patio and deck, unspool along the south and east, while the garage is on the north,

NEW WAVE



The undulating ceiling panels that connect the dining room and kitchen offer a contrast to the box-like nature of the spaces. The panels, suspended from the ceiling by aircraft cables, are 6 feet long and 3 ½ feet wide. Architect Nils Finne, principal at Finne Architects, in Seattle, sketched out the pattern, modeled it in 3-D, and created an elaborate instruction manual showing where to cut each piece. The 60 unique slats were cut from a sheet of veneer maple plywood using a computer numerical control (CNC) machine and mounted 2 inches apart on perpendicular runners that thread through the slats, bending up and down to follow the contours. Finne's client, a civil engineer, picked up the numbered pieces from the milling shop in Portland, drove them to the house, put them on the floor, and assembled them himself. "I've never had a client who was as technically capable as Bob," Finne says.

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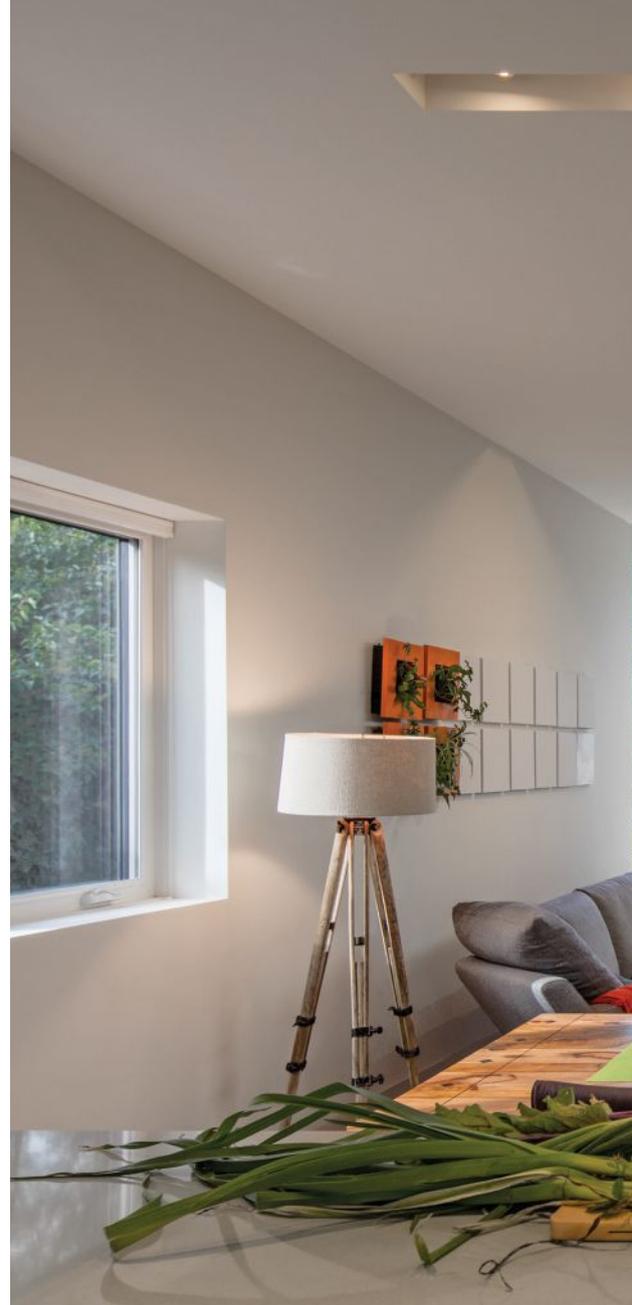
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Aging in place was top of mind for the owners of this modern home in Alberta by Ibarra Rosano Design Architects and Jillian Builders. Living areas and the master suite are on the main floor, with guest quarters above. The design can accommodate the later addition of an elevator, if needed.

where winter storms come from. The central entry hall/stairwell connector has high clerestories on the south side that bounce light down, even to the basement, which contains the geothermal mechanicals and a playroom for visiting grandchildren.

With the living areas and master suite on the main floor, the clients have the option of aging comfortably in place. And although the entry is a few steps higher than the street, a lift could be incorporated from the garage to the house, if necessary. Because of deep setbacks on all sides of the 75-foot-by-128-foot lot, Rosano stacked two guest rooms and a bath over the garage, stepping them back from the front

façade in keeping with the neighborhood scale. Other homes in the neighborhood also have flat roofs, which surprised the architect.

“We assumed a sloped roof made more sense in the snow, but that’s not necessarily so because the snow can serve as an insulator,” says Rosano, whose team designed a flat structure calculated for snow loads and drifts. Exterior stucco is as common in Alberta as it is in Arizona, but “it’s different from what we have in Arizona,” she says. “Theirs isn’t painted and has sand in it with sparkle.” Cor-Ten steel on the connector and garage doors contrasts with the stucco while being durable, low-maintenance, and relatively affordable, she adds. Builder Derek Deibert, president of Jillian Builders, in Edmonton, fitted the garage doors with heavy-duty commercial hardware to handle the added weight.

The frameless corner windows in the kitchen and living room presented another challenge throughout design and construction. “They had to be shored up for three weeks while we waited for the



ICF [insulated concrete form] exterior walls to fully cure because there was no structural support for the weight of the roof in the corner,” Deibert says. Those windows bring sunlight and views into critical places, but also control privacy. “The kitchen looks out onto the suburban street, and rather than put a predictable window in the center of the kitchen looking out to the neighbor’s front door, we put windows on the corners so you’re seeing the cedar trees in the neighbor’s yard,” Rosano says. In the living room, the corner window became the husband’s favorite spot for reading the paper, drinking coffee, and soaking in the light and warmth, she adds.

The home’s interior material palette is pale and understated, to reflect light, with pops of color from art, furnishings, and the kitchen’s bright green, back-painted glass backsplash. Flooring on the main level is radiant-heated colored concrete, while the cabinetry and second-story flooring is white oak. Over-troweling the concrete floors when they were almost hard created a marbled effect, Deibert says.

Throughout design and construction, both builder and architect benefited from the client’s metalworking expertise. His company makes drilling rigs, and he has an extensive metal shop, so he and his employees fabricated most of the metalwork, including the stair structure. Its oak treads, cable railings, and open risers make the compact house feel more expansive. “He was an excellent inventor and problem-solver,” Deibert says. “There were a lot of items that needed to be custom-built or designed from scratch. We would simply meet on site with a pad of graph paper and figure things out.”

While this house is quite different from the defunct Desert Wing design, it addresses similar issues of protection from extreme elements. Whether you’re shaded by an elegant roof in the desert or soaking up the winter sun in Canada, that visceral sense of comfort is a hallmark of A+ architecture—and a quality everyone understands. **CB**

Cheryl Weber writes about architecture and design.

SYNCING GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Custom home builders share how managing client expectations can eliminate drama and create a better customer experience

By Mike Beirne, Senior Editor



You vetted the prospects and screened them for all the red flags you can imagine. You liked them, liked their project, and you ultimately decided to take them on as clients. But what if they're walking into the relationship thinking their Lexus-type budget for the project will get them an Aston Martin kind of house, with burnished-looking Venetian plaster walls, gleaming Calacatta marble counters, and bleached, wire-brushed hardwood floors—while you bid them for drywall with four coats of finish, granite, and flooring with one coat of stain and three coats of polyurethane? If customers are expecting a higher level of product that is far above what the builder, based on the client's budget, delivers, the mismatch will result in a bad experience for the buyers and unfavorable reviews for the builder.

Setting expectations is an important early phase in what will be a journey of several months to a year—or longer—constructing the client's dream house.

Doing so can create the best possible home construction experience, where clients are engaged, conflicts are minimized and resolved, and builders ultimately delight their customers by meeting and even exceeding expectations.

"Setting expectations is an ongoing process that starts from the first meeting and continues well after the house is finished," says Donald Farinelli, president of Farinelli Construction, in Mechanicsburg, Pa. "Building a custom home is the ultimate service business because it spans all sorts of disciplines. You're in sales, you're estimating, you need a warranty for your product, and you're doing it all on a level that will be one of the largest purchases that anyone will ever make."

SEEING IS UNDERSTANDING

Building a dream home should be fun for customers, but the experience can get bogged down by the process of making all of the product selections and myriad other decisions that can pile up, confuse, and, ultimately, end up preventing the builder and client from being on the same page. One way to keep both parties in sync is to be visual.

Farinelli's team urges clients to save every image—whether digital or from a magazine—and to stuff it into an idea book or keep it in a Houzz account, then share it with the designers and project managers. "We tell clients to save photos that they think are cool," Farinelli says, "and to note on the photo what they think is cool. It's one of the best ways for us to learn what someone is all about."

Even better, Farinelli says, is to have clients see homes he previously built. John Ricci, president of Ricci Construction Group, in Cheshire, Conn., uses the site walk with clients to not only stake out where the septic, utilities, and sports courts are to be located, but to keep clients excited about what living in their dream home will be like. He'll talk about how the driveway will be sloped so they can get the best view when they approach the house. He'll explain how the home will be positioned so the west wind will prevent mold spores from collecting in the structure and how he can deliver for the client who sleeps on the right side of the bed and wants the winter moon shining on her face as she slumbers.

"The winter moon, being able to read by the northern light ... it's all fun for me, and I don't find any of it silly. It's their dream home," Ricci says. "Having the house positioned where you are taking advantage of all the environmental characteristics is very important. What the glacier did here 2 million years ago is extraordinary. I look at Connecticut as a place that has conditions that don't exist everywhere, and you have to take advantage of that if you're really homing in on making this process as wonderful as possible for the client."

Along with getting his customers excited about their home, Ricci also uses site visits and preconstruction sessions to explain things such as what he'll do to guarantee a dry basement; how he'll protect the homeowner's health by

exhausting radon; and why having separate propane lines for the heat/stove and for the generator is a best practice.

“Reviewing that level of detail gives clients a sense of comfort and solidifies their confidence in you,” Ricci says. “You have to explain yourself and do it in a manner where they know you’re looking out for their best interests.”

Clients’ lack of experience and familiarity with the process of building their first house could manifest itself in discontent down the road if they become overwhelmed by all of the decision-making or wonder why custom home construction takes longer than a production-built house. Reminding clients early on that you’re on their side during this long process is part of setting expectations at Carnegie Homes & Construction, in Houston.

“Customers are very excited in the early stages, and that’s when I tell every homebuyer that there is going to be some moment during this process when you’ll want to wring someone’s neck. At some point, you’re going to be frustrated,” says Arpan

Gupta, Carnegie’s president. “I’ll say, ‘I want you to remember this (preconstruction) moment and how good we feel right now.’ You’re still dealing with the same people. Whether it was a paint color that needed changing or something didn’t look the way you wanted, we all have the same goal. We’re all good people. We just need to take a step back and find the best solution.”

During preconstruction, Carnegie clients are given a 15-page manual that outlines what happens during each phase of the project and what is expected of them at each stage regarding selections and deadlines. So as not to overwhelm clients, Carnegie breaks up the preconstruction process into several meetings, the first being the introductory session to go over the manual.

“Just like studying for med school, you have to break up studying into multiple sessions because you can’t absorb it all at once,” says Gupta, who changed careers from medical school to home building.

Clients get a preview of the subject matter that will be covered at the next meeting and are provided material so they can prepare for that session, which takes place a week or two later. Some builders urge clients to have all of their selections completed before the foundation is poured, but Gupta believes buyers can be overwhelmed by that approach. Instead, Carnegie handles selections in phases, with one group of features picked before pouring the foundation, another group finalized before framing, and another chosen by the time the drywall arrives.

“We give clients time to walk their home, see how it feels, and how they are going to use it. We get good feedback that way, and people enjoy the process because they don’t feel overwhelmed,” Gupta says. “Five years ago we used to give customers a 20-page selection book and try to go through the whole thing. They’d go through it but wouldn’t feel good about it, and we were getting emails a few days later because they would be second-guessing their choices.”

Anthony DeRosa started a custom home building company in 2008 with a staff composed of just himself and his business partner, both running jobs in the field and managing the office. They were very busy, but the setup worked because clients back then merely signed off on

documents and let the architect take care of the details. “It was the nature of things because the meetings were shorter and much easier to navigate,” DeRosa says.

Today clients are more involved. The Internet is an easily accessible well of images and information about new-home construction, architecture, and décor. When buyers see a Pinterest post of a family room,

an alcove, or a stairway they like, they demand it. Also, the number of vendors and suppliers for tile, plumbing fixtures, and cabinets has exploded from the handful of outlets and showrooms that existed when DeRosa started building homes, so clients now have more opportunity to see what potentially can be in their dream home and be more hands-on with planning.

Consequently, DeRosa Builders, Anthony’s second and current company, which he co-owns with his brother, Michael, in Greenwich, Conn., staffed up to meet clients’ needs.

“Now we have an office manager who follows the tracking and ordering of supplies and shipments,” DeRosa says. “We have a senior project manager who is at every meeting of each of our the jobs. She helps clients with all the selections and uploads everything into the software. She keeps us organized across the board. We have three or four site guys who stay on site all of the time, watch the progress of the job, make sure the notes from the project manager are being implemented on the jobsite, and ensure we’re staying on schedule.”

Another upgrade involved implementing CoConstruct. The project management software includes a tutorial so that even clients can use it. Clients receive weekly text message reminders about approaching deadlines and the schedule status. They’ll see the schedule pushed out when rain days occur and receive an alert when the antique finish porcelain bathroom tile they selected is delivered

“SETTING EXPECTATIONS IS AN ONGOING PROCESS THAT STARTS FROM THE FIRST MEETING AND CONTINUES WELL AFTER THE HOUSE IS FINISHED.”

— DONALD FARINELLI, PRESIDENT,
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to the jobsite. To approve change orders, they simply sign on their smartphone screen with their finger, and the additional cost is added to the bottom line total for the project.

“We’ve done projects with 80 change orders, and this tool allowed us a lot of freedom, providing easy tracking and also updating the client,” DeRosa says. “We used to have a daily log on the jobsite that the super would sign and note if it was raining or when a delivery arrived. CoConstruct delivers a lot of our bad news—about rain delays and the cost of change orders—and keeps everybody on the same page. Our clients—particularly Millennials—love that they can open their phones and see exactly where they are with their finances, when a payment was made, and the check number. I used to have to reconcile that stuff at the end of a job, and it would take me hours. The tracking is great, and there are far fewer questions, so now we can focus on the build and the quality of the build.”

DELVING DEEPER

Look books are part of the process at Hemingway Construction, but clients also are asked to bring images of what they don’t like. Peter Sciarretta, CEO of the Greenwich, Conn., builder, finds that customers often have an easier time articulating what does not appeal to

them than they do explaining why they like something. An image of a kitchen or a façade may look great because the lighting was good, but their opinion of that photo doesn’t really reveal details about their preferences for architecture and décor. “The photos of what they *don’t* like tell me more about what they actually like than does a photo of what they like,” Sciarretta says.

Another method he uses to discover clients’ expectations is asking how they want to grow into their new home. Those answers don’t come by asking, “How big a house do you want? How many rooms should it have, and do you want an open floor plan?” Rather, he’ll ask if they have adult kids whose families will need space to stay, so summer may be more like coming home for them than going on vacation. Do they have aging parents they eventually could take in who will need an accessible bathroom—but one that’s aesthetically consistent with the original construction, not a renovation? He also asks how do they live? What are their hobbies? Is exercise important for them? Do they play cards? Does their daughter take ballet?

Sciarretta meets clients in their current home to see how they live because photos of what they think they like don’t tell the whole story. During one visit, he observed a father and son sitting on the floor playing chess. While touring the children’s bedrooms with

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another client, he saw playing cards spread out on the edge of a bed as the mom lamented that the family rarely finishes a game because when they take a break for dinner and leave, the cards are disheveled upon their return.

How fantastic an opportunity if a room, a niche, or even an alcove could be dedicated to space accommodating those activities. For the father-and-son chess players, Sciarretta had the architect design a space—with chairs—around the dimensions of a chess board. He accommodated the card and game players by extending out from the family room to add a niche that otherwise would have been a continuation of the exterior wall with windows.

“These are things our clients do every day but never thought they could have a special place for. That’s how I get my custom clients to allow me into their lives and put them into spaces they didn’t even think were on their wish lists,” Sciarretta says. “They thought they just wanted the open floor plan with big windows over the kitchen sink. My favorite part is when, later, the clients send a photo of the father and son playing chess or the daughter using the ballet barre we put in. Those are photos of things we talked about on day two but which the clients never thought would actually be part of their home. Those are the things I try to accomplish as a responsible builder and designer who makes an effort to get on the same page as the client.”

ALIGNING FINISH WITH BUDGET

Tim Hensley has been building for 33 years and finds that he spends more time today setting client expectations about the project and how both parties will communicate. The president of Hensley Custom Building Group, in Loveland, Ohio, explains up-front that questions and other requests will receive a response within 24 hours. That means a reply won’t always be instantaneous, except in case of an emergency, and will occur during business hours, not at night. Hensley employees will update clients on schedule changes due to weather, selections delays, and subcontractor availability.

To align product expectations with budget, Hensley shows prospects photos of finished homes, including such details as imperfections in drywall, so he can point to and illustrate the different levels of finishes available by price point.

“If you’re delivering one level and the client is expecting another, then somewhere in the preliminary planning or the selections process, you didn’t give the right explanation or make the right

promises. That’s one of the things that can lead to disagreements. Setting these expectations up-front has helped,” Hensley says.

Sometimes the vision of the dream house that clients have doesn’t match the reality of what the plan specs say they’re getting or what they intend to spend. Sciarretta recalibrates those expectations by “going back to the basics,” he says. By the third client meeting, he’ll invite the client to go for a drive, during which they’ll visit three Hemingway homes, all with equal quality of construction but with different levels of finishes.

“I’ll say, ‘This house cost X dollars per square foot.’ Then I’ll take them to another house, show it, and tell them, ‘This is Y dollars

per square foot,’ and so on,” Sciarretta says. “We’ll stop at three, and I’ll let them see what they get for the money. So then they may say ‘OK, I only wanted to spend X dollars per square foot, and now I understand what X gets me. Now that I understand, I probably want to spend Y because that’s the level of finishes I want.’”

— TIM HENSLEY, PRESIDENT,
HENSELY CUSTOM BUILDING GROUP

As clients see each house, Sciarretta introduces them to

the homeowner and then steps outside so the customers can have a private conversation and ask the owner about what it was like to have Hemingway Construction as the builder.

CHANGE ORDERS

Change orders (COs), depending on how they’re handled, can knock the shared expectations forged between builder and customer during preconstruction out of alignment. “People don’t realize that it really does cost a lot of money to make a change,” Farinelli says. “You have to stop what you’re doing, make the phone calls, get the orders out into the field. It’s almost like doing everything twice.”

All of the builders interviewed for this article say they strive to meet with clients at least weekly so they can show the home’s progress. These sessions are opportunities to answer questions and keep clients excited about their project. They’re also often the time when clients see something they don’t like and want it changed, such as getting a different foyer window instead of the one specified in the plan and already installed. In such cases, Ricci will immediately submit the order for their signature.

“If they change it on Monday, the clients get that change order Monday afternoon, and we need a decision no later than Tuesday,” Ricci says. “We like to get paid for the COs as they take place. We don’t tally that up and collect it at the very end.”

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Change order requests are also an opportunity to educate. If a client wants a knee wall that's not in the original plan and thinks the change is a small \$1,000 framing and finish job, DeRosa sees his role as explaining all that's involved: buying and installing casing, trim, and a decorative cap, and bringing in a framer, drywaller, painter, and an electrician because code requires an outlet—ultimately showing why the order costs \$5,000.

No matter what system is used, quick turnaround and documentation are best practices with change orders. Sciarretta immediately follows an order request with an email to the client briefly outlining the request, the time and date the conversation occurred, and what's involved to make that change. A price for the change order is submitted for review within 24 to 48 hours. He also sends notes to clients following every phone call and meeting—typically short bullet points that highlight the main items discussed or the meeting's agenda—shortly after those encounters occurred. “The way to do it is to communicate thoroughly and quickly,” Sciarretta says. “In other words, now, not next week.”

Again, all of the builders we interviewed document the house plan and specs in over-abundance by having the client sign off on every selection and decision. The paperwork can be an irrefutable trail of what both parties agreed to, in the case of a later disagreement. And all the builders also acknowledged that they don't want to beat their clients over the head with the contract. They give in a little. “I do go into every project expecting to give away product,” DeRosa says. “I'm not going to anger a client or take away their dream by fighting over \$5,000. We'll talk about some options, we'll try to find a solution.”

If a client contracts for 5/8-inch drywall with four coats of finish but then demands walls that feel like glass, Ricci will remind the client of what the contract says but will give a little and perhaps offer to do four rooms on the first floor with Venetian plaster at a 10 percent discount.

“You want to show you are willing to bend a bit,” Ricci says. “Clients know that our deal is we are looking out for their best interests because a customer who is happy is a customer who will pay you. If they aren't happy, collecting your money won't be so easy.” **CB**

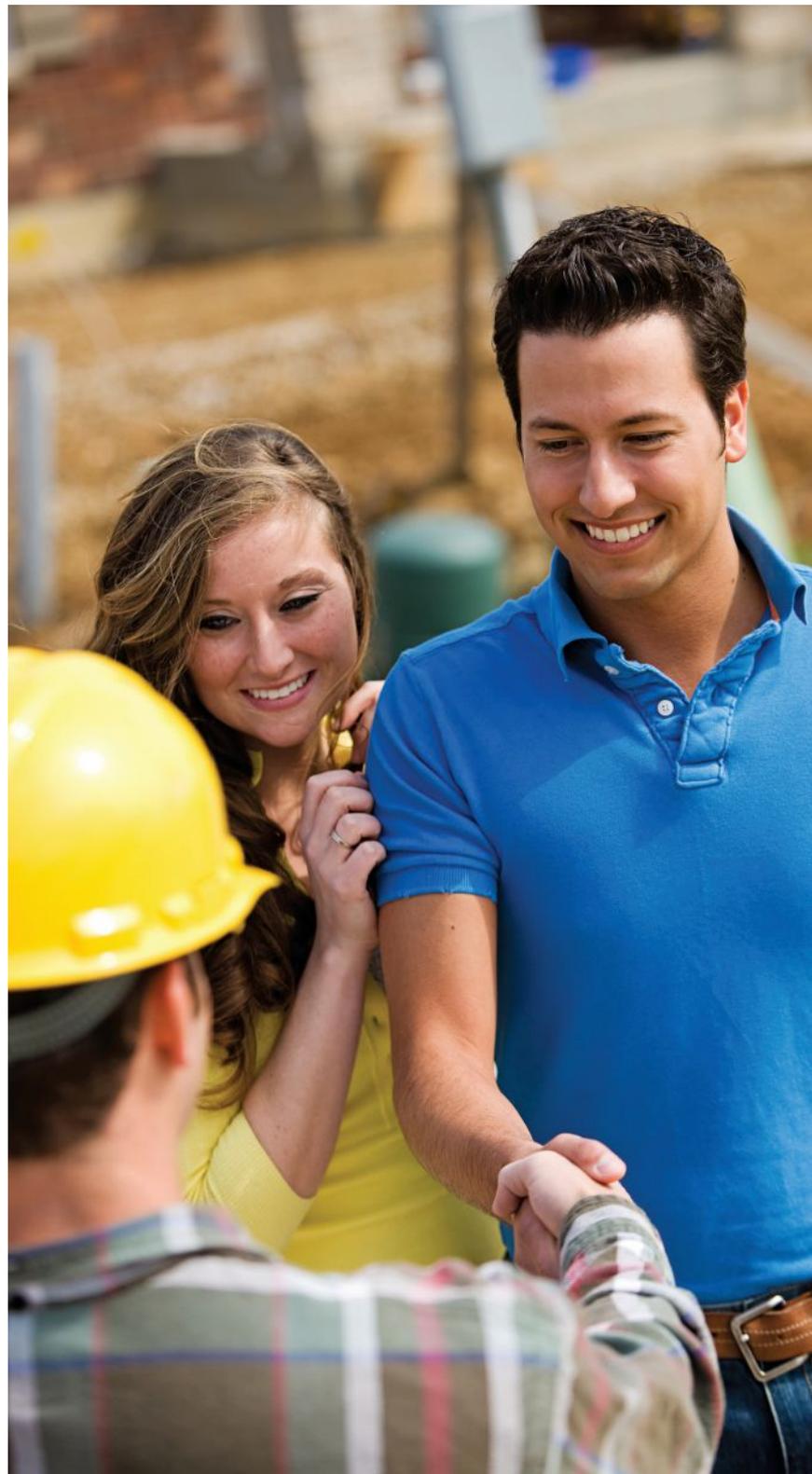


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Goldberg General Contracting and architect Seth Romig converted an 1886 Chicago three-flat into a single-family home, gutting the building and reconstructing its rear façade.

A PLACE IN THE CITY

Despite design challenges, permit hurdles, and pressure from the neighbors, two urban homes offer inspired solutions

By *Mary Beth Klatt*

A home in the city is the stuff of dreams for many, but building within a preexisting, dense infrastructure requires special effort, from diplomacy with zoning boards and neighborhood associations, to finessing the design challenges of light and privacy, to designing within a tight footprint. If you're working on an old building, conversions and renovations come with a laundry list of challenges that may involve historical preservation, narrow lots, scheduling trades, and collaborating with planning and zoning boards and neighbors. It's almost guaranteed that the home will be virtually rebuilt. Factor in legal expenses related to planning and zoning, and it's easy to see why some builders shy away from such projects.

As with any custom-built home, the best results come when you address planning and zoning issues and neighborhood concerns early on, especially if any aspect of the construction veers from design-review guidelines or may be disruptive. Architects offer their insights starting on page 32, in "Penciling Out: Approvals."

CHICAGO: RADICAL REMODEL

Nestled in Chicago's scenic Lincoln Park neighborhood and surrounded by boutique restaurants and shops, this 4,800-square-foot townhouse had all the charm of the historic-looking three-flat homes that the city is famous for, including an intact brick and limestone façade with metal cornices. Owner and designer Jessica Supera bought the 1886 building but knew that the interior—previously three apartments—was unworkable for her husband and children.

"I had this Brooklyn brownstone fantasy, and I loved the street and the neighborhood," Supera says. She hired Chicago-based Goldberg General Contracting (GGC) and local architect Seth Romig for the historical conversion/adaptive reuse project. Supera wanted "classic with a twist." The classic part: retaining the building's architectural bones; the twist: a lot of light. Romig, who'd previously worked on a three-flat historical conversion in Chicago's Bucktown neighborhood, was up for the challenge of transforming a 22-by-62-foot structure on a 25-by-125-foot lot into a five-bedroom, five-bathroom home for one family. The harder question was, "What pieces of Chicago can we keep to elevate this house into something special?" Romig says.

The plan was to save the façade and to essentially rebuild the home, adding new windows. One of Supera's pet peeves is windows that face brick walls, an often common predicament for Chicago three-flats and rowhouses, as well as many city apartments.

One of GGC's VPs, Jeff Berry, who led the project, removed all of the original windows and installed a 7-by-16-foot skylight. Because the neighborhood isn't designated as historic, Romig had no difficulty getting the project through permitting, which in Chicago is largely done online. Supera and Romig agreed that staining the red brick façade a dark color would unify the façade while setting it apart from others on the block.

GGC essentially gutted the building, rebuilding the rear façade with full-span windows running the width of the house on all levels. The team excavated the basement so the ceiling would be 8 feet 4 inches high. The grade level in the backyard was lowered to allow for a walkout basement, leading to a patio, breezeway, and the 22-by-20-foot garage, which has a party deck above it. The spot for the garage, which was built last, served as the staging area for the backhoes during construction.

The yard was shored up with steel sheet pilings before the concrete retaining walls were built and clad in masonry. Digging out the backyard was Supera's idea. She was inspired by an image she had seen of a New York brownstone with a walk-out basement. But recreating that basement on a narrow lot so it didn't disrupt the neighbors was a challenge.

Inside, Romig knew he wanted to capture "the classic essence of the building in a proportioned way." He retained the building's vintage charm with a pair of raised-panel French entry doors with beveled glass, echoing the door with a half-oval arch inside. "We wanted a formal foyer to transition between the interior and exterior," he says. "The interior arch detail reinforces the formality and importance of that threshold between the interior and the historic front façade." Even the layout has the "twist" Supera sought: The designer's office is located in the front of the home, near the entrance, where a living room would usually be.

While the structural components and the mechanicals are 21st-century, interior finishes are historical, with an elaborate trim package. GGC VP Keith Dinehart notes the feeling of accomplishment when such an adaptive reuse is complete. "We welcome urban challenges," he says. "It makes the project more interesting."



Maintaining the classical proportions of a Chicago townhome while making the interiors contemporary involved several major design moves, including connecting the kitchen to the family room and the outdoors and adding generously sized windows to the rear elevation, essentially rebuilding it.

SAN FRANCISCO: FINESSING A TIGHT LOT

The clients for a project in San Francisco's Noe Valley are long-time residents of the city who were moving from a condo to a house. They knew they wanted to stay in the neighborhood—a popular, lively one, with trendy restaurants and boutiques.

The couple bought a dilapidated 850-square-foot Queen Anne cottage in a part of the neighborhood with many traditional Victorian homes. They wanted a contemporary design but also appreciated the charm of the existing cottage and the street. And they knew their plans could take awhile to be approved, given the city's lengthy review process.

Local firms Schwartz and Architecture and the construction firm of Gelling & Judd took on the project, which involved rebuilding the existing cottage as well as lifting it to insert a two-car garage beneath. While the 1908 cottage wasn't considered a historic resource (any building more than 50 years old and possessing architectural or historical significance is a candidate), it still had to meet the city's demanding zoning and planning design-review guidelines and get

the neighbors' approval. Early on, the design was limited by the city's planning department.

It took a year just to get permits, and the project itself took three years from start to finish. The lot was just 25 feet wide—typical of the city's narrow urban parcels—and Schwartz had to build the house with a series of setbacks mandated by San Francisco's Planning Department: a 3-foot-wide setback on one side, and a 5-foot setback on the other.

These uneven setbacks cut up an already narrow space, forcing Schwartz to go vertical, adding height to the rear elevation. One neighbor, who lives more than a block away, objected to the building's height, which was actually lower than the 40-foot height limit, Schwartz says. The neighbor's objection was overruled because he was outside the required radius for notification.

Schwartz recalls that, after plans and drawings were first submitted, entirely new setbacks were demanded by the review committee, so he and his team modified them. But the neighbors on both sides

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For a home in San Francisco's Noe Valley, one of the city's most beloved neighborhoods, a traditional Queen Anne cottage façade was preserved (top). Rebuilding involved constructing a modern rear façade (bottom).

of the property had signed off on the original setbacks, and they then objected to the new ones, leaving the design team caught between what the city wanted and what the neighbors wanted. More adjustments were made.

"We thought that maintaining the cottage feel would bring an easier review process, but in the end, I'm not sure that was the case," Schwartz says. Though a total tear-down probably would have been easier and less expensive, he notes that "the surprise factor of entering the front door and discovering this very different world at the back" is a design feature that ended up delighting everyone.

From the street, the house—now 3,500 square feet—appears to be a traditional, two-level home in keeping with the neighborhood vernacular. But seen from the back, the rear elevation is three levels, plus a roof deck, and is completely modern, with steel beams and glass walls. The front and rear look like two entirely different homes.

The house, widest at the street level, gets narrower as you approach the top, due to the setbacks. The entire top floor is just 16 feet wide. The master suite is in the new portion of the home, behind the raised existing cottage.

"When you walk into the front of the house, you immediately see the back. It's like you're in a glass box with a jungle on the other side. It's the coolest feeling," says project foreman Ronan Hanley, of Gelling & Judd. "The back is a beauty."

Despite the hurdles, a project with coherence and identity resulted. In fact, Schwartz says, "A unique identity was born out of the very challenges thrown our way."

PENCILING OUT: APPROVALS

Whether you're building in a city on the East Coast, West Coast, or in the Midwest, historical buildings can present special challenges. An experienced architect, as well as strong relationships with zoning boards and neighborhood groups, can expedite the approval process, save money, and may just help keep the project on track.

Builder Sean Ruppert, principal of OPaL, in Cabin John, Md., and architects Neal Schwartz, in San Francisco, and Seth Romig, in Chicago, have experience with historical conversions, adaptive-reuse projects, and in historical districts. San Francisco and Washington, D.C., have lengthy permitting procedures, which sometimes even culminate



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in televised public hearings. In contrast, Chicago's permitting is entirely done online, with public hearings held by the city's historic preservation division to determine landmark status.

Planning boards nationwide can be influenced by neighbors who may be affected by construction. Ruppert, who works extensively in Washington, D.C., says that in most parts of the District, "Whenever you add on to a house, it has to 'read' as something completely different: separate and modern. The historic part of the home has to stand on its own; it's the star of the show." In San Francisco, neighbors and government officials favor Victorian architecture over new, says Schwartz, who is also a professor of architecture at the California College of the Arts, in Oakland. "Modern, progressive architecture is not seen as adding value," he says.

In Chicago, Romig doesn't share these struggles. He rarely works in the city's historical districts, but he does have experience gutting turn-of-the-century three-flat multifamily residences and converting them into single-family homes. Because Chicago's permitting process is fairly straightforward, he says, "I

haven't had a lot of struggle to find a way forward with planning and zoning."

In San Francisco, Schwartz often finds himself in animated discussions with planning and zoning officials on the interpretation of seemingly subjective guidelines. Homes go through a historical design review, but obtaining a determination of whether a given house is a historical resource can add an additional four to six months to the process, he says. Schwartz observes that city officials and residents are often biased toward saving older buildings, no matter the cost, so he often finds himself in city hall offices to discuss design issues. Those discussions can be expensive. He once had an over-the-counter review of a retaining wall for his own home in San Francisco. The five-minute approval process racked up \$3,800 in additional permit fees.

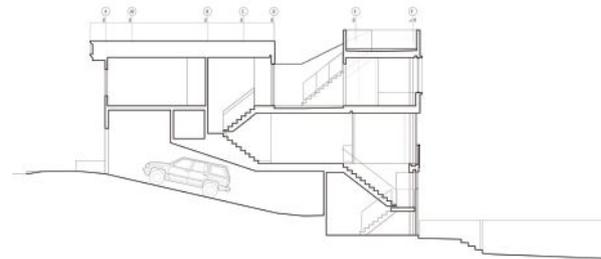
Ruppert understands these frustrations. When two developers abandoned converting a 1920s car barn into two large homes because they tired of dealing with planning issues, he bought the car barn and did the conversion from scratch. Ruppert knew from previous experience working with the capital's historic preservation



LEFT: Challenges abounded in a San Francisco home, on one of the city's typical 25-foot-wide lots. The entry and kitchen are at street level. Stairs run from the lower garden level to the roof deck, and the home gets narrower as the ascent progresses.

TOP, RIGHT: Upon entering the home from the street, lush greenery at the rear is fully visible, thanks to a modern rebuilding with abundant glazing on the back wall of the house.

BOTTOM, RIGHT: Adjacent to the kitchen is a covered deck. In keeping with the downward sloping site, stairs lead to the lower garden level and family room, which connects to the garage.



review board that they would likely approve his work. He also made slight accommodations for neighbors.

In Chicago, Keith Dinehart of GGC made accommodations, too, to appease the neighbors of the 19th-century rebuilt townhome, whose façade the client and contractor decided to stain—“particularly one neighbor,” he says, “who we had to present the project to from the beginning, and throughout, to head off any contested permitting issues.”

Here's advice for expediting permitting:

- **Hire an experienced architect** well-versed in planning-department regulations and the design-review process. For example, a seasoned Washington, D.C., architect knows it takes three months to get an appointment with the historic preservation review board staff and six months for permits.
- **Develop good relations with planning entities.** Ruppert has done this with the District of Columbia's historic preservation review board, which includes historians, architects, an archaeologist, and at least one citizen.

- **Listen to neighbors' concerns.** “They have to like you first,” Ruppert says. “They need to see you as a team player with a good track record. Though you may not incorporate any of their thoughts, explaining how your plan is best suited for the property is essential.”
- **Hire a good zoning-law attorney for larger projects** to represent your interests at public hearings. “When you're dealing with that kind of money, you don't just want to talk off-the-cuff,” Ruppert says. Legal fees can range from \$50,000 to \$70,000, which includes pre-hearing discussions with board staff and vetting different incarnations of drawings. Sometimes it's less for smaller projects.
- **Get involved with area groups** to shorten and simplify the permitting process. Schwartz is the founding chair of a committee focused on policy and advocacy for Bay Area architects with San Francisco's chapter of the American Institute of Architects. **CB**

Chicago-based writer Mary Beth Klatt covers design and real estate.

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principal and owner,
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TOP PRIORITIES

An architect's key criteria for selecting builder partners

Cary Bernstein has had her own architectural practice for 25 years, creating modern homes that are light-filled and space-savvy with rigorous attention to detail. Bernstein spoke with us about the challenges of designing and building in San Francisco, what she seeks in a builder, and why old relationships and new talent carry equal weight.

—Amy Albert

Which comes first, the builder you want to work with or the design?

The design comes first, but sometimes we enter into contracts where the client already has a builder in mind.

What if it's a builder you've never worked with before?

You want to be a good team player, especially if this is someone with whom the client has a long relationship. You want to have a happy team going into construction. If there are red flags, such as not asking questions during cost estimating, I need to inform the client of my concerns. If the builder has experience with architects with a practice similar to mine, I have no reason to object.

How do you go about finding a builder that would be right for a project?

Professional and personal referrals are always first. I start by asking other architects, but I'll also ask consultants and potential clients about working with a particular builder.

What do you look for in the builders you choose to work with?

The first thing is: Does this builder have experience with design-oriented architects? Then there's the level of skill in construction regarding the client's expectations for the project. If we're doing a project with a

higher degree of detail and customization, we want a builder experienced with this level of work. On the other hand, a project like a country house we did recently, with common details such as board-and-batten siding, is best done by a local builder who regularly does that kind of thing. If there's a project I like in the neighborhood, I find out who the builder is.

The bigger research is for projects outside of San Francisco. For those I have to call on my network or look at publications in which projects are published.

How can you tell if a builder "gets" your work?

If a builder asks questions about places in which there's a high degree of integration—finishes, materials, structural—it shows he's putting together the project in his head as he's reading our documents. A good builder may ask about the documents themselves. As cost estimating and value engineering progress, a good contractor might make recommendations for alternate ways of doing things that are still in line with our design ideas.

What's your ideal scenario?

Working with the builder from the very early stages of the project to develop it in a cost-effective and collaborative way that meets the client's design and budget goals. Many builders aren't comfortable being part of the design process, even though we like to include them. Our smoothest projects come through the negotiated-bid process, rather than a competitive bid. A builder that's very familiar with the design intent and drawings gives more accurate pricing, and there are fewer surprises during construction.

What's the hardest aspect of choosing the right builder?

Finding the best fit for budget and quality. Many times, when clients have tight budgets but high

design aspirations, they forgo more professional construction firms for smaller contractors that don't have management team costs. A smaller builder with one or two individuals has lower overhead, but sometimes this translates to an abbreviated management process that has gaps, and this leads to quality-control and accountability issues.

Do you have a preference?

No, we just want the best level of skill that the project can afford. Professionalism is more important than size.

“MOST OF OUR BUILDERS HAVE LONGTIME, LOYAL STAFF. THAT'S WHAT MAKES THEM GOOD BUSINESSES.”

Do you have a stable of builders you work with?

We do have contractors and consultants we love working with. We've worked with the same structural engineer for 20 years. But as a matter of business, we don't want just one horse in the barn. That said, it's good for us and for the client to work with someone regularly. After a while, the conversation becomes shorthand.

What are some of the biggest challenges of working as an architect in San Francisco?

Everyone would agree that the entitlement process is the biggest challenge. Planning approval is notoriously difficult in San Francisco. It's not because the planning department is difficult; it's because the process is long and there are a lot of unknowns due to the way San Francisco allows neighbors to participate in the approvals process. That's something that the planning department gets blamed for, but it's really a political problem.

The second biggest is the cost of construction and labor. The Bay Area is expensive. Contractors have insurance costs. And they have environmental requirements, which everyone is happy to meet, but they add cost.

There's also the cost of excavation and alteration to the landscape. As land prices go up, more extreme excavation is being done. Usually foundation costs are one of the most expensive per-square-foot aspects of a project. But real estate prices are getting higher than the cost of basement build-outs. In this hot market, basement builds now make more sense.

Has the labor shortage affected the builders you work with?

Yes. Most of our builders have longtime, loyal staff. That's what makes them good businesses; their crews have been with them for a while. But in this economy, some builders have lost senior staff who have gone on to start their own firms. There's some poaching going on.

What about the subcontractors?

They're all so busy that it's hard to manage a schedule. We've seen this in boom economies before, when the trades get so busy that they hire less-experienced people who come from elsewhere for a short duration, and with that comes increased risk and more quality problems.

I saw a project of yours that looked recent, but was surprised to learn that it was more than 10 years old. What's the key to designs that are still fresh years after they've been built?

There are fundamentals that we hope all of our projects have and that contribute to a project that's great over the long term: A good plan that works, with generous daylight. The other is that the character of the building is true to itself and has logic and visual coherence. We like our projects to be rational and emotional at the same time. You can see the logic, even if you don't know where it came from, and the project appeals to the emotions—textures, proportions, and details. When we've satisfied the mind and emotions, we know we have a good project. We experiment with new materials and technology, but we don't let the experiment be the defining factor of the project. **CB**

For a look at work by Cary Bernstein Architect, go to custombuilderonline/carybernstein.com.

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True to his nature, builder Nick Schiffer immediately said, "Of course we can build a wood dish-drying rack that would drain into the sink," then set about researching the best way to do it.

BUILD A BUSINESS, BUILD A BRAND

A craftsman's use of social media has put him on the map

By Stacey Freed

Nick Schiffer is obsessive. His interest in woodcraft and building is a round-the-clock passion, and he wants to spread the word. It turns out, people want to listen—and watch.

IN HIS GENES

For Schiffer, playing as a kid meant hammering nails into the floor of his grandmother's kitchen. By 11, he was on the jobsite for his father's residential fence company in Stoughton, Mass. "I was the kid who cleaned up and put stuff away," Schiffer says. "I wanted to soak up as much knowledge as possible." Schiffer went to Southeastern Regional Vocational Technical High School where he focused on house carpentry and then did a four-year stint at Fitchburg State University, graduating in 2012 with a Bachelor of Science degree in construction management, "mostly because my mom wanted me to," he says.

After school, Schiffer returned to work for his father. Soon a large Boston developer hired him away. "My hands were calloused and dirty when I went on the interview," Schiffer says. "The interviewer knew that with hands like these, I wasn't like the other kids he'd interviewed. They offered me significantly more money than I had ever made up until that point." Schiffer was torn about telling his father—and it did lead to a short-term rift—but Schiffer made the leap and worked his way up to running high-rise multifamily projects in Boston.

Yet he couldn't shake the urge to create, so on nights and weekends he grew his carpentry and remodeling business. "I was splitting 120-hour weeks between two jobs," Schiffer says. "My girlfriend, who's now my wife, was supportive but said, 'You'd better pick one or the other before you kill yourself.'" Schiffer left his day job and went out on his own as a woodworker and remodeler.

SOCIAL MEDIA LIGHT BULB

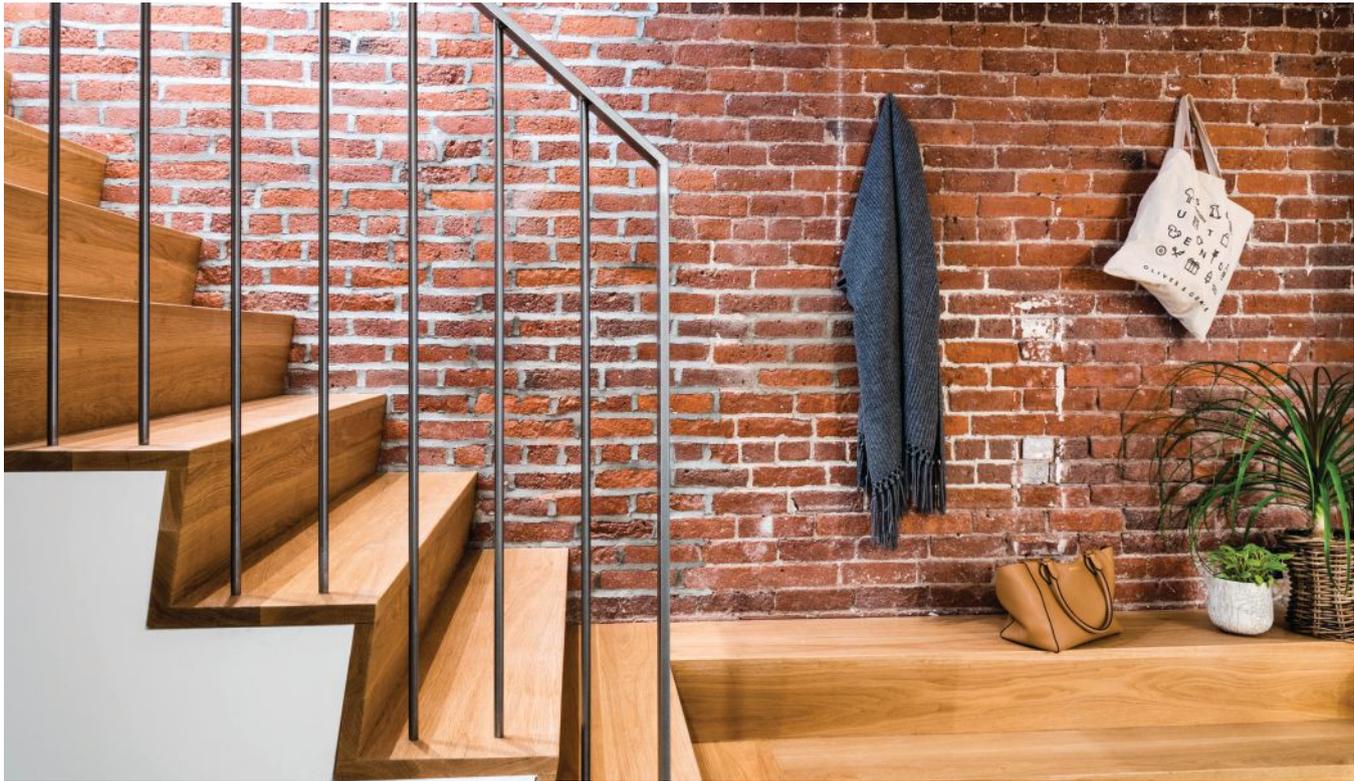
Schiffer started NS Builders—with its tagline of Design. Build. Repeat.—in 2014. His first job was remodeling the home of an architect he'd worked with at the Boston developer. That's about the time his obsession with Instagram kicked in. Schiffer recalls that he didn't view Instagram as a promotional venue back then. "I wanted to share on it and engage with people," he says. But midway through his first remodeling project, Schiffer got a call from some Instagram followers who wanted to talk. It was a light-bulb moment: "Instagram could be an advertising platform where I could connect with other like-minded individuals," Schiffer says.

Just as with carpentry, Schiffer set out to learn all he could. "I have an obsessive personality. When I see something I like, I go all-in and start researching it," he says. He began looking across industries at who was winning on social media, started following them, and emulated what was working.

In addition to compelling photographs—which don't have to be professionally shot but must look good—authenticity and interaction are important to Schiffer. "People want to learn," Schiffer says. "I talk to them, engage them, and say, 'That's great, but why not do it this way?' Or 'I tried it this way and had issues.' I'm really developing conversations. Success grew out of that."

FOLLOW AND BE FOLLOWED

As of this writing, Schiffer has more than 73,000 Instagram followers and nearly 1,800 posts that include stills and video of finished projects, work in progress, products, and photos with tips such as, "Put the valve (and steam control) on the opposite side of the shower-head to prevent getting wet!" That one has 2,034 likes and 54 comments.



Signature handiwork: NS Builders fabricated this custom steel handrail off-site, predrilling all of the holes into the staircase. “We prayed that they lined up,” Nick Schiffer says. (They did.)

Schiffer uses Facebook as a landing page, though he cross-promotes from Instagram. He’s on LinkedIn for its professional and résumé-building connections and he shares content there, too. In addition, he says, “YouTube has been great for us.” He’s working on the launch of a series he describes as “similar to *This Old House*, where we show renovations and talk about them step by step, about what we’re doing, the products we use, and why.” He says he has nothing against Twitter, but he’d rather focus on what he knows and is finding success with.

Schiffer’s audience is 25-to-45-year-old designers, architects, and builders. “That’s where a lot of my conversations start, and then I get looped in with the homeowners,” he says. Because he posts regularly, Schiffer believes his name bubbles to the top when architects and designers, for example, are searching for recommendations for clients. “More than 90 percent of our projects [out of the 15 to 20 projects a year ranging from \$30,000 to \$ 1 million] come through social media,” he says. “From that, maybe 70 to 80 percent are coming through other professionals, and the other 20 to 30 percent directly from consumers.”

He still gets energized by learning from others on Instagram such as BespokeWoodWrights, MatthewChaseWoodworks, ArtisanSignatureHomes, VerandaInterior, and StudioMcGee.

Schiffer has also had success with *The Modern Craftsman*, a weekly podcast he does with carpenter Tyler Grace, owner of TRG Home Concepts, in Medford, N.J., and John Hourihan, owner of Vintage Builders, near Boston. The three of them speak with guests from all channels in the building industry and discuss everything

from products and processes to business successes and struggles. “We’ve got more than 200,000 downloads on iTunes and can be found across all platforms including Alexa,” Schiffer says.

CABINET ARTISTRY

In 2017, Schiffer opened a millwork side of the business to fabricate his own cabinetry, “so we own an entire project from warranty and also from brand recognition,” he says. “You walk into a project and you know who built it because of the level of craftsmanship, level of care, and level of detail.” Now, NS Builders has two people in the shop, one in the office, and four in the field. Schiffer is the owner but is also a project manager. The company does about \$2 million in volume.

Schiffer’s other social media mission is getting young people interested in building. The biggest challenge to the industry, he says, is finding help that’s truly passionate about what they do. His aim has been to build a brand and a company culture that people want to be part of because its focus is on quality and craftsmanship.

One goal of The Modern Craftsman brand, Schiffer says is to go to events where he can reach high school students and talk to them about working in the trades and how they can have a successful career. “Kids want to do what’s cool,” he says. “We think it’s cool to be a carpenter, to be a plumber. We need to make sure the younger generation feels as though their decision to be in the trades will be respected.”

Sounds like this could be Schiffer’s next obsession. **CB**

Stacey Freed covers design and the built world from her home in New York state.

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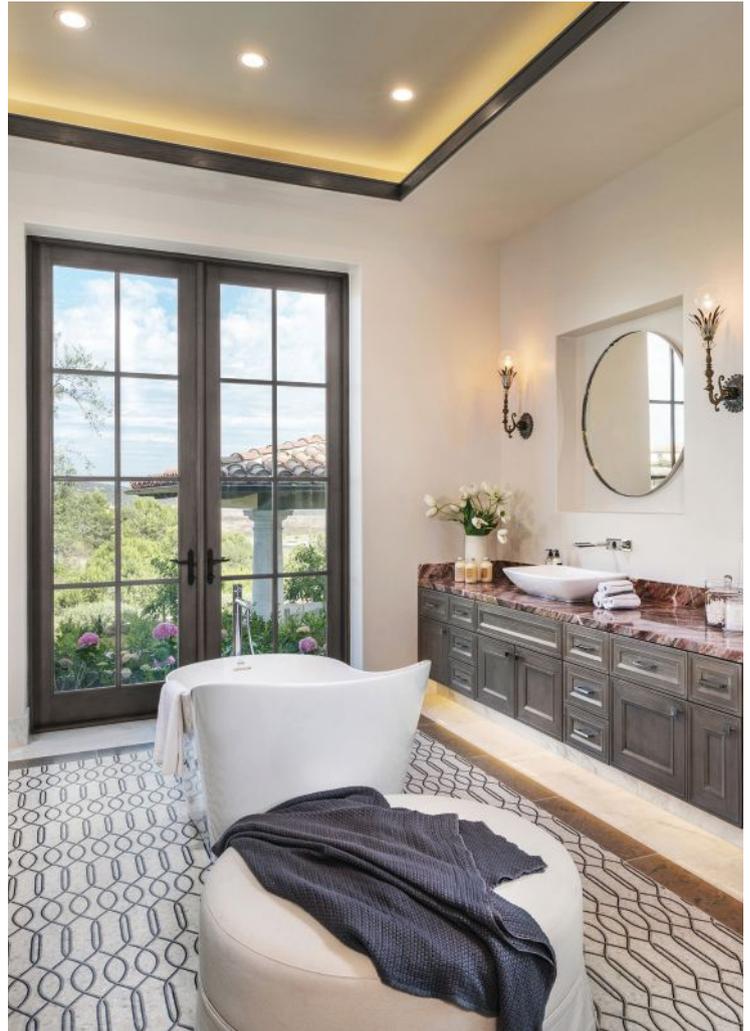
MASTER SUITES



SHANNA LIN KERR

S M DESIGN ASSOCIATES, SANTA ANA, CALIF.

The key to design is to understand the client: their wants, desires, aesthetic, how they entertain, how they live, and how they would like to live. These intimate details create a portrait of the client from which we build our design for spaces that are deeply personal, such as the master suite. We are often asked about design trends, which are important from a resale point of view, but this perspective is always balanced with our understanding of the client. Whether the preference is for something as simple as facing the bed toward a spectacular view instead of a wall or TV, as common as having a cozy retreat from a bustling and growing family, as trendy as providing separate his and hers master baths, or as complicated as creating the perfect spa-like bathroom with a freestanding marble tub, our approach is always the same: Focus on the client.



PHOTOS: APPLIED PHOTOGRAPHY; KERR HEADSHOT: JANA PESEK



MARY COOK

MARY COOK ASSOCIATES, CHICAGO

The master suite in this summer cottage on Lake Geneva, Wis., is designed to take full advantage of the panoramic surroundings by incorporating floor-to-ceiling glass in the bedroom and sitting room to maximize views in three directions. A fireplace, coffee and wine bar, and deluxe bath turn the suite into a true retreat by using hand-glazed custom tile

on the fireplace surround and plush carpeting in both the sitting and sleeping areas. Furnishings are arranged so the lake is always on full display, whether one is just waking up, retiring for the night, catching up on email, or enjoying time by the fire. A deck off the master suite brings the uninterrupted sight lines of the lake even closer to the homeowner.



NEW PRODUCTS

1.



2.



4.



3.

1. BOTANICALLY INSPIRED

The Artist Edition collection of sinks is inspired by what manufacturer Kohler calls “painterly style.” A new addition, the Dutchmaster sub-collection, depicts a floral theme while emphasizing visual play between light and shadow, similar to the chiaroscuro techniques of Dutch master painters. The line’s Midnight Floral pattern was designed in collaboration with florography artist Ashley Woodson Bailey. kohler.com circle No. 850

2. ‘DUCHESS’ TILE

Walker Zanger is refashioning the Duquesa tile collection—a new, durable cement offering of its four designs Alba, Fatima, Fez, and Jasmine. Each style profile is inspired by old-world mosaic patterns and textures, including Moorish bronze metalwork, Moroccan arched doorways, and Italian textiles. Duquesa tiles feature the manufacturer’s exclusive color palette, Mezzanotte, a contrast of light gray, creamy, and dusty blue tones. The handcrafted tiles are 8 inches square. walkerzanger.com circle No. 851

3. FIRE DANCER

In partnership with fire-pit manufacturer Blazing Beats, Coyote Outdoor Living presents its own Firetable with “dancing flame technology.” The product’s tech synchronizes a visual reaction in the flame to the sound of music playing through the unit’s audio system. Blazing Beats uses a patent-pending gas fire burner assembly hooked up to a self-contained Bluetooth audio system. coyoteoutdoor.com circle No. 852

4. FREE-RANGE COOKING

The Pro Series is the latest in ILVE’s line of freestanding dual-fuel ranges, offering a removable griddle, high-Btu brass burners, and a built-in warming drawer ideal for serving. The Pro Series is available in 36-inch single- or double-oven configurations, or in ILVE-exclusive 40- and 48-inch double ovens, and is 24 inches deep. The triple-pane glass doors are designed to effectively trap heat for conserving additional energy and to be safe to the touch. The two color options for the Pro Series are stainless steel and matte black. ilveappliances.com circle No. 853



5. SINTERED SURFACING

In response to demand for thicker surfaces in kitchen, bath, and flooring applications, Neolith's series of 20 mm premium sintered stone has expanded to include 18 models with 13 new color patterns. Using heat and pressure in a process that mimics the formation of igneous rock, Neolith sintered stone surfaces are scratch-, stain-, and UV fade-resistant. Manufacturer TheSize emphasizes the product as a sustainable solution for indoor and outdoor use. neolith.com **circle No. 854**

6. ANGULAR FAUCET

Emphasizing edginess, modern design influences were brought to bear on the creation of the Dorrance widespread faucet by Newport Brass. Offered with ADA-compliant levers or refined cross handles and a geometrically inspired spout, the faucet comes in a black matte finish and exceeds WaterSense requirements at 1.2 gpm. The Dorrance collection of bath accessories includes a wall-mounted faucet, tub fillers, and bidet and shower sets. newportbrass.com **circle No. 855**

7. APRON-LESS

Designed for customized alcove tubs, American Standard's studio bathtub with a fold-over edge integrates lumbar support for greater comfort while bathing and is ADA-compliant. The three-sided tiling and water-retention flange helps prevent water seepage, and the apron-less design allows the tub's front apron finish to match a given bathroom's style and décor. American Standard offers a limited lifetime warranty for the tub. americanstandard.com **circle No. 856**

8. BRIGHTER VENEER

A new color offering in Eldorado Stone's Cliffstone ledgerstone veneer product category, Whitebark, boasts a brighter color palette influenced by sun-whitened poplar trees. The stone dimensions are approximately 1.25 to 6 inches in height, 4 to 22 inches in length, and 1 to 2 inches in depth. The manufacturer offers eight additional darker color choices for the Cliffstone profile in sandy, slate, and reddish tones. eldoradostone.com **circle No. 857**



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GROUP DIRECTOR - PRINCIPAL

Tony Mancini
484.412.8686 | tmancini@sgcmail.com

DIRECTOR OF SALES & DIGITAL

Adam Grubb
317.219.7546 | agrubb@sgcmail.com

ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR

Tina Kanter
847.391.1054 | tkanter@sgcmail.com

INTEGRATED MEDIA ADVISORS

Dave Clark
847.954.7982 | dclark@sgcmail.com
States: IA, MI, NE, KS, OK, TX, WI

Tim Gillerlain
847.954.7916 | tgillerlain@sgcmail.com
States: IL, IN, MN, ND, OH, TN, SD, MO

Robert Reed
630.845.1285 | reedmedi@sbcglobal.net
States: AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY, Western CA

Michael Stein
610.918.1828 | mstein@sgcmail.com
States: AL, AR, CT, DC, DE, FL, GA, KY, MA, MD, ME, MS, NC, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, SC, VT, WV, VA

Richard Thompson
952.449.1592 | rthompson@sgcmail.com
Inside Sales Manager

DIRECTOR OF EVENTS

Judy Brociek
847.954.7943 | jbrociek@sgcmail.com

EVENTS COORDINATOR

Carly Pini
847.954.7941 | cpini@sgcmail.com

ADVERTISING COORDINATOR

Erica Rivera
847.391.1049 | erivera@sgcmail.com

REPRINTS

Adrienne Miller
847.391.1036 | amiller@sgcmail.com

LIST RENTAL INFORMATION

Claude Marada
402.836.6274
claudemarada@infogroup.com

Bart Piccirillo
402.836.6283
bart.piccirillo@infogroup.com

SUBSCRIPTION INQUIRIES

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ARTFUL ENTRY



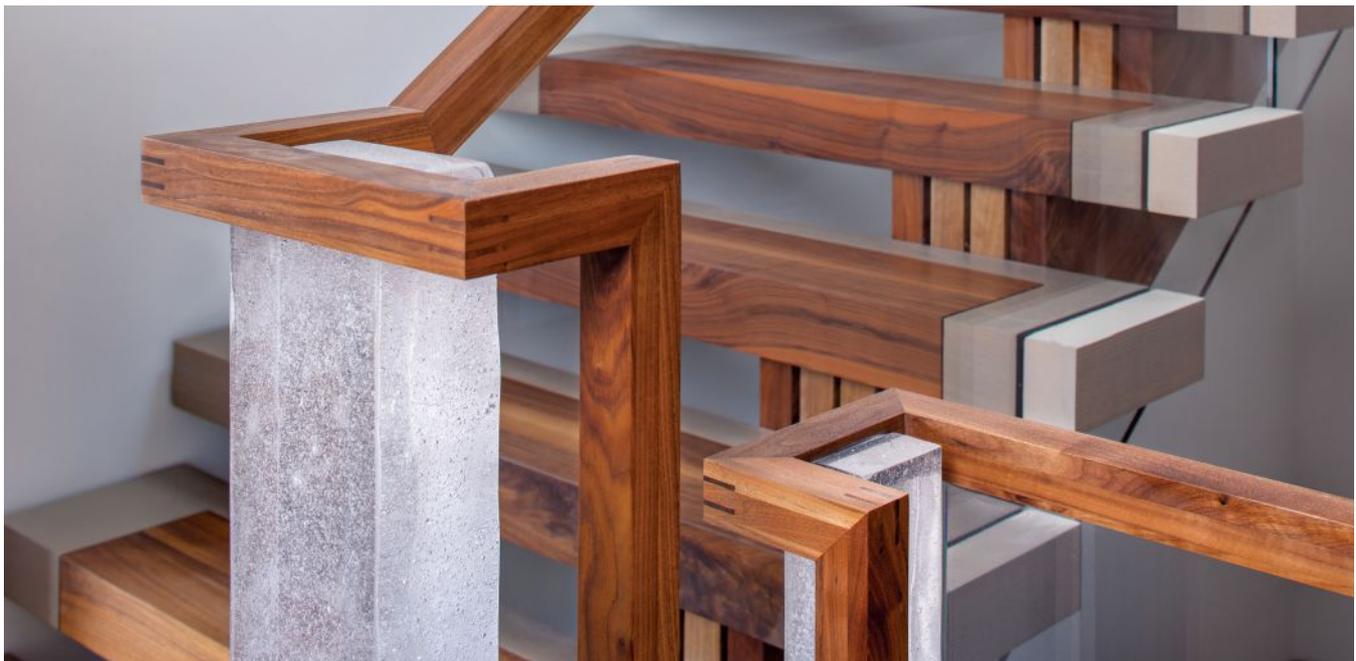
Seattle woodworker Nathie Katzoff, owner of NK Woodworking & Design, is earning something of a reputation as a stair artist. So, for art collectors in search of an entry staircase to function as the home's focal point as well as a piece of sculpture, Katzoff was the logical choice. Referred by the home's architect, Katzoff faced a challenge: design, build, and install a stair that would fit gracefully with the rest of the home, yet make its own statement.

The stair treads are a combination of black walnut and treated white oak. The four visible stringers at the right of the run are also black walnut, mixing clear finish walnut and bleached walnut for varying tones. A walnut handrail wraps around hand-cast glass newels that resemble blocks of ice. Katzoff's

aim was a modern play on the traditional flourish of a stair rail volute.

The design was first drawn by hand, then a 3-D model was built in the shop, "so the clients would know exactly what they were getting," Katzoff says. A duplicate stringer was concealed inside the drywall so the crew had the necessary structural support for installing the final assembly, which, except for the balcony glass, was also built in the shop, taken apart for transport, and reassembled on-site. Katzoff notes that the owners put enormous trust in his team to execute something that would be in sync with the completed home. This project, he says, makes him proud because "it has all the bold geometry of a modern piece, but when you get up close, the details tell a richer story."

—Amy Albert



PHOTOS: MATTHEW GALLANT

PROJECT Walnut and Ice, Northern California DESIGNER NK Woodworking & Design, Seattle



Residence, Burr Ridge, IL Architect: Michael Buss Architects, Ltd. Installing contractor: Complete Flashings Builder: McNaughton Brothers
Construction Material : Snap-Clad .032 aluminum Color: Charcoal



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-Owner, Residence, Burr Ridge, IL

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