



Adam Neale and Megan Freitas' dream house

Marin family's home

is small, carefully built to last,
and in tune with nature – and kids

by Zahid Sardar

Adam Neale and his wife, Megan Freitas, have made a home in Inverness that perfectly marries shoe-box modernism to Bernard Maybeck's Arts and Crafts-era building style of exposed wood ceilings, handcrafted wood and forged steel details. Because the house is just seven rooms and two bathrooms for four people, it could well be used as a template for other homes in the West.

In keeping with our newly straitened times, it is a sensible building (as post-World War II ranch homes were), with a small vestibule, large open living space, breakfast room, three bedrooms and a laundry room laid out more or less in a straight line. Its

built-in banquettes and unpretentious furnishings, including some well-used Modernist heirlooms and art from Neale's parents, make it a comfortable place for dogs and children to romp in.

There is little distracting color other than the milky off-white glaze of the pleasantly imperfect, locally handmade Blue Slide tile backsplashes in the kitchen. Other touches there include hand-burnished concrete counters, the natural colors of various woods, and waxed plaster walls.

The house, like a natural beauty that requires no makeup, is perfectly proportioned. No room seems too large or too small. The



result is crisp, modern and yet whimsically woodsy at the same time.

What's more, the 2,400-square-foot home by Berkeley designer Gustavo Carlson, who worked on the Emporio Armani cafe and Levi's flagship store in San Francisco, is full of small, casual green comforts for the couple and their twin daughters, Lily and Fielding.

The sloped, fire-resistant metal roof hangs over deep wooden porches in the front and back; in the front are attractive red cedar square columns that recall Russian-style cabins in the Fort Ross area of Sonoma County.

The south wing of the stucco house is angled at 22 degrees - like a boomerang - so the back porch can better face the eastern view. On the south side, a combination stucco and poured concrete wall is composed of fly ash, a reusable waste by-product of coal-fired power plants. This wall absorbs and generates heat in the winter; in the summer it provides welcome shade so both front and back porches can serve as outdoor rooms.

Inside, a central spine of clerestory windows brings in light all day from the southeast. Tall powder-coated aluminum French doors on the east and west faces allow cooling breezes to flow through. It's that simple.

The recycled teak planks used in the floors hold vestiges of their history in nail holes and blemishes; laminated Douglas-fir beamed and sloped ceilings look like the inside keel of a boat and recall the Maybeck style. When thick coastal fog blocks views of the woods and distant bay, the owners can find warmth in the red cedar-lined breakfast room, which feels like a typical Inverness cabin, and the children can entertain themselves in a world of make-believe in the play loft under the rafters of their bedrooms at the north end of the home.

Neale had imagined more voluptuous shapes, such as vaulted ceilings and curved walls, but luckily, because of budget constraints (the house cost about \$500 a square foot), he settled for the more restrained, slightly angled rooms Carlson proposed. The east-facing breakfast room and the spacious master bedroom jut into the back porch as if they were added over time.

"They never wanted a trophy house," Carlson said, recalling the first discussions of what home meant to the couple. The ritual of brewing coffee was more important than a built-in machine that would be ready with a cup when they awoke. The only fancy appliances are a Viking stove, which works hard for frequent large family gatherings, and an equally hardworking dishwasher.



They valued the feel of wood - Neale is a woodworking instructor at a Waldorf school - more than shiny steel and glass and wanted no room that did not have a purpose. In fact, if a room could be used two or three ways, it would be even better, they told Carlson.

Both in their early 40s, the couple met on the East Coast and moved to Colorado for 10 years, where Neale worked as a snowboarding and kayaking instructor and a carpenter, until they had their twins and decided to move to Marin, where Freitas' sisters live.

Freitas' great-grandfather, an emigre from Portugal, had started a cattle ranch near Point Reyes that remained in the family until she was a young girl in West Marin. She remembers riding horses along trails near Inverness and returned there frequently once they moved to the Bay Area.

"Megan took me to see the spot where she recalled spending time at a family friend's home, and we saw the property near it that would eventually become our home," Neale said.

The property was strewn with junk. More than a dozen old cars, boats, trailers and chainsaws were scattered across the 3 acres, and the man who lived there burned and buried garbage around his cabin. Even so, several years later when they learned it was for sale, they knew it was for them.

"It was right by the horse trails Megan loved," Neale said. He was also drawn to the setting. Although he and his three broth-

ers grew up in a wealthy gated community in Miami, they were never far from the Atlantic, and Neale became an avid surfer. Inverness' proximity to Tomales Bay and the Pacific - and even better surfing - was irresistible.

"My father worked with the 7-Eleven corporation, so I think of us as a farmer-grocer family anyway," Neale said with a laugh.

They pooled their savings with money they inherited from each of their families and bought the land with the small 1,000-square-foot cabin on it. Neale cleared the property of all the junk but changed little inside the cabin other than to make it more comfortable. Instead, they acquired ponies, "and the girls got interested in riding too," he said. As they watched their girls win riding ribbons, they knew their 11-year-olds would soon outgrow the small house.

"Small children in a small house did not bother me, but people told me that we'd need more space later," Freitas said. "And I was tired of having to climb over Adam to get out of bed every morning. I wanted to have room on each side of our bed, and room for a couch." Their former master bedroom was the size of their new laundry room: 8 by 10 feet.

Being green-minded, they wanted to save as much as possible of the rickety cabin for a guesthouse, but that would have entailed moving off the choicest spot on their land, where they had learned the habits of the sun and stars, flying bugs and the birds that chased them. They decided to tear it down.



However, they decided that their new house did not have to be as large as building codes would have permitted and that it could still feel a bit like the cabin. “You don’t need more than one large, high-ceilinged 400-square-foot room for a place to feel spacious,” Carlson agreed.

They had no need for a game room or a separate family room, so the single open-plan living space with fireplace suffices because it opens completely on two sides to the landscape. The porches serve as versatile rooms with deck chairs in some months and dining furniture in others. When needed, the girls’ bedrooms become the guest wing, and they share the wealth of floor space with them in their much larger new master bedroom.

A large bathroom with a deep Duravit porcelain tub for Freitas and an outdoor shower on the back deck for the surfer are sensible luxuries. And, in their Zen entry garden of raked gravel, concrete retaining walls also do double duty as built-in benches.

“This design came out of several iterations responding to their lives,” Carlson said. “It connects to what they love: filtered tree views and bay views. It has a meadow to run or ride in.”

And instead of spending money on square footage, they decided to use costly materials judiciously in places where they will wear well and gracefully over many decades. This actually makes it a greener home than many that are Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-certified yet ostentatious.

It uses traditional Arts and Crafts ingredients and modernism, but with such a light hand that it looks refreshingly new. This house could well signal a turn in Bay Area architecture.

“It is now also my idea of a green home,” Carlson said. “Something built for many generations.”

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