

# ELEGANCE, REVISITED

Margaret Lesher's former Orinda estate has been restored to its pre-WW II finery.

BY J. J. GORDON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTHONY PIDGEON







**KAY,** let's get this straight: There are houses, and then there are *houses*. And the sumptuous abode at 244 Glorietta Blvd. in Orinda has been a head-turner since it was built in 1932. Of course, anyone who was anyone during the 1980s and on through most of the 1990s knew it mainly as the Lesher family's party pad, the locus where socialite-philanthropist Margaret Lesher toasted everyone from then governor Pete Wilson to actress Tippi Hedren. >>>



**CINEMATIC DRAMA** (previous pages) A grand circular staircase and imported Carrara marble flooring make an elegant statement in this dramatic foyer. (this page) It's always showtime with your own personal old-time movie theater. Vintage film posters and classic matinee refreshments add panache. (opposite page) All eyes are drawn toward a faithful reproduction of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco recessed into a ceiling niche. Architect Kurt Lavenson commissioned a Florentine artist to create the work.



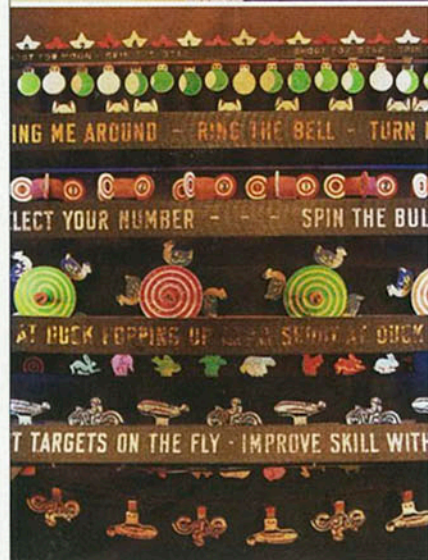
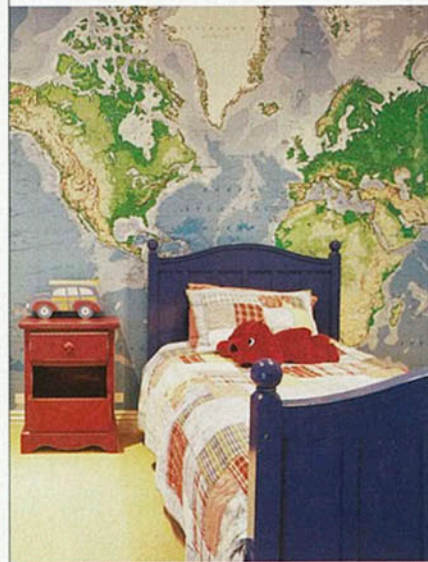






#### HOUSE PROUD

(previous pages) A gabled roof and rich pine paneling create a cozy but spacious retreat in this family room. Chairs covered in tapestry and leather sofas surround the pool table. (right) Sub-zero side-by-side refrigerator and freezer make the kitchen both functional and modern, but the warm wood cabinetry and granite countertops keep it homey. (below) Global influences inspire the children's bedroom; a carnival shooting gallery offers one of many entertainment options at the house. (opposite page) An authentic Japanese teahouse where the tea ceremony is performed for guests.



Back then, the place was a pinnacle of '80s design. Pastel-colored walls swept up from rare marble floors to, in one room, a mural on the ceiling. Everything was rich and brocaded in a way that looked straight out of *Dynasty*.

After Margaret Lesher drowned in 1997, the house was sold once before being purchased by money manager Chris Bittman and his wife, Kenda Noble, in 2001. When a water leak forced them to undertake repairs, they decided to return the place to its roots.

"We did things to take it back to a classic house," says Bittman. "We undid the phony stuff and went back to authentic materials and finishes," such as replacing gold paint with true gold leaf, and tearing out particle-board cabinets in favor of mahogany and cherry.

Of course, as the heads of a modern, busy family with five kids, Bittman and Noble wanted the house to look 1930s but to have all the conveniences of the 2000s. To make that happen, they called in Kurt Lavenson, the architect who had kept their previous Alamo abode one step ahead of their growing brood.

A minimalist, Lavenson might seem an odd choice to refashion a classic estate, but he was up for airing out the old manor.

His first action was to create space, by widening and moving doorways. "The goal," Lavenson says, "was to create a series of arches that line up with one another so that you can see one room from the next, and light and views and different qualities can filter in from adjoining rooms."

While Lavenson created room for the kids to roam, interior designer Cyndi Devereaux helped shape the look of the house. Lavenson and Devereaux refinished a massive, mahogany fireplace surround in the living room, and continued its wood accents throughout the house, adding mahogany moldings and cherry flooring. An office became a dining room with smooth Venetian plaster walls, and the team finished transforming Lesher's huge second-floor closets into sizable bedroom suites.

Some of Lesher's amusements remain, including the ranch house-style western ballroom, the rare 1950s Coney Island shooting gallery, and the art deco theater, complete with adjacent bar—not to mention the straight-from-Tokyo Japanese teahouse in the backyard.

After three years, the house is finally finished, but Bittman and family won't get to enjoy it. He had to relocate after becoming the chief investment officer for the University of Colorado Foundation. The mansion was recently sold for an undisclosed amount, though it had been on the market since April for \$8.95 million.

Whoever can afford that chunk of change will probably have a nice wardrobe, and it's a good thing: When you walk into the house that Bittman and Noble have left behind, you feel as though you should be wearing a tux or a formal gown. That's something Margaret Lesher could appreciate. ■

