

Modern History

A minor 60's house gets a major overhaul.



By JULIE V. IOVINE Photographs by RICHARD BARNES



Opening pages and above: In the living room, Olle Lundberg, the architect, extended the view of the San Francisco Bay by abutting glass at one corner without the support or visual interruption of a column or window frame. Laura Secombe, the interior designer, carried the checkerboard theme of the courtyard garden (right) inside to the stainless steel fireplace surround. Left: Lundberg kept the helix shape of the original staircase.



Left: The courtyard is now more integrated with the rest of the house, thanks to transparent walls of glass. The architect used tilting stainless steel frames and curving windows in place of the right-angled geometries typical of 1960's modernism.



Original house and courtyard in 1961.

BEING MODERN IS MORE COMPLICATED THAN IT USED to be, and a newly renovated house in San Francisco offers a short course in modernism, then and now. When it was built in 1961, the 10,000-square-foot house, designed by the architect William Wurster, did not exactly fit the white-box mold. The ceilings were 12 feet high, for one thing, not the regulation 8 feet, and there was a central courtyard, an obvious nod to California's sunny climate that purists from the International Style school would have disdained. Noted by the local landmarks board, but otherwise uncelebrated, the house was bought in 1991 by Lawrence J. Ellison, a billionaire software mogul, who had his own ideas about finding the Zen in modern design. After considering all the big-name talent that money can attract, Ellison settled on Olle Lundberg, a relatively unknown, 42-year-old architect who likes to work with his hands — anathema to any modernist reared on mass production — fabricating much of the hardware for his projects in his office.

The architect knew immediately what he had to do: make the spectacular views of the San Francisco Bay even more panoramic. To that end, Lundberg turned the house's factorylike grid of opaque glass facing the courtyard into a sweeping wall of glass and stainless steel that juts out, as if it were craning to capture a glimpse of the Golden Gate Bridge. The monotony of plate-glass windows has been relieved in the living room with a distinctly syncopated rhythm, thanks to the addition of stainless steel frames, French doors and, most particularly, a large trapezoidal panel.

In deference to the owner's interest in all things Japanese, Lundberg, with the help of Ron Herman, a landscape designer, drew inspiration for the courtyard's new plantings from an early-19th-century temple garden in Kyoto. A checkerboard of alternating black-river rock and baby's tears ground cover adds a dynamic graphic to the contemplative outdoor space. A small forest of bamboo trees disguises the neighbor's wall. The overall impression is one of calm luxuriousness and a past gently prodded toward a more resonant future. ■