

San Francisco Chronicle Magazine

MAY 8, 2005



A Lighter Side of Dark

Designers flood a wood-heavy interior with color

For me the family is where it starts," says San Francisco interior designer Barbara Scavullo, as if to explain the rationale for a large 8,500-square-foot home she completed in Atherton for a couple with four children. Early on in her 25-year career, Scavullo used to work for modernist William Wurster's firm, but this project is not at all like their work.

Scavullo's client studied architecture at Princeton. Although he's in finance now, he was instrumental in the way the building took shape. He leans toward modern design, but his wife prefers older styles of architecture like the house they shared in Pelham, New York. "He also wanted tall vertical doors and windows trimmed in mahogany," says Scavullo.

"The aim was to bring their two aesthetics together. He loves mahogany and so we used a lot of it. For her, our detailing is tied to Arts and Crafts and a little bit to Edwin Lutyens, or 1920s architecture," she says.

The gabled house they built in collaboration with architect Karin Payson has the feel of older buildings. The lower floor is clad in mahogany and cherry paneling but has contemporary detailing. Pilasters, coffered ceilings with plaster insets and cherry floors throughout also add to a sense of history. "But there was no particular historical period intended — we just wanted the feel of a substantial, traditional family home."

"I also showed them a lot of work by Bernard Maybeck," says Payson, pointing to dormers and clerestory windows influenced by his architecture.

The U-plan courtyard house is divided into wings on each side of a vestibule. To the left are Kitler's office, library and formal living space; to the right are Gail's office, the kitchen, a guest room, dining room and family rooms. The upper floor, where the bedrooms are, is decorated more to her taste and tends to be lighter in palette and less wood heavy.

Payson and Steve Justrich, Scavullo's in-house architect at the time, took a page from Frank Lloyd Wright's book and fine-tuned the double-height vestibule so that a wooden staircase to the upper floor doubles back over the tall front door to create a soffited entryway. A fixed wood-and-glass-paned "shoji" screen in this foyer shields the powder room from view.

The interior design involved other architectural sleights of hand. In the family room, for instance, Justrich designed false truss beams that allow the eye to make a comfortable transition from the vaulted ceiling over the family kitchen and dining space to the peaked ceiling of the family room. Upstairs, an eyebrow dormer is softened with a false demi-lune ceiling.

The furniture, chosen by Scavullo's design director Arnelle Kase, is as mixed in style as the eclectic architecture.

"There were a few things we reused from their old home," says Kase.

In the family room, she introduced her favorite style of seating — an

Left, top to bottom, views of the vestibule design by Steve Justrich and Karin Payson in collaboration with Barbara Scavullo. The stair rises and doubles back over the tall front door. The fixed, pane-glass screen shields the powder room. Right, convivial L-shaped seating before the fire and a leather armchair from Enid Ford spell comfort. The faux ceiling trusses allow a smooth visual transition from a vaulted ceiling in the breakfast room to a peaked one in the family room.





The formal living room, left, has a bay window looking onto the garden, above.

L-shaped sofa — that allows the owners the option of sitting facing the fire or the television. “That shape also provided the breakfast area a kind of screen so it doesn’t feel as if the table’s right in the family room,” she says.

In the formal living room, Kase unleashed color to counter the formal woodwork in the rest of the interior. “Luckily, both our clients like color and he wanted something bold that filled the space and was also inviting,” says Kase.

“I really wanted to ground the space. India has so much color,” says Kase, who had been there as a young designer in 1979. “We were inspired by that. You don’t get something quite like that in something Italian,” she says.

Antique Swedish armchairs that have delicate paisley-patterned upholstery work in concert with a vintage Agra rug. The sofa from Enid Ford has chartreuse upholstery, and as a counterpoint, Kase added contemporary metal coffee tables by Gary Hutton.

At one end of the living room a bay window with three sides of glass looks completely modern despite its wood-frame windows.

“They are detailed like steel sash windows,” says Payson.

But here, too, there are hints of India. “The Woven Cargoes fabric on those chairs from Enid Ford has a special pattern,” says Kase. “It’s the tree of life.” ♦

Zabid Sardar is The Chronicle design editor. E-mail him at zsardar@sfchronicle.com.





Upstairs, painted wood and lighter textures prevail. Left, in the master bath, blind doors with mirrors conceal storage. Limestone floors are matched with golden plaster walls. This page, a deep porcelain tub is offset by custom mosaics from Waterworks. The panels simulate Asian wall hangings.