



RESPONSIBLE REMODEL

After 18 years, a family of four rebuilds their Palo Alto home into a sustainable dream house.

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It was summer 2007 when Jason Rusoff and his Berkeley-based architect Gustave Carlson stood back from Rusoff's post-demolition midcentury home to look at the framing. They were a bit shocked, and frankly, a little scared. "I couldn't believe how little wood was holding the house together," says Rusoff, a software engineer who purchased the 1961 ranch house in Palo Alto 18 years ago with his wife, Barb Elspas, a medical researcher. Carlson concurs. "You're not really quite sure how a house is framed until you open it up and see," says the architect. "The bones were good, but no, there wasn't much there."

Rusoff admits he wasn't in love with the original three-bedroom, two-bath property to begin with. "It had a Brady Bunch-era lava-rock fireplace. Need I say more?" he asks. But the home's location in the heart of the burgeoning Silicon Valley was a major selling point for the career-minded couple. The close proximity to good schools for their two sons, Alex and Sam, plus the added bonus of a built-in social network (close family friends lived on the same block) were also strong persuasions.

But for the couple, building their ideal home—one with a soaring roof, massive open kitchen, spa-worthy master bath and landscaped yard—was secondary to raising a family, an endeavor that tends to take a toll on a rickety old house. "We hadn't planned on a major renovation, but once we started looking at what needed to be ripped out and modernized, we knew we were in for a full makeover," Rusoff recalls.

"Almost everything in the house was original from 1961," Rusoff explains. "The kitchen was too small. We didn't like the grooved hardwood floors. The louvered windows were just laughable in the winter: You could always feel the wind blowing through them. And all the interior ceilings were unfinished, which makes for a dramatic appearance, but is a disaster as far as regulating the indoor temperature. It was cold in winter and hot in the summer."

Based on this information, plus the inside scoop on the family's daily routines (work and school schedules, traffic



Architect Gustave Carlson was able to make this 1960s family home feel much larger without changing the footprint. He rearranged rooms and added a generous ipe-wood deck that connects to many of the home's most commonly used spaces.

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The once-cramped kitchen was moved to take advantage of a larger but lesser-used space. The new kitchen benefits from dramatically pitched ceilings, plenty of natural light and an open design that includes a bamboo-topped island and modern maple cabinetry.





BEFORE

patterns, clutter habits and the like), Carlson drew up a series of three different cost-based layouts—high, mid-range and “the biggest bang for your buck.” The graduated proposals have become a trademark of his practice. “I want my clients to understand all of their options,” he says. “Usually, one single plan won’t satisfy all of their budget concerns and design needs.”

Having succumbed to the inconvenient, yet inevitable, decision to move the family into a nearby apartment during the renovation, Rusoff and Elspas felt comfortable going with the most extensive transformation. In addition to the installation of new oak floors and low-E windows throughout the house, the heart of the plan involved the momentous relocation of the kitchen, which would occupy an existing 300-square-foot breezeway between the house and the garage. “Barb and Jason weren’t out to ‘McMansionize’ the house by building out—or up—as much as they could,” Carlson explains. “They simply chose to make better use of the original footprint.”

Featuring state-of-the-art stainless-steel appliances, FSC-certified maple cabinets and a sustainable bamboo butcher-block island that doubles as a casual counter-dining option, the new open kitchen has unsurprisingly become the home’s most celebrated space. Its west-facing clerestory windows let in the late-afternoon sun—a bonus for dinner preparation that’s also inherently energy efficient. “If you understand the way the sun moves across your property, you can create a design that captures its light,” Carlson explains. “You’ll cut down on electricity bills and achieve a sense of openness.” The home’s new roof now features recycled insulation, and the kitchen’s cathedral ceiling, pitched to mirror the original, soars 14 feet for an airy effect.

Carlson studied the patterns of the sun to determine the most efficient window placement. In the kitchen, west-facing windows take advantage of the late afternoon sun, delaying the need for artificial lighting during dinnertime, when the space is most often used.



The modern, clean-lined master bath feels luxurious thanks to Carlson's use of various interesting textures. Smooth white pebbles line the wall behind a subtly curving soaking tub, while recycled glass tile glistens in the sun thanks to the new light well.

says Rusoff, who would visit the building site daily on his way to work during the nine-month construction process. "We hadn't planned on including one, but that's why it's important to be flexible and stay involved every step of the way." The shower's natural light is reflected off the glass tile, which is made from recycled bottles. The adjacent tub area features a striking backdrop of white river stones. Altogether, 100 square feet were added to the master bath. "It was a cramped, one-person-at-a-time type of space," says Rusoff. "This was the one spot where we gave in to our impulse to build bigger."

The backyard also underwent an impressive restoration: Palo Alto landscape architect Keith Armstrong removed a patchy grass lawn in favor of low-maintenance, drought-tolerant native plants such as gooseberry and salvia, a well-known butterfly magnet. Shade-loving species were also nestled into the shady terrain, beneath the property's mature pine, crab apple and redwood trees.

Today, south-facing glass doors in the kitchen, living room and master bedroom offer an enchanting spectacle: A new pond and fountain designed by Carlson have proven to be favorite backyard haunts for hummingbirds and egrets. "The chirping birds and trickling fountain make it easy to tune out the noisy street and nearby train," says Rusoff. A raised ipe-wood deck, which Carlson designed to be flush with the main floor of the house, also encourages an effortless indoor-outdoor experience. "It's a way of extending the home's square footage using outdoor space," he explains. "Now the family comfortably steps outside in their slippers, or even barefoot. For an architect, it's so satisfying to know that your clients appreciate the design just by virtue of enjoying it." ■

The brightening treatment was also bestowed upon the formerly claustrophobic master bath, thanks to a last-minute suggestion by the couple's 18-year-old son, Alex. "The light well in the shower was his idea,"



The open-plan kitchen and dining room is now the home's most popular space. The island is used for a quick snack or just hanging out and keeping the cook company, while family dinners take place at the table.

