

Barn Again

A DRAFTY OLD BARN BECOMES A COZY MILLION-DOLLAR HOME.
by Martin Holden | PHOTOGRAPHS BY Cesar Rubio



ALTHOUGH HER NEW HOME IS JUST 1,200 SQUARE FEET, LINDA LEE Harper knows how to live large. Skyhill Ranch, her extraordinary enclave in the hills between Napa and Sonoma, encompasses 87 acres of forest, rolling lawns, and a spring-fed lake. When she found the property, with its dilapidated house and barn, the designer, philanthropist, and high-voltage Napa personality immediately enlisted the help of a friend, San Francisco architect Olle Lundberg. The two had previously worked together on her homes in Yountville and SoMa's Clocktower Lofts.

Skyhill Ranch was previously owned by former San Francisco 49er Ted Connolly, and the main house, with its carpeted, sunken conversation pits, was not Harper's style. Her first instinct was to tear it down—which she did. But not before turning the old stable and farmworkers' quarters into what was meant to be a guest house. From its modest start, the building evolved like a living thing, and before long, "Farmworkers' House" became



FACING PAGE: Before renovation, the barn was allowed to decay for decades. "There were bats," remembers owner Linda Lee Harper. "There were rattlesnake nests. It was absolutely Third World." THIS PAGE: Where horses were once stabled, a multipurpose room now serves as an overflow office and entertaining area. In the foreground is Marc Newson's Wooden Chair, available at Limn.



ABOVE: "We were being slightly tongue in cheek here," says architect Olle Lundberg. "We put the TV where the fireplace would normally go, since it's become the center of the house." The cantilevered console is made from a slab of Australian eucalyptus. BELOW: A steel stairway descends an old stone wall, which once separated the living area from the stable.

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Harper's primary home, office, and social hub—even though it's smaller than some of her neighbors' garages. The main house will just have to wait.

The redesigned barn is like a small ship. Its spaces do double and triple duty, as needed. A curtain pulls down to separate the laundry area from the guest bath, which also contains a collection of wineglasses dangling from the ceiling.

Elsewhere, shades descend at the touch of a button, transforming a work space cantilevered out over the office into a sleeping loft. Unlike building a new house or simply remodeling, totally re-vamping an existing building presents unique challenges and unexpected benefits. "You end up with spaces and geometries that you wouldn't necessarily create if you were starting from scratch,"



ABOVE: Harper calls this her "Alice" room because you enter through a glass door. "The space is wonderful to look into, like a little Zen garden," says Lundberg. A friend made the pillow-cushions for seating. BELOW: The trellis that provides privacy for Farmworkers' small garden is made from what was once the redwood deck of the main house. Overhead cables are held in place by large lead fishing weights.

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says Lundberg. "You get these wonderful accidents, and idiosyncratic solutions to existing conditions."

Those happy accidents were a perfect fit for Harper's personal style. "Though it's my design on a detail level," says Lundberg, "as an overall concept, it's more evocative of her personality. She's never seen a corner she didn't like, a junction she didn't like—she wants to celebrate every meeting of materials." As with many small things worth having, this one didn't come cheap. "I was going to put a quarter of a million dollars into this," says Harper wistfully. "It's been a million instead, but oh my God—we've gotten our money's worth!"

Much of the extra cost came from the extensive custom metalwork that Lundberg and his team fabricated in their SoMa atelier. "We generally build what we call the 'signature pieces' of our projects, like a fountain, a staircase, or a front door," says Lundberg. "In Linda Lee's case, we've gone way beyond that, and fabricated practically every component of the project. It's just a celebration of detail all over the place." Best of all, the client is happy in her modern mountaintop aerie. "The scale is perfect," says Harper. "It's a nest." □

Martin Holden writes regularly about architecture for San Francisco.

