

Radiating History

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Tuesday, November 24, 2009 08:29 AM

In a house tucked into a Mill Valley canyon, the spirit and ingenuity of the 1960s live on.



Built in 1960 by architect Daniel Liebermann, the home's many curves and angles give it a spaciousness that far exceeds its literal size.

When Andrew Todd first got the e-mail, he knew he had to see the place for himself. The photo was of a structure that hardly looked like a house: set into the hillside was a curved building with an immense stone fireplace running its entire length, a central column of entwined steel rods that held the roof up like an umbrella, and light that came in from every angle. "I was obsessed," said Todd, the cofounder of Bay Area salons diPietro Todd.

He and his wife Kim had been happily ensconced in a modern home, a 4,800-square-foot house in nearby Greenbrae. They had just remodeled the backyard, adding a hot tub and new landscaping. In short, they were hardly thinking of moving, let alone embarking on a multi-year renovation. But this house changed everything.



The house is supported by a column of spiraling metal tubes; from this dramatic sculpture, the original timber ceiling unfolds like an umbrella.

It turned out that it was one of the first homes designed by architect Daniel Liebermann, who built it for himself in 1960. Liebermann, who apprenticed with Frank Lloyd Wright, had a cult following for his organic structures, several of which are in Mill Valley. Still practicing today, he was a very early preacher of green building. In his own home, he implemented his vision of the ideal architecture, which has turned out to be remarkably prescient. “I was thinking about how to disrupt the site as little as possible,” says Liebermann, who is just shy of 80 today. Instead of maximizing what he could build on the steep, heavily wooded hillside, he created a shallow excavation—what he describes as a “bite out of an apple.”

The concave “bite” provided space for a curved structure, perhaps 800 square feet, perhaps a bit more. After studying architecture at Harvard, Liebermann wanted to experiment with building shapes. Here, he created a house that is a half-oval; with the flat edge made of glass and facing south, it is a perfect example of passive solar design, maximizing the natural light available. With clerestory windows around its entire perimeter and 18 skylights, the house had no overhead lighting when the Todds bought it.



Architect Vivian Dwyer (pictured at right) oversaw the complex renovation for the Todd family, who frequently entertains around the central stone fireplace.

In addition, Liebermann canted many of the exterior walls out ever so slightly. The roof has a similarly delicate pitch: beams radiate out from the central supporting column, creating a shallow slope down to the house's two corners. As Liebermann had hoped, a space without traditional 90-degree angles turned out to feel mysteriously large.

The architectural sleight of hand involved is disguised by not only the subtlety of the angles, but by the rough, natural materials used in the space. The long fireplace of stacked rock looks like it could have been used by cavemen—especially with a giant boulder in front, which Liebermann brought in to serve as a sofa. Besides the foundation, all the materials—from the Douglas-fir beamed ceiling to the airplane-glass shelves embedded into the reclaimed brick walls—came from the salvage yard. It was a cheap way to get building materials, says Liebermann, and he liked the aesthetic.



A new peninsula in the updated kitchen made space for a discrete dining area, where a wood slab table is set with period-perfect Heath dinnerware.

These ideas, right on point today, are how the Todds' foreman, John Lovell, came to email Andrew about the house. Lovell became interested in Liebermann's work after attending a talk about green design. When he saw the real-estate listing, he recognized it as Liebermann's own home.

A longtime family friend, Lovell knew the Todds appreciated unique architecture. "None of us had any idea what we were getting into," says Lovell. "It turned out to be more like working on a boat than a house, where nothing was straight and everything was curved—it was a process of discovery."



Andrew Todd relaxes on the house's stone "sofa," which has been there from the beginning. While Liebermann was working on this project, he would sleep on a sheepskin atop this very rock.

For the delicate task of retaining the original design while also attempting to "luxe it out a little bit," the Todds brought in San Francisco architect Vivian Dwyer, who had worked for Anne Fougerson before setting out on her own. "I really wanted to maintain the honesty of the house, which was so clearly a labor of love," says Dwyer. In the end, it would take the greater part of two years and a budget that was close to the purchase price of the property to turn the "beautiful bones" into a comfortable modern home.

Kevin Smith, who had worked with Lovell on the Todds' Bodega Bay vacation home, joined the team as the general contractor. "Initially, we thought things were quirky and offbeat, but they started to make more and more sense. And soon we really learned to love Daniel's design," says Smith. Because the house was built on a concrete slab, the renovation would involve the tricky task of raising the roof to run new electrical wiring and utilities overhead.

Collaborating with Lovell, Smith and the Todds, Dwyer orchestrated a pitch-perfect restoration, where every element from the oval skylight apertures to the curved interior walls had to be customized to fit the original structure. Determining from the Todds that a tiny second bedroom

and office were unnecessary, she reclaimed the spaces for the master bedroom. She also designed a new bathroom core, which can be accessed from both master bedroom and main living area.

The creature comforts Dwyer suggested include a poured-concrete tub, which replaced a cast-iron tub that had been embedded into the floor of the bathroom. The new sunken tub now occupies a corner of the master bedroom and is luxuriously heated by the house's original radiant heating system. Dwyer also designed a kitchen peninsula for extra counter space—a cantilevered steel structure that floats above the concrete floor.

The most prominent stylistic change was the addition of plaster to cover the walls of exposed brick, deemed a bit too raw by the team. The off-white integral-colored plaster complements the stone of the fireplace and the wood beams of the ceiling.

To fit into their new space, the Todds happily downsized their possessions. “We just wanted more intimacy in how we entertained; in a funny way, we had outgrown our old house,” says Kim. Andrew, a collector of mid-century furniture, admits to a twinge of regret when he had to jettison his Mies daybed, but otherwise finds “living with less much more pleasurable than living with more.”



Left: The semidetached studio in back is occupied by the Todds' teenage son, Luke, while Andrew's office is tucked below. Right: Separated by a wall of glass, the living areas blend seamlessly into the outdoor terrace, where Luke and John Lovell check out the stars. Even the ceiling beams continue overhead, forming a trellis that connects the main house with the

detached studio.

It's amiraculous second act for the house, which had so much invested in it at the start. Liebermann, whose two youngest children were born during the six years he was here, moved his family from the area in 1966. "It was a dream living here, in this sunny place surrounded by the woods. I never would have left—it was more than heartbreaking," he says. "But it was during Vietnam, a scary, depressing time, and I was really mad," he says. He took a position teaching architecture in Norway, eventually moving back to Marin County in 1995.

After spending two years getting a hands-on education in Liebermann's architecture, John Lovell can speak to the impact it's had on his own work. "It completely transforms the way you think. You look at what's being built everywhere else, and it suddenly seems so boring—all the boxes and the straightness. Obviously, it doesn't have to be that way."