

Martin Young dots smartly sentimental SF flat with mementos

By Anh-Minh Le | March 13, 2014 | Updated: March 14, 2014 2:47pm

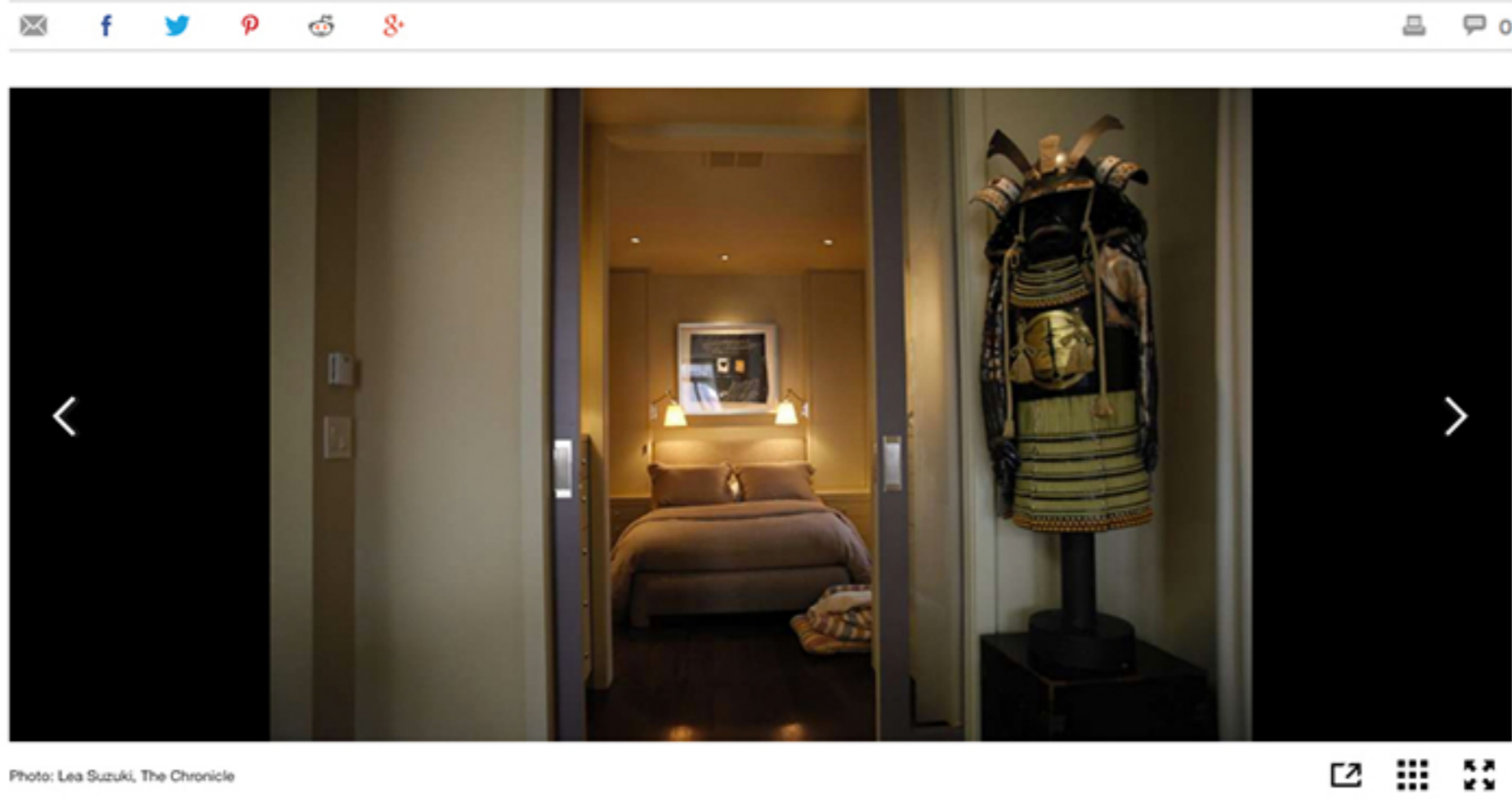


Photo: Lea Suzuki, The Chronicle

IMAGE 1 OF 10
Samurai armor decorates the exterior of the bedroom in the home of Christopher Cara in San Francisco.

When Christopher Cara was ready to convert a commercial space on the top floor of his Pacific Avenue trilevel building into a home for him and his Dalmatian, Carlotta, he had only one interior designer in mind: Martin Young. He didn't bother interviewing or even approaching anyone else.

Cara met Young in 2004, when Young stopped into Thomas E. Cara Ltd., the espresso machine sales and repair outfit that Cara's parents founded in 1946 and that he now operates. "I found Christopher to be entertaining and funny," recalls Young(www.martinyoungdesign.com), an Oakland native who at the time was living in New York City.

A year later, Young was preparing to move back to the Bay Area and returned to the shop. Much to his surprise, Cara remembered him. The two struck up a friendship that seven years later led to a client-designer relationship.

"Everything really clicked," says Cara of his rapport with Young. "After spending time with him and also spending time in his house, I only wanted him to work on my place."

Although Young is trained as an architect - having earned a bachelor's from UC Berkeley and a master's from Columbia University - he prefers to focus on the interior design of a project and frequently collaborates with architects.

For the Cara property, he enlisted the help of Richard Beard, a principal at BAR Architects - who introduced the designer and homeowner to the contractor, Michael Warner of Scott & Warner Builders.

Beard was responsible for the layout of Cara's 800-square-foot flat: The living room is located in the front and flows into a dining room that then leads into a cozy bedroom, which can be closed off from the rest of the flat by shutting a pair of frosted-glass pocket doors. (And yes, cozy translates to tiny - the sleeping quarter measures about 9-by-9 feet.) A small but efficient kitchen juts out from the dining area.

The anchor elements

When it came to furnishing the home, Young designed two anchor elements: the upholstered bed and the barley-hued sofa. He delineated the living room with a custom goat-hair rug - "It doesn't show dog hair!" enthuses Cara - that is bordered with a cherry-red binding for a pop of color in the fairly neutral space.

The kitchen's Carrara marble countertop and backsplash is the same material used for the bathroom's shower, countertop and frame around the mirror. (The inspiration for the bathroom was the Park Hyatt in Milan, where Cara stays when he travels to the Italian city.)

Cara chose the especially freckled slab of marble because it's reminiscent of the one that was in his childhood kitchen. It turns out, Cara's sentimentality is a recurring theme in the decor. Shelving was built-in throughout the unit to accommodate his many mementos. "There was a lot of editing and styling," laughs Young.

In the living room, bookcases flanking the fireplace - which features a Lagos Azul limestone mantel and darkened steel screen of Young's design - serve as landing spots for collections like the Limoges pieces that belonged to Cara's mother and glass bud vases he picked up in Venice. (Psst - an art-adorned panel above the mantel slides back to reveal a 36-inch television.)

At the entrance to the bedroom, black-and-white family photos and other keepsakes, including copper baby shoes, line the shelves. Nearby, Cara points out a small portrait of a boy singing. "It's not the best," he says, "but my dad's cousin painted it and I grew up with it."

Clever refinement

Some of Cara's heirlooms required finessing to successfully incorporate them into the design scheme. "People underestimate what new finishes and fabrics can do," says Young. "If he was OK with (those sorts of changes), I knew I could get this to where it needed to be."

A pair of shield-back armchairs that were Cara's grandmother's - "These are from the dining set that was a part of lots of family dinners," he explains - were painted in a shade reminiscent of fog and the seats covered in a Rogers & Goffigon fabric. Mahogany Chippendale side chairs that are holdovers from Cara's days living in New York City were also lacquered and reupholstered.

It was important to Cara to integrate his mother's needlepoints in the home, so Young had pillows made with a needlepoint on one side, outlined in leather; on the other side is a Rose Tarlow patterned textile. "When I'm not here, he can turn them over," quips Young, as he flips a pillow to reveal a needlepoint with a cat motif.

These days, the interior designer splits his time between San Francisco and New York City. He's keeping busy with a couple of residences in the former, and a kitchen in the latter.

And if you ask Cara, he'll tell you that Young isn't quite finished with his pad: "I still need a rug!" But that one missing bedroom item isn't stopping Cara from thoroughly enjoying his home.

While Carlotta loves lying in front of the fireplace, says Cara, he has no such allegiances. "I don't have one favorite spot that I go to," he continues. "The whole thing is my favorite spot."

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