

Designer Makes It Work (and Play) in a Russian Hill Garage

1

By **Mary Jo Bowling** | Nov 2, 2015, 10:52am PST



Photos by **Patricia Chang**

The way things are going with home prices and development in San Francisco, a lot of people would look at the Russian Hill cottage Martin Young shares with his partner and see expansion potential. Indeed, the two-bedroom home is a remodel in progress, but Young is **keeping it small and maintaining the spirit of the 1907-era building**. When the designer returned to SF and established his own business, [Martin Young Design](#), he converted the home's below-ground potting area into a multitasking space that includes his office, a garage, a laundry room, and a party zone. The project has been an exercise in restraint, simplicity, and the power of space planning. Young has been told that the home's former owner, a woman who fought to preserve San Francisco cottages, would approve.



↑ Young says that the home used to belong to Dorothy Orrick, a long-time San Francisco resident who died in 2010. Orrick was active in historic preservation efforts, and even contributed to the book [Here Today: San Francisco's Architectural Heritage](#).

↑ Young has been told she was particularly interested in protecting San Francisco cottages. When she lived in this one, which may have started life as an earthquake shack after the devastating 1906 tremblor, she used this space as a potting shed for her garden, which was designed by famed landscape architect Thomas Church. This before photo shows what the space looked like pre-remodel.



↑ After her death, Young and his partner purchased the home, but left soon after when work took them to Holland and New York City. When they returned, Young took over one of the two bedrooms upstairs as his office. But a live-work space was not working out, and when he started looking at the downstairs storage space in back of the garage with new eyes, he spotted possibility. Today, what used to be a potting shed is lined with cabinets and equipped with an island that can act as a work surface, a party prep station and a buffet, or a folding table and laundry sink area.



↑ He removed the back wall of the space, opening it up to the garage. A double-sided shelf separates his desk from the cars and defines his office. "I needed to squeeze a couple of cars down here, and it required every square inch," he says. "Taking down the wall gave me a little more to work with."



↑ His long desk, which is shared with an assistant, is positioned in front of a large window that looks over a small grassy lawn and a large redwood tree. Although the home is in the heart of densely packed Russian Hill, the tree gives the feeling of being in the forest, and it's often visited by one of the wild parrot flocks that inhabit the neighborhood.



↑ The large windows and doors make the backyard, which looks much the same as when Church designed it in the 1970s, very much a part of the area that Young and his partner have dubbed "the garage." Not only does Young look over it while he's working, it's where he and his partner entertain guests.



↑ That's when the island, its sink, and the below counter beverage refrigerator take on a host role. During the day, the area is used as a big work surface and inspiration board (it comes in handy for laying out and pairing material samples for his client projects). But when there's a backyard party, it makes a great buffet. Young says the cabinets and countertops are all from IKEA, but he gave them little tweaks to make them special. For example, the counter is a standard IKEA butcher block, but he gave it an apron that makes it appear thick and substantial. It's also stained with a light wash to match the ash color of the floors upstairs.



↑ The cabinets are set into the walls to make them appear more custom and built-in. "My idea was to open everything up, but to keep as much as possible concealed," says Young. "Nearly everything is behind cabinets, which keeps the space a simple, clean slate."



↑ Simplicity is at the heart of the design, and of Young's practice. "When we were working on this space, the contractor kept asking if I was sure I didn't want to put up walls between the spaces or seal the concrete floor to make it look more finished," he says. "My question was 'why do that?'" Young says that in his work, his first move is to try simplicity, in the sense of making something look natural, sleek, and achieved with ease. "I wanted a simple look for this space, and I also wanted it to be flexible," he says. "But while simplicity is beautiful, making something look effortless is difficult."