

Fine Homebuilding®

ANNUAL ISSUE ON

HOUSES

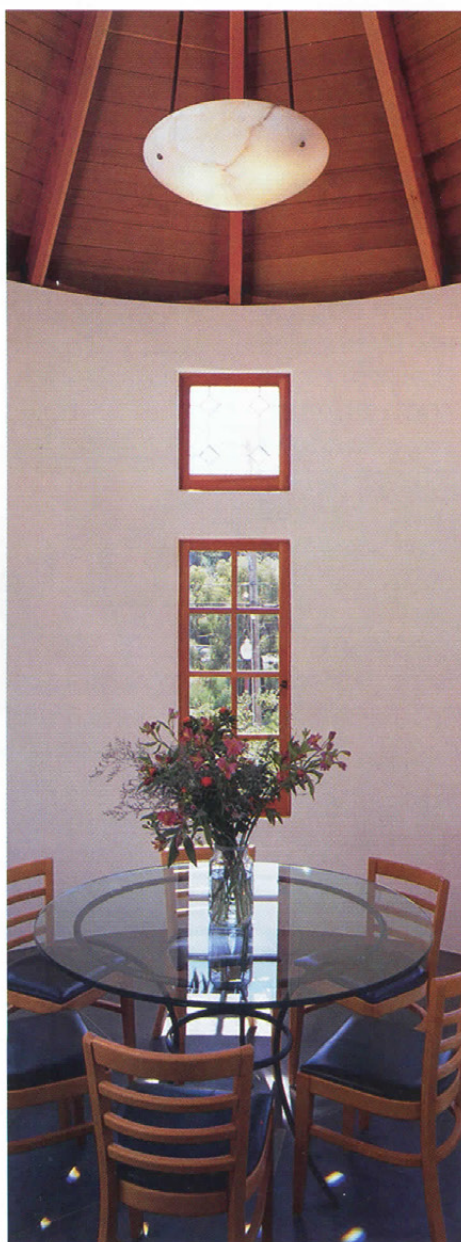
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A New Normandy Cottage

A remodeling contractor draws on his knowledge of an old house to rebuild a home lost in the Oakland hills fire

by Kurt Lavenson

On a Sunday afternoon in late October 1991, a firestorm ripped through the Oakland/Berkeley Hills area of northern California. Fanned by hot, dry winds, the fire quickly cut a wide and brutal path, destroyed nearly 2,800 homes and took a number of lives.

One week later, I was standing with my client, Terrie Johnson, in the soggy ashes of her house, surrounded by the wreckage of her neighborhood (bottom photo, facing page). A heavy rain had fallen the night before, and above our heads big clouds were crossing a magnificent blue sky. Silhouetted against this backdrop, chimneys stood amid the rubble, and concrete steps ended in midair.

Loss and replacement took on new meanings for me that day. The neighborhood was gone, but it still existed in the collective memory of the people who lived there. Each person, each new refugee, had to come to grips with loss and then take the wearisome steps of rebuilding. And for everyone, the rebuilding path started in a bureaucratic briar patch.

Documenting a nonexistent house—An insurance company remembers a house much differently than a woman who loved her home. Insurance companies do not allocate value to the sacred qualities; the feeling of an old wood-paneled bedroom or a plastered archway had to



The fireplace divides the living room into two distinct spaces. Inspired by the original fireplace, the new one is a freestanding partition. Note how the ridge beam passes through a slot between the chimney's two flues. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

be quantified into linear feet of vertical-grain fir and square yards of subcontracted plaster work. The funky brick pathways and curved rafter tails—all of the stuff that gave Terrie's house character—had to be reduced to unit costs that could be crunched to arrive at a replacement value.

I started by researching building-department records, which the city of Oakland made available through a special Community Restoration and Development Center. Set up in an abandoned Safeway supermarket, this "one-stop shop," as it came to be known, was a real time-saver. Under one roof, the city made available plan checkers, zoning officials, building inspectors and design-review board members. This special arrangement shaved many days off the typical permit process.

Terrie tracked down copies of reports from her real-estate agent and a flier advertising the original house with its photo under the caption "A Normandy cottage." A family album also yielded a variety of suddenly precious snapshots of the house. We compiled this information into a packet that we submitted to the insurance company. Then we hit a brick wall. The insurance company vastly undervalued Terrie's loss. So we gathered more data on the original house and comparable houses in the neighborhood.

This task was arduous, but through the process of documenting the old house and defending it

Holding its own on the street. With its restrained use of eyebrow dormers, hip roofs and a cylindrical turret, this new house in the Oakland hills recalls the region's architectural heritage. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

Only the chimney remained. Like thousands of houses lost in the Oakland/Berkeley Hills fire of 1991, Terrie Johnson's house was reduced to ashes watched over by a mournful chimney. The freestanding fireplace in the new house pays homage to the scene.



Top photo: Alan Geller. Bottom photo: Kurt Lavenson.



Plaster archways once again. Deep, arched passageways were a signature detail in the original house. They are reprised in the new house, as can be seen in this hallway to the living room. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

against insurer skepticism, a transformation took place. I earned Terrie's trust. She knew I understood the spirit of her old house and could not only revive it but also improve on it.

Reinterpreting the past—Early in the project, I invited my architect friend Cass Smith to collaborate with me. He liked the whimsical detailing and informality that came through in the photos of the original cottage, but he believed the increased bulk of so many rebuilt homes nearby required that more stature be designed into Terrie's new house. Therefore, we emphasized the steep roofs and the strong geometry of a cylindrical turret to give the house a noble public presence (top photo, p. 65). Our goal was to make a house that could hold its place on the street without being an imitation.

Terrie's enthusiasm increased when we rearranged the plan and siting of the old house. We shuffled the footprints of the original spaces to maximize the amount of sunlight into the rooms and to minimize the amount of noise from a nearby freeway. She had always wished she could push the house forward on the lot to

gain a small patio (floor plans below). This project was her chance. The power to redesign became contagious.

We continued to transform the plan of the original house by raising the roof enough to squeeze a master bedroom in the upstairs. This detail fulfilled a remodeling dream that Terrie had for the original house. Approaching the design as if it were a remodel gave the new house a critical link to the past.

The upstairs master bedroom came to include a small balcony that overlooks the backyard (photo right). The bedroom's open plan flows into a generous bathroom (photo left, p. 69). At the end of the upstairs hall, we added another room that can be used as a study, an exercise room or even a small bedroom (with the addition of a door).

We were then left with the whole downstairs for public spaces such as the kitchen, the living room and the dining room. To this level we added another bath and a bedroom that could be a guest room or a child's room for a family. The kitchen was kept simple, efficient and full of natural light. French doors off the kitchen lead

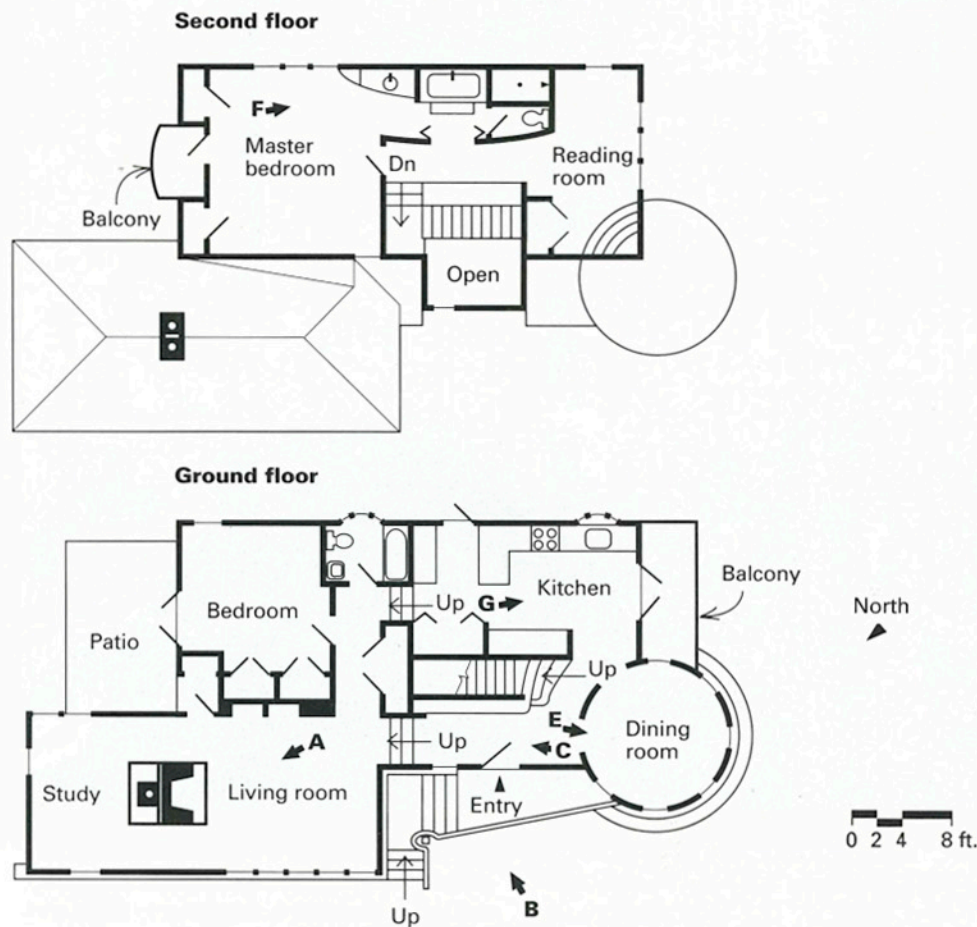


The roofs don't overpower the backyard. Notching the foundation into the hillside put the floor on the same level as the backyard. That decision, along with breaking the mass of the house into two roughly equal portions, reduced its bulk. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 2, plus a reading room
Bathrooms: 2
Heating system: Gas-fired hydronic radiant floor
Size: 2,500 sq. ft.
Cost: \$225 per sq. ft.
Completed: 1993
Location: Oakland, California

Photos taken at lettered positions.



Two rectangles seek circle for memorable plan. At the junction between the kitchen and the entry, the cylindrical turret that greets the street becomes a circular dining room. Offsetting the two rectangular portions of the plan allowed the architect to create a sheltered, sunny patio in the backyard.



Dining in the turret. On the west side of the house, the dining room occupies the cylindrical turret overlooking the street. Hand-troweled plaster finishes the walls as it wraps softly around the edges of the window openings. The dark-gray floor is pigmented concrete. Photo taken at E on floor plan.

to a small deck (photo right, facing page). Terrie likes things quiet, and she likes to read at home. The original house felt like a getaway cabin with its beamed living-room ceiling and wood paneling. Surrounded by mature trees and with thick plaster walls, the original house conveyed a sense of solitude. To recapture that feeling, we emphasized a new timbered ceiling (photo p. 64) supported by 2x6 walls. These walls hold more insulation than is standard in this climate zone and gave us thicker jambs at all openings. We also decided to heat the house with a hydronic radiant system. It has no fans and therefore generates no noise, and it provides steady, soothing warmth. Our sound-deadening strategies were all the more important because it will take years for the landscape to return to its pre-fire, sound-deadening density.

Cass and I worked hard to make all of the proportions dramatic and pleasing at the same time. Looking again to the geometry of the cylin-



The bath is open to the bedroom. A mahogany cabinet topped with a curving concrete counter links the upstairs bedroom with the master bath. The shower walls, the tub surround and the bathroom floor are covered with limestone tile. Photo taken at F on floor plan.



Daylight floods the kitchen. A bay window over the sink and French doors (with a transom) to the west allow ample natural light into the kitchen. Beyond the doors, a balcony off the kitchen provides a sunny outdoor space in the afternoon. Photo taken at G on floor plan.

dricul turret, we emphasized that space by focusing the stairway landing and the long axis of the plan on the turret. This plan created roofs that had to be mocked up (and redesigned) at full size by my partner, Randy Keller. The windows in the turret are laid out on compass cardinal points and topped with beveled glass (photo facing page). Sunlight moves through the room as it would on a sundial and strengthens the connection to the outdoors. A compass scribed and grouted into the round concrete floor reinforces the concept.

Quantity or quality, the perpetual question—As the fire-zone hillsides are rebuilt, it is apparent that most people are aiming for the maximum square footage that their budgets can supply. We took another route and devoted the budget to authentic materials and craftsmanship rather than gaudy amenities and gross square footage. The materials used to finish the

house were chosen to display lasting quality and to complement the skills of the subcontractors who worked with them.

We chose Douglas fir for most of the doors and windows, which have true divided lites and insulating glass. The divisions of the muntins recall the windows of the original house. The cabinets were custom-made (Birdseye Woodworkers, 816 Bancroft Way, Berkeley, Calif. 94710; 510-849-4852) and are primarily maple and Douglas fir.

But we splurged on Honduran mahogany for the front door and for some special cabinets with concrete countertops. Slate covers the entry and kitchen floors. From there, two oak steps lead up to oak plank flooring in the living room and lower bedroom.

The walls are finished with plaster veneer over two kinds of substrates. We sheathed the flat walls with blue board and the curved surfaces with metal lath. Once the curved areas were built up with a couple of layers of plaster, a top

coat of veneer plaster was troweled onto the walls to bring a hand-tooled continuity to the interior and to approximate closely the look and feel of the original walls. At windows (and some door openings), plaster wraps around the edges to make bullnose corners. At some passageways, we fulfilled Terrie's request for deep arches like the ones in her old house (photo p. 66).

As the house begins to age, the patina of the materials is growing richer. I think we designed and built a good house. It took more time and effort than most of the neighboring houses, and it cost more than the insurance company contributed. But as I look around the nearby hills and see too many big houses that look as if they leapt right out of those insurance unit-cost charts, I am confident we did the right thing. □

Kurt Lavenson is an architect and contractor living in Alamo, California. Photos by Charles Miller except where noted.

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