

# diablo properties

The resource for distinctive East Bay homes

## NORMANDY COTTAGE REVIVAL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KURT LAVENSON  
CONTENT PROVIDED BY AIA EAST BAY





Western elevation of the house, facing the street: The round turret, containing the dining room, intersects the kitchen area in the main house. The high windows in the turret are custom leaded glass. A small brick patio off the kitchen can be accessed through the French doors.



Fun Facts

**WHERE THEY PURCHASED**  
Oakland, CA

**HOUSE STATS** 2,500 square feet;  
2 bedroom, 2 bath

**OWNER INVOLVEMENT**  
Changed from reluctant and wary to trusting and inspired.

**FAVORITE DETAIL** Round dining room and eyebrow window

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As architect Kurt Lavenson, AIA, tells it, his client for this home was the first he'd had that didn't really want a new house or a new kitchen, or an architect, for that matter. She simply wanted to feel safe and secure after a wrenching loss. She was thrust into the world of home design and reconstruction by the fire that swept through the Oakland hills in 1991, burning down not just her old Normandy cottage, but her entire neighborhood. The only thing that remained standing on her property was her chimney, like a tombstone marking the loss. With the

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owner and Lavenson working together, that loss began to look like an opportunity to create something new. What followed was a process of healing, design, and construction that led to a new and better home. At the core of the house is a freestanding chimney made from salvaged bricks that pays homage to the original one that stood amidst the ashes. The central ridge beam passes through it, spanning between two heavy timber trusses. The design emphasizes these primal elements—a sheltering roof and a strong vertical structure. Planes of wood and curving arches of plaster define the rooms while carefully placed windows

maximize the effects of light and shadow. The round dining room and an eyebrow window above the staircase accentuate the sculptural character of the interior spaces. At the exterior, the house expresses the shape of its individual volumes in a collage of basic geometric forms that intersect to create playful rooflines. The entire house was moved closer to the street, creating a level backyard garden and using the slope of the land at the front to create a raised plinth at the entry and turret. This provides some prominence to the modestly sized house (about 2,500 square feet) along the street frontage. High-quality natural materials were used throughout, giving the house a green, sustainable identity years before such terms were common in the building trades. Ten years after the house was done, the owner had to move out of state and sell the



Clockwise from top left:  
The curved walls of the turret wrap through the interior to sculpt space in the entry area.  
Sliding the house forward on the lot gained height for the brick plinth at the entry and turret. A small base-ment fits below, behind the brick.  
Mahogany cabinets with colored concrete countertops line the upstairs hallway. An eyebrow window carves into the roof and the plastered ceiling.

house from afar. Recently, after another 10 years, the new owners also had to move out of the area. So, they called the realtor from the first sale, Adele Gillis, who had her own healing relationship with the house. Apparently, a senior person in her office had passed up the listing 10 years ago, leaving an opportunity for Gillis at a time when she was in transition. She needed the sale so much that she cleaned the house herself to prepare it for market. Amongst the debris she removed from the basement that year was an old Persian rug, which she saved.

She had it cleaned and has treasured it to this day, as a reminder of that period in her life. So, she was pleased to be involved with this house again and to be reminded of how far she has come. A few weeks ago, Lavenson's wife noticed the real estate ad and knew it was the house he had done 20 years before. They visited the Sunday open house, which Lavenson knew would be a reunion of sorts for him and the house, but he'd had no idea how deeply the building had affected its subsequent owners and its realtor. He

entered the house to find it glowing with the care and attention of loving owners. They had clearly appreciated the quality of the design and the materials enough to add their own best efforts to the house's legacy. After Lavenson noticed his name on the sales brochure, he introduced himself to Gillis. Later, when she looked at his website, she saw her rug in one of the photos. Since she had never met the original owner, Gillis told Lavenson her story about the rug and asked if he knew anything more about it. He told her that when the original owner moved in 20 years ago, her friends gave her pieces of their own furniture as housewarming gifts. Among those friends was her architect. Lavenson paused and said, "The rug came from me."