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Wood & Windows

Los Altos architect brings the outside in

By Carolyn Snyder, Special to the Town Crier



when architect Tanvi Buch of Los Altos designed a home for her family, wood and windows were paramount. The result is a spacious environment that's warm and comfortable and brings the outside in.

It was Buch's first residential project. She had done small retail projects for SZFM, a design studio in San Francisco, and skyscrapers for Skidmore, Owens and Merrill, where she specialized in glass curtain wall design – elements of which are seen in the Buch home.

In their "pre-kid" days, she and her husband, Premal, an electrical engineer with Magma, lived in a Daly City condominium and enjoyed city life. But, with the arrival of their daughter, Anoushka, now 4, their condo grew smaller and their commutes seemed longer. They began house hunting in Los Altos.

"We couldn't find anything we liked," Buch said, "so we followed our realtor's advice and looked for something with hidden potential that we could remodel in a big way."

That something was a house on Galli Drive behind the Hillview Civic Center – but rather than remodel, they decided to rebuild.

Buch interviewed a couple of architects before making the decision to design it herself.

"It was a huge move," she said. "I was used to being part of a team and spending someone else's money. But my boss was encouraging. He said, 'Jump and the net will appear.' So I did."

Buch, now on her own, began the design process. Excluding a bout with "architect's block," it took a year for the plans to take shape and construction to begin.

The house was more than halfway complete when a fire of unknown origin destroyed it.

"Two-thirds of the house was gone," she said. "It was a huge emotional hit and ... setback."

Undeterred, the Buchs resumed construction and, finally – on Thanksgiving Day 2006 – moved in with Anoushka and her infant brother, Kabir, now 23 months.

“It was a wonderful Thanksgiving, even though we had no furniture,” Buch said.

The wood-shingled Craftsman house is compatible with the neighborhood and presents a welcoming facade with its French casement windows and circular flagstone patiolike entrance.

There is a certain “wow” component as you step over the threshold and find yourself in a large room with a lofty tongue-and-groove ceiling. Parallel wood beams over the living area and intersecting beams over the kitchen area give it a lodgelike feeling.

The H-shaped house opens to a center courtyard in back. French doors (there are five sets along the living area) and divided-light windows provide uninterrupted views of the outdoors and blur the boundaries between indoors and out. Walls are minimized.

Inspiration for the design and materials came from their desire for an open plan and from their “love of wood, the beauty of its exposed grain and the warmth it brings,” Buch said. The ceiling, woodwork and cabinetry are Douglas fir; the flooring, warm-toned Brazilian cherry.

The 3,200-square-foot house, built by Cremoux Construction of Sunnyvale, has 4 bedrooms and 3.5 baths. The master suite and children’s rooms occupy the left side of the “H.” A fireplace wall separates this wing from the open living area, which surrounds the courtyard at a right angle. It is visually separated into living room, dining room, kitchen and family room by architectural detailing and placement of furniture.

A “cabinet wall” with a “hidden” door separates the family room from a guest suite. The door is concealed – there is no visible hardware – so it looks as if the house ends at the wall.

Serving as a divider between kitchen and family room is a carved teak two-person swing, suspended by ornate brass chains – a comfy place to read or watch television. It is part of Premal’s heritage. He is from Gujarat, a state in western India, where every family has a swing.

“It is part of the culture and furniture,” Buch said.

Parallel islands, topped with black honed granite, form the nucleus of the kitchen – one contains a Viking gas range; the other, a deep stainless-steel sink and under-the-counter freezer. Other appliances are camouflaged in a wall that mirrors the one in the family room. Gary Weisenberger of Palo Alto made the cabinets.

Colors are intense, punctuated by an off-white fireplace. Oil paintings with bold brush strokes provide splashes of color on the few solid walls.

How does Buch describe her unique house?

“It’s ‘Tanvi-esque’ – a new school of design,” she said.

Buch became an architect because “it was a logical combination of math and art,” her favorite subjects as a high school student in India. She did her undergraduate work at UC Berkeley and earned a master’s degree in architecture from the University of Texas at Austin.

She was on her way back to the Bay Area from Austin when she met her future husband, then a doctoral candidate at UC Berkeley. They were part of a group trip to the Grand Canyon.

Now that she has completed their house, Buch is designing a home for a client in Los Altos and working on a remodel in San Jose.

For more information, visit www.tanvi-buch-architect.com.

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