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French QUARTERS

ARCHITECT ANDREW SKURMAN AND
DESIGNER STEVEN VOLPE CREATED
AN ELEGANT FRENCH CHÂTEAU
FOR A SOUTH BAY COUPLE.

BY JULIE CARLSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW MILLMAN



A few years ago, a Silicon Valley tycoon launched a search for his dream house, a process that for most people might include a browse of local listings and a call to a real estate agent. But for this particular highflier, it involved an aerial survey of the secluded neighborhood and a subsequent buyout offer to the owners of the choicest property. The couple in residence rejected his initial proposal; they had raised a family on the sprawling estate and had no interest in relocating. But when the suitor nearly doubled his offer, from the merely generous to the stratospheric, they were finally persuaded.

It all turned out for the best: The tycoon got his Atherton estate, and the retirement-age couple built a new, scaled-down home nearby that suits them so exquisitely, "the husband hates to go on vacation," says San Francisco architect Andrew Skurman.

In designing the new 7,000-square-foot residence, Skurman, who specializes in high-end, classically inspired architecture, took his cues from his Francophile patrons, modeling the house on an 18th-century pavilion near Versailles. Located

OPPOSITE: Bruno Romedás bronze *Untitled Circle* frames a view of the rear terrace. ABOVE: The client chose the striped silk used for the drapes.



OPPOSITE: A painting by Ray Parker hangs over the 18th-century mantel. RIGHT: The house's entrance features meticulously manicured topiaries. BELOW RIGHT: In the living area, light filters in through the French doors.



on a one-acre lot, the house is accessed via a long driveway and is surrounded by lush landscaping and mature trees for total privacy.

"The clients wanted a one-story house for the convenience, but they liked the look of a two-story house," Skurman says. In a feat of architectural legerdemain, he created a second story: an unfinished attic with operable dormer windows and a slate mansard roof. Every room in the house opens to the outside via custom French doors, and a system of "lay lights"—skylights that funnel natural light through the unfinished upper story into the rooms and hallways—brings a soft, filtered glow to the interiors.

"We are naturally attracted to symmetry, which is pleasing to the eye," says Skurman, who apprenticed with I. M. Pei and later worked in the San Francisco office of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. "I created a symmetrical, U-shaped house: The east wing houses the couple's living quarters, and the west wing contains the kitchen, the guest quarters and the husband's office. The central wing contains the entrance hall, the living room and the dining room. This is essentially a two-bedroom house, which suits the couple perfectly."

The approach to the house is imbued with a sense of grandeur; visitors cross the fish-scale-patterned granite auto court, continue past potted spiral topiaries and the formal gardens (which hew to a strict palette of green and white) to reach the monumental solid white-oak entry doors. Inside, however, the rooms are masterfully proportioned to a human scale.

"We tried to keep the house's interior spaces intimate," interior designer Steven Volpe says. "The living room is scaled for furniture, and the couple wanted to be able to entertain small groups and their grandchildren without being overwhelmed by the proportions."

Because the wife had worked in the past with such interior designers as Michael Taylor and Anthony Hail, she was already in





possession of a distinguished collection of antiques and art. One of those pieces—a rare Regency-period credenza topped with caramel-colored Brescia marble—anchors the entry hall, which also features a Henry Moore bronze sculpture and an oversize Jim Dine “Heart” series painting, sourced by Volpe.

As the co-owner of San Francisco’s Hedge Gallery, which specializes in midcentury furniture, Volpe is known for bringing a note of streamlined modernism to the spaces in which he works. In the living room, for example, the designer mixed newer pieces—such as a set of 1940s bronze Maison Baguès tables—with existing pieces, including a pair of antique bergère chairs. The chairs, which are covered with rose silk velvet, once belonged to Michael Taylor and now flank an antique French marble fireplace from Ed Hardy. Volpe commissioned the custom rose-and-green-striped silk for the curtains, and walls glazed a soft yellow create a subtly textured backdrop.

ABOVE: In the entry, a bronze Henry Moore and a painting by Jim Dine add a note of modernity. RIGHT: The wife’s study opens directly onto the manicured gardens.

While the clients are devotees of classic French style, they also wanted modern conveniences. For instance, the husband was adamant that he be able to serve guests drinks from a proper bar







LEFT: The architect and designer aimed for a classic Provençal feel in the kitchen. BELOW: Interior designer Steven Volpe (left) with architect Andrew Skurman. OPPOSITE: In the dining room, a pair of works by Michael Gregory echoes the symmetry of the architecture.



area in the living room. To accommodate this request, Skurman and Volpe removed the back from a huge, 18th-century Italian armoire and positioned it at one end of the room. Now the armoire opens directly to a cutout in the wall that accesses the kitchen's bar counter. In the kitchen, the duo assembled "a collage of elements to create a room with a historic feel and modern amenities," says Skurman. The floor is reclaimed polished Cavendish limestone, and the white-oak cabinetry is designed to look like mismatched furniture. Volpe found heavy chicken wire for the cabinets and designed the massive hand-carved unit that conceals the refrigerator.

A stickler for details, Skurman used paneling and moldings to create visual interest and an aura of history throughout the house. Custom laser-cut heating grilles were fashioned after a pattern used at the San Francisco Opera House, and Bordeaux-patterned parquet floors were made from hand-scraped white oak that mimics the look of a rustic 18th-century country house, down to the carefully calibrated gaps between the quarter-sawn boards.

The handsome brass olive-knuckle hinges are from Von Morris and practically qualify as jewelry for the house. For the rest of the hardware, Skurman met the wife in Paris (where he has another office) to visit the venerable company Bricard; and on the Rive Gauche, they unearthed an antique lantern that now hangs in the entry.

But Skurman's first priority was spatial flow. He is particularly proud of the lozenge-shaped spaces that mark the transitions between the wings and act almost as turnstiles defining the passage from one room to the next. "It's the hallways and the vestibules and the circulation spaces that make a house," the architect says.

Now, with the couple happily settled in their idyllic French abode, it is doubtful that even the most deep-pocketed airborne house hunter could dislodge them. ■