

THE LOOKER



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The Joy of Taking the Stairs

How to turn a cramped Noe Valley cottage into an airy, three-floor home: one step at a time. By Lauren Murrow

As any San Franciscan who has spent an evening—or many—circling the block knows, finding street parking is the city dweller’s curse. So much so, in fact, that one Noe Valley family opted to remodel an entire house to allow for that ultimate city perk: a two-car garage.

The original home was a diminutive, one-story Victorian sandwiched between two larger houses. In its modest form, architect Neal Schwartz was confronted with an engineering conundrum: How do you pack space for two cars—not to mention a family of three—into an 850-square-foot cottage?

Schwartz’s answer: Go vertical, jacking up the existing home and inserting an entirely new level beneath it. On one side, he constructed a sloped parking ramp that tilts downward at a 22-degree angle, long and narrow enough to fit two cars end to end. That meant that the garage’s angular ceiling would cut a wedge through the new bottom-floor living room. Aboveground, that’s disguised by a 10-foot-wide stadium staircase clad in glossy, rift-cut white oak. “Something I love about archi-

itecture is the way that problem-solving is embedded in the design,” says Schwartz. “Nothing is pure—often, it’s a response to the challenges of building in San Francisco.”

Though clever, the overscaled stair was a risky move on a lot so cramped. “It’s difficult to design a house that feels spacious and cohesive when you’re splitting the living spaces among multiple stories,” says Schwartz. “The challenge was to make the floors flow together.”

The unifying factor, he decided, would be the uncommonly sculptural stairs that meander from the family room to the kitchen and living room to the bedrooms on the top floor. “I wanted it to be clear that the stairs were the big architectural moment,” Schwartz says. In the family room, Schwartz offset the floating oak stair with a dark walnut ceiling, a rich contrast. “I wanted you to feel embraced by the stair, so you almost feel like you’re being carried upward by it,” he says. That stairway is now a favorite play area (and hiding place) of the owners’ seven-year-old son.

From the family room, a stair leads to the kitchen and living area. On this



1. A dramatic suspended stairway leads from the family room to the living room and kitchen on the second floor. 2. The home features an indoor-outdoor living room, an outdoor barbecue patio, and a fire-pit-equipped roof deck.



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floor, the existing square footage was constrained by the setbacks required on both sides by San Francisco’s Planning Code. Schwartz created new openness by exposing the end of the kitchen and living room to the sky. On one side of the stair, there’s a barbecue patio and dining area; on the other, a glass-walled outdoor living room. “You come up through this oak chute and enter into a pure glass box,” Schwartz says gleefully.

The living room’s transparent walls shield the family from the elements, while an outdoor fireplace wards off the chill. “We can be outside even when it’s windy or storming and still have a cozy indoor feeling,” says the homeowner, who wishes to remain nameless. “It’s a total anomaly in San Francisco.” The white oak of the stairway runs in a ribbon along the kitchen floor, cresting seamlessly into the dining table like a wave. The 11-foot-long table—custom designed by Schwartz and Architecture—doubles as a generous kitchen island.

Up another artful stairway, the master bedroom surrounds a central courtyard, which floods the space with sun and fresh air. But the home’s most stunning feature, perhaps, is its most unlikely: the bathroom. At 200 square feet, the comparably spacious room revolves around a 10-by-6-foot picture window that affords sweeping views of Billy Goat Hill from the built-in tub.

Schwartz admits to having doubts over the course of the project’s two-and-a-half-year progress. Between the unorthodox garage design, the home’s unusual proportions, and the planning department’s demands, he worried the final product would emerge disconnected. “I was constantly thinking it was going to spin out of control,” he says with a laugh. “I’m proud I was able to wrestle a complicated puzzle into a home that ultimately feels clean and serene.” ■



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3. A strip of white oak from the staircase continues across the kitchen floor, wrapping around the dining table. The faceted kitchen tiles are by Ann Sacks. 4. A distinct stairway on each floor—including a stadium staircase in the living room—unifies the three-story home. 5. The master bathroom’s 10-by-6-foot picture window reveals views to Billy Goat Hill. 6. The architects raised up the home and added a new ground floor to accommodate off-street parking. The sloping garage allows space for two cars to park end to end.



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