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An Acadian Cottage



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Some Things Bold, Some Things Blue

Bold colors define this remodeled barrier-free house

by William Dutcher

A prominent hip roof over a long, narrow floor plan describes the house that Pauli and Sandy Muir started with. The place had never been remodeled, and its kitchen could have been set aside as a “before” exhibit to illustrate how American attitudes about kitchens have changed over the course of 50 years. Its walls, ceiling and cabinets were meticulously finished—with a coat of gray enamel paint. The kitchen had very little counter space, only one window and a single light in the middle of its flat ceiling. The plywood-panel cabinet doors concealed utensils, dishware and foodstuffs, and as was often the custom, the kitchen was intend-

ed to remain behind closed doors, isolated from the rest of house.

On the north side of the house, a two-step difference in levels between the house and the garden was another condition that had to be changed in the remodeling. Sandy had been disabled by polio as a young man, and though he uses crutches, he gets around the house mostly by a wheelchair. Making the house easily accessible to him was one of our principal goals.

The interaction between clients, architect and the building itself can be pretty cloudy at times, as the process of sorting out a remodeling hierarchy of needs, wishes, existing conditions, op-

Embraced by the new. The original cottage is now flanked by two additions in the rear of the house (photo above). On the left, a small shed now houses the kitchen. On the right, a new wing contains the master bedroom and bath. In the center, the garden-room windows look out on a deck and paths that are now on the same grade as the interior floors.

Bench corner. Sturdy, built-in furniture is a Craftsman tradition. In the kitchen corner (photo right), the author updates the tradition by adding adventurous colors, patterns and textures to the built-in bench and its surroundings. This quiet corner of the kitchen offers a retreat from the culinary commotion and features a window overlooking the garden.





Streetside. The new path to the front door rises on an incline, bearing largely on fill brought in to raise the grade gently. Note the green stripes in the dormer—they delineate the new construction from the original roof.

tions and budgetary realities runs its course. From the beginning, however, Pauli and Sandy made it clear that they wanted their remodel to be something special. In hindsight, I think of the project as embodying four general ideas: accommodation, old and new, tradition and place-making. It seems relatively easy for me to think in terms of these ideas now, but it would have been impossible at the beginning.

Accommodation—In my mind, accommodation means molding, bending and adapting the

architecture to fit the clients' program in a comfortable, hospitable way, much like the way a shoe accommodates the foot (rather than the other, painful way around). In this case, accommodation meant adapting to the Muirs' specific needs while maintaining the architectural harmony of the neighborhood.

Accommodating Sandy's disability became a large factor in the design. He was generally reluctant to have things modified to suit his needs, whereas Pauli always considered how my proposals would affect Sandy's use of the house. I

tried to make these accommodations seem effortless and natural, beginning with the sidewalk.

The house needed wheelchair ramps along both sides—one leading to the front door and the other to a couple of entries on the west side of the house. Rather than make them stand apart and proclaim themselves as ramps, we took the gentler approach of tipping the entire ground plane in front of the house. We brought in truckloads of fill to raise the grade and held the new earth away from the foundation of the house with low retaining walls.

On the west side, the driveway rises to meet a level boardwalk that extends the length of the house. On the east side, a sand-finished concrete path looks like an ordinary walk as it climbs to the entry (photo left). Where the path leaves direct contact with the ground, the 3-in. thick slab is supported by sheet metal over pressure-treated joists and reinforced with #3 bars.

For a while, we had planned to make this path a boardwalk but decided that it could become dangerous when wet because of the incline. Sand-finished concrete has enough tooth for a good grip even in the rain. To get this finish, a hose is trained across the top of the concrete (standard mix—no special additives) after it has taken a set. It takes a practiced hand with the hose because the tendency is to wash away the sand and get down to larger aggregate.

Providing easy access around the house and into the garden was equally important. Before I started laying out the dimensions of the new spaces, I spent a day in a wheelchair, measuring the amount of room it takes to move around. While a wheelchair is only 24 in. wide, it takes a surprising amount of space to maneuver one. Consequently, I learned that the center of the house should be a large, open space with the kitchen laid out along one wall for ease of access (large photo, facing page).

There is also a kitchenette (designed for Sandy) by the door to the dining room. It has a 6-ft. 6-in. long counter with a sink, a small cooktop and an under-counter refrigerator at one end. He uses the kitchen to prepare hot meals when Pauli is out of town.

Pauli had two requests for her office nook (small photo, facing page). Because she dislikes working at a desk facing a wall, she asked for a window that would give her a view across the dining and living rooms. Also, she wanted the floor raised a step to place her at a comfortable level with the existing window, which gives her a view of the path that leads to the house. Pauli also likes the step up because, she says with a twinkle in her eye, "It keeps Sandy out of here."

The master-bedroom/bath wing is on the same level as the original house. Sandy prefers to take showers in a bathtub, so we found a drop-in bathtub with a wide, flat rim that makes it easier for him to transfer in from his wheelchair; its Kohler's K840 "Maestro Bath" tub (Kohler Co., 444 Highland Ave., Kohler, Wisc. 53044; 414-457-4441). We also installed a stainless-steel grab bar around the perimeter of the bathroom that doubles as a towel bar.

The new wing and the original house are linked by the garden room, which had to have its



One step up. Adjacent to the kitchen, Pauli's office nook (photo above) looks toward the front of the house. It is separated from the kitchen by a blue screen and by a step up. This extra step places Pauli at a comfortable level from which to gaze across the dining room toward the living room and the front path. Another window provides a view to the side yard.

Places around a center. The new kitchen is actually a collection of places arranged around the table. In the foreground, a tree-trunk post and beam carries the corner of an upstairs bedroom by way of cantilevered orange glulams. Using the tree trunks helped strengthen the connection between indoors and out.

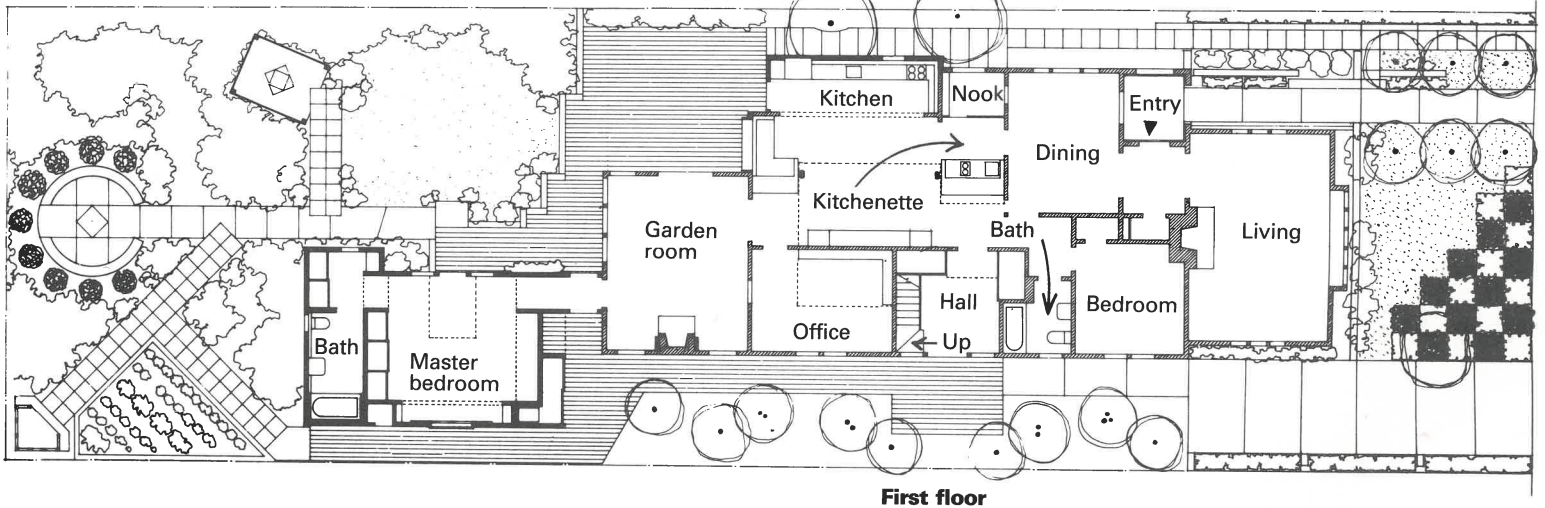
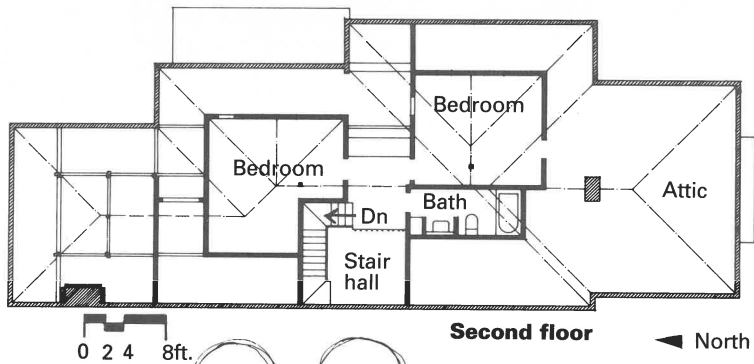


Original floor plan

The footprint of the original house remains virtually intact. In the rear, a new master-bedroom wing occupies the same spot that was taken up by the garage. The original 8-in-12 roof enclosed an unused attic large enough—with the two new dormers—to squeeze in a couple of bedrooms and a bath.

SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 4
- Bathrooms:** 3
- Heating system:** forced air, gas
- Size:** 3,000 sq. ft.
- Cost:** not available
- Completed:** 1991
- Location:** Berkeley, California



floor lifted 20 in. to match. To make the garden easily accessible, we used earth from the bedroom foundation excavations to elevate the rear garden to the floor level of the house.

Old and new—I felt that it was important to respect the character of the existing house, to capitalize on its intrinsic merits (such as the hip roof, multipaned windows and its cottagelike feel) and to take my design cues from the form of the existing building. Early on, it seemed that exploiting the difference between old work and new work was a good strategy for addressing Pauli's desire for the design to have "bite." I took this to mean something that has a sharpness—an edge to it—that makes you take notice and challenges your assumptions and expectations.

Pursuing this idea meant there would be no disguising the remodel. The old would remain old and would not be changed. Conversely, the new would not be made to look old.

I had originally intended that the new ceilings be clad with painted pine boards affixed to the undersides of the rafters. But when the old flat ceilings came down, Pauli liked the look of the 1x4 skip sheathing and wanted to preserve it as part of the new ceiling.

Fortunately, the garden room had originally been sheathed with 1x4s. Our builder, Tom Nowell, and his crew carefully removed every other board. These extra boards became the patching materials we needed to replace split boards and to fill in places where vents and ducts used to go through the roof. More provocatively, the memory of the former walls are recalled in the tracery of the dark-colored bands set into the hardwood flooring (photo left, facing page).

New cabinets and the stair (really a large cabinet rather than a conventional stair) were designed to stand apart from the walls as objects that "float," furniturelike, in the existing spaces. Instead of being scribe-fit to walls, the cabinets engage them by way of ½-in. reveals.

On the exterior, the stripes made by alternate rows of green shingles show where the original roofs meet the new ones. The board siding on the new walls distinguishes them from the old stuccoed walls. Color delineates old and new. Old walls are gray; new, white. New windows, doors, cabinets and beams are multicolored. Old windows are white. I hoped this approach would add a dimension beyond the usual.

Tradition—Pauli asked that the house partake of the traditions of East Bay architecture. A strong part of that tradition is the Craftsman style—a style that emphasized simplicity of construction, extensive use of wood, revealed structural members, geometric decorations and built-in furniture with a solid, utilitarian bearing.

Because the original house already exhibited some Craftsman traits, we decided to add more to them in several ways. In the kitchen, a solid, built-in bench occupies a corner by the door to the garden (photo p. 61). The kitchen table is the heart of this house, and the bench is a place to retreat to and get away from the action.

Squares and circles are used as decorative designs throughout the house. Squares are repeated

Shaping the design

The Muirs—Pauli in particular—had an enormous commitment to this project. Not being architecturally educated, she set about clipping photos of buildings she admired and writing a list of things she wanted done. After this preparation, she put together a brief, which read in part:

"The new plan should give us easy accessibility into the house, a master bedroom with adjoining bath, rooms for two grown children when they return for visits, a study for Sandy, a semiprivate place for Pauli's desk and files, accessibility to a garden and deck, a kitchen that opens to the yard, a cozy garden room and some storage space.

The overall feeling should be informal, warm, natural and cottage-like—a house with a heart. Important considerations: pleasant spaces, light and air, a house that is basically simple and honest but that brings a smile to your face."

Pauli then held a minicompetition among three architectural firms to get schematic designs with different approaches. Each architect got a copy of the brief, and each received compensation for participating regardless of whether they were awarded the commission. My plan was eventually accepted—I think in part because I took the time to have a preliminary meeting with Sandy and Pauli to see if my ideas were on the right track.

When we got down to business, Pauli came to the table armed with her binder of photos and a recently read copy of Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*. Both, she claims, gave her courage when she and I were battling out a particular idea. She says, "It isn't easy for an ordinary housewife to stand up to a professional with 30 years' experience."

Both the client and the architect taught and learned from each other. The Muirs revealed their unique needs and desires. In turn, I taught them about the language of architecture—about color and form, about particular traditions, about the subtle influence of Japan on West Coast building and (if I may be so bold) about the history of modernism in architecture. This is, after all, now a modern house. —W. D.

in various scales in all the new windows and doors, in the screens over the master-bedroom windows and beside Pauli's desk. Circles show up in the cabinet that flanks the kitchen table and the stair railing.

A strong connection between indoors and outdoors is another Craftsman trademark. The Muirs' garden room, with its French doors to the deck, is one such connection. If you look at the new floor plan (drawing previous page), you'll see another. The house now has an axis that extends from the hallway through the glass of the garden-room windows, continuing along a path to a red-brick sitting circle surrounded by cypress trees. Yet another connection is the large dormer window in the master bedroom, which is situated to frame a magnificent pine tree.

The master bedroom can be considered a sleeping porch—albeit an updated version. It has sliding panels that can be opened behind the headboard to let fresh air wash over the bed (photo middle right, facing page).

Place-making—Of all the factors motivating this design, the idea of making a memorable place was probably the most important; that meant giving the spaces character. At the core of the design, the Muirs and I wanted to touch people emotionally. In part, we sought to do this through the details. The repetition of the square and the circle helped, and the same can be said about bringing trees inside the house, using them as posts to support the new upstairs bedrooms (photo previous page).

We also used color to make places. This part of the Bay Area is often shrouded by coastal fog, which softens the light and invites the use of bright colors. As a break with the past, I wanted to paint the new Craftsman details with vibrant, complementary colors, instead of with the traditional dark stains used in earlier times. Pauli resisted. Sandy resisted. Wouldn't bright colors overwhelm the space, they asked, making it impossible to display artwork or appreciate the views out the windows? Not so, I would say, pointing out that the walls of museums are often finished in bold colors, with no adverse affect on the paintings hung on them.

I brought over books on color in architecture, especially the works of Luis Barragan, Bernard Maybeck and Carlo Scarpa. I also brought the Muirs books on the so-called naive arts from all over the world that demonstrate over and over that unexpected color combinations can be a delight. Pauli began a photo file of the unusual color combinations she encountered in her travels, and we started pinning up dozens of color chips from the paint store. In the finished rooms, skylights give the colors punch (large photo, facing page).

Color and building code come together at the top of the stair. We needed a railing here, and Pauli wanted it to be removable so that large pieces of furniture could be delivered easily. Given its prominent place, the rail had to be special; it had to have an open feeling, not look like a prison grate. I played with some wooden handrail sections in my shop, coupling them with dowels to various lengths of handrail re-



Under skylights. The new kitchen is laid out along a single wall for ease of access. A row of skylights stretches the kitchen's entire length, helping to illuminate the vibrant color scheme. Where old walls have been partially removed, their patches have become inlays in the new oak floor plan. For example, the mahogany strip that recedes toward the door from the bottom of the photo marks the line of the east wall of the original kitchen. In the upper left corner, the original skip sheathing is revealed as the new ceiling finish.

turns. The result is a trio of snakes that weave in and out of the railing, while being part of its structure (photo above right).

Meaning?—The design of this house succeeded, I think, in two important and unexpected ways. First, it is not based on a formal concept or image, but rather on ideas and attitudes about what the goals were and how they might be accomplished (sidebar facing page). These ideas—and Pauli and I both had very definite ideas—gave a framework to guide the design and allowed a variety of solutions.

Second, the design is impure, ambiguous, open-ended. This allowed (and encouraged) change. For example, the skip-sheathed ceilings and the sliding window panels in the master bed-

room are substantial changes that occurred during construction.

Even after construction was “complete,” changes continued. After the first winter, doors were added between the kitchen and the garden room and in the stair hall. A cabinet was added to close off the upstairs landing from the kitchen. The Muirs made these changes to give the kitchen more tangible boundaries. I resisted, believing the openness of the design would be compromised. But the changes enhanced the room, giving it an element of variety and flexibility that was lacking. In this case, the architect learned from the client. □

William Dutcher is an architect in Berkeley, Calif. Photos by Charles Miller.



The tale of the snakes. At the stair landing, a trio of snakes stands guard. The red, white and blue one is for political science (Sandy's profession), the one on the right is for the client who wanted “bite” (the only snake with fangs), and the one in the middle is for the architect who stuck his neck out.



Fresh air. Sliding shutters over the master-bedroom headboard can be opened to take advantage of the breezes on balmy nights. The 2x2 grilles on the outside are security screens. Note the little doors on the lower shutters. They can be opened individually to let in just a little ventilation in cold weather.

Built-ins stand out. Cabinets and bookcases with incised circles stand slightly apart from the walls, as though furniture. This bookcase is in Sandy's office.

