

Earth-friendly home rises Phoenix-like from ashes

by Ann Jarmusch

In a secluded Southern California neighborhood, where picturesque historic homes hug the rims of tree-filled canyons, a 21st century house has arrived.

GREEN LIGHT - The San Diego home of Susan and Steve Shuchter (top right) fits into this vintage neighborhood and takes advantage of the Mission Hills canyon views while using environmentally friendly materials inside and out, including ribbed channel glass (above). A high ceiling and open floor plan have made the new kitchen a favorite spot of Susan Shuchter. The cabinets are made of renewable wood. CNS Photos by John Gibbons and Howard Lipin. This contemporary dwelling for the Shuchter family doesn't overshadow or shout at its gracefully established Craftsman and Spanish Revival-style neighbors, many of which were built eight or nine decades ago. It fits the area's villagelike pattern and scale, where one- and two-story homes stand close together, buffered by small, fenced gardens and yards. The house's soft colors also blend with the woody, green canyon behind it and changing sky.

Yet, from the street, one can't help but notice this recent addition to the neighborhood. The geometry of the facade and front fence is pronounced and precise, in keeping with the industrial nature of many of the materials selected by architect Heather Johnston.

Form clearly follows function. The structural systems are exposed and expressive - but with soft edges and modest proportions that ensure the design conforms to neighborhood character.

You can't tell by looking or even touching the walls of this one-year-old house, but what firmly anchors it in the 21st century is its wide range of environmentally friendly materials, inside and out. Some are being used thanks to the owner's sense of responsibility to the planet and the architect's dogged research.

The exterior front walls are clad in precisely arranged rows of rectangular panels made of cement fiberboard siding, one of the practical, green materials Johnston ordered that's not often seen on American homes. Smooth and slatelike in texture, the panels appear to change color - from gray to heather to purple - depending on the time of day. They never need painting, resist mold and don't appeal to termites.

Five kinds of glass bring natural light into the house, focus views and connect indoor spaces with the canyon behind the house. Channel glass, long used in commercial buildings in Europe, is a relatively new option for American homeowners. The Shuchter house may be the first residence in San Diego to incorporate its distinctive, strong "ribbed" walls.

Johnston, who aims for multiple virtues in each building component, uses channel glass here as a nearly continuous band, or clerestory, high overhead to bring natural light inside and support the roof. At the heart of the house, a channel-glass wall forms a dramatic, floor-to-ceiling veil that separates the entry to two bedrooms from the open kitchen and dining areas.

FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

It was Susan Shuchter, an internist, who insisted on building a house that would also conserve energy and natural resources. Given their good fortune to own such a lovely spot, she felt compelled to leave "a social and ecological imprint that's not hard on the planet."

Her husband, Steve, credited Susan with this accomplishment. "She was very set on this. It wasn't a moral imperative for me, but it was for her," he said.

Generating energy via roof-mounted photo-voltaic cells was Susan's top request and one that seemed easy to implement. It wasn't, to the Shuchters' dismay and frustration.

For technical reasons, solar cells could not be attached to the roof, which is made of another relatively unusual product called structural insulated panels, or SIPs. Both frowning, the Shuchters said they hope new hardware will be developed to solve this problem.

In addition to being environmentally friendly materials, the cement fiberboard siding, channel glass, concrete floors and SIPs are all fire resistant. (SIPs are made of foam insulation sandwiched between sheets of pressed concrete material; they were hoisted into place by a crane in one day.)

Californians, especially those living on canyons like this family, are conscious of fire danger. The media called Steve Shuchter, then a University of California San Diego clinical psychiatry professor specializing in grief counseling, to comment on the trauma and recovery process for victims of October 2003 San Diego wildfires, the worst fires in California history.

About two weeks later, Steve was stunned to find himself in need of his own advice: The wood-shingled home that formerly stood where the new house is today was destroyed by a fire that started in a bedroom.

Daughter Naomi, a composer, musician and artist, was home at the time and escaped unharmed with the family pets.

MOVING FORWARD

The whole family was shaken. The couple had lived there nearly 30 years, raising three daughters who treated the canyon out back as their playground. Originally a Craftsman bungalow, the old house had been modernized by previous owners, who added lots of glass and a second, lower level with the master suite and family room stepping down into the tree-shaded canyon.

Johnston's first meeting with the Shuchters about designing their new home took place in the bungalow's charred, smelly and forlorn shell. Susan Shuchter was still sifting through the sad, surreal remnants for family

keepsakes. Johnston recalls being stunned by sooty remains: a melted CD collection, charred stacks of medical journals and a child's crumpled shoe.

Initially, Steve and two daughters wanted to rebuild the shingled house, but the family soon united around a plan to start fresh. In either case, the replacement had to match the original house's footprint to streamline their insurance claim and the city's permitting process.

"The Shuchters are perceptive people," Johnston noted. "The whole point of modern or contemporary architecture is that it reflects the present, and anticipates the future, rather than the potentially nostalgic past.

"The fire was so devastating, that to overly focus on what was there before was merely to reinforce the loss. Instead, we looked for a way forward, to help them see a life ahead that contained not only promise, but potential they couldn't have realized before."

Naomi helped nudge her parents from their former comfort zone - a bungalow furnished with ponderosa pine and leather - into an airy, contemporary house with sleek modern furniture in bright colors.

"Between all of us, we have good taste," Naomi joked.

LIGHT RUNS THROUGH IT

Today, her father seems delighted that his former post-and-beam house, which suffered from confounding blockages of views and indoor-outdoor movement, has been reborn with a more fluid floor plan, improved connections with the outdoors and more natural light. Johnston achieved these goals partly by adding glass window-walls and decks on the canyon side.

The architect also positioned the interior channel-glass wall on a slight diagonal through the heart of the house, a bold gesture calculated to draw people, or at the very least their eyes, toward the canyon.

As in the old house, the master suite and family room, now enhanced by a bar/entertainment area, are on the lower level.

Sunlight enters the house from angles and heights that were unimaginable in its predecessor. "The more angles you can develop the better," said Johnston, who used skylights and windows of different shapes and sizes, some of them in surprising places.

She judiciously interjected accent panels of amber-colored glass, which catch the sun at certain times of day, washing an orange glow over white walls and concrete floor. Throughout the house, handsome doors and cabinets made of sustainably grown eucalyptus also add warmth while acknowledging the eucalyptus trees that shoot out of the canyon.

"It's a wonderful house at all times of day because the light moves through it," said Susan. She's noticed various subtle effects, depending on whether she is "still or in motion."

Asked to name her favorite places, she mentions the soaring, open-plan kitchen (where she cooks gourmet ethnic dinners) and the side yard, where her collection of staghorn ferns clings to a new wood fence (all but one survived the fire).

Inside, the architecture makes a strong statement with its exacting combination of exposed structural elements, such as steel I-beams and posts, Douglas fir beams and ceilings, large windows and the occasional

white wall covered in sheet rock.

No mere green demonstration project, the structural elements come together as if crafted by a fine artist, which is how Johnston spent her undergraduate years.

Steve, now UCSD professor emeritus, pronounced the house "a work of art." He enjoys studying "the lines of the house, the way the materials are cut and fit, and the light. It's an active pleasure."

"We're both docs," Susan added. The exposed building parts are "sort of like anatomy. It makes sense to see it all, rather than padding the skeleton."

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