

Design team breathes new life into Healdsburg ranch house

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Every new house has its day. Even modest tract houses flash at least a few of the latest design trends. Take any older house in original condition and you can pretty much date it by its design and details. It happens to the best of them.

But no house needs to remain stuck in its original time zone.

Efraim and Jessica Wichman of Zeitgeist Sonoma recently demonstrated how an older house can be lifted into the 21st century by applying some smart design ideas.

They turned their design expertise — he is an architect, she is an interior designer — on a 30-year-old Healdsburg home that had recently changed hands.

Fine for its time, it was starting to reflect its age. But by changing out windows, doors, molding and fixtures, and strategically removing walls to integrate the main living spaces, they turned the ranch house into a fresh and airy farmhouse with contemporary touches.

“The original house had what we often refer to as a personality disorder. It had such a variety of styles,” Jessica said.

It’s not uncommon to find homes that incorporate a variety of dissonant design details. Such was the case with the Healdsburg home, well situated on Fitch Mountain with beautiful views south toward downtown Healdsburg and Windsor, that were not maximized to their best advantage.

“One of the first things we have to do is try and figure out what the house wants to be, what the client wants the house to be, how do we mesh their mission with what the bones

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In the case of the Fitch Mountain home, the new owner, who had purchased it from friends, wanted it to have a contemporary farmhouse look. The Wichmans pulled off the transformation working primarily within the original footprint of the house.

Outside the changes were small but visually significant. Designers kept the old T1-11 horizontal plywood plank siding but removed the decorative rock siding beneath it with board and batten to give it a more old fashioned look.

One of the most dramatic changes came simply by changing out the windows.

The home had competing styles, including arched Palladian windows, better suited to a more formal or Italianate home than a ranch house or farmhouse, and tall triangular windows soaring above picture windows to the awkwardly high pitch of the open ceilings. Both were common design features when the house was built.

These were all replaced with wood casement-style windows to give it a more vintage look and to create a uniformity and visual flow throughout the house.

Both the living room and the bedroom had the triangular windows, which the Wichmans replaced with more traditional clerestory windows. Dated skinny baseboards and door moldings were replaced with wider, custom-milled trim and the old-school six-panel doors were switched out with single panel Shaker-style doors.

The Wichman's advice? Don't mix styles and stick with a singular geometry. The Fitch Mountain House had not only tall triangular and arched windows, but openings between rooms that were angled at the corners, another once popular design trick that was past its prime. They squared off the openings to crisp 45 degree angles.

The Wichmans cleared out the spaces of awkward obstructions. A tiny wetbar in the living room that seemed out of place and out of proportion was removed and a comfy window seat instead went into that corner. Around the corner the designer created a casual dining nook off the kitchen with identical window seats, repeating a design element to meld the spaces. They inserted the same white window seats into either side of the fireplace, which itself was simplified by the removal of an awkwardly large bench hearth

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While kitchens a generation ago were more open than the hidden cooking spaces of the 1950s, they were still not incorporated into the living space the way they are in today's home design.

The Healdsburg house had only a small opening cut into a wall between the kitchen and the living room not unlike an order window at a drive-in. It was set so low a tall cook couldn't even see through it without bending.

The Wichmans removed the wall between the kitchen and living rooms, separating them only with a long counter, and opening up the spectacular views to anyone at work in the kitchen.

The kitchen itself was updated with custom inset style cabinetry with Shaker doors, Prince White Quartzite slab countertops and gray subway tile backsplash.

The old kitchen had a coffered ceiling. The Wichmans smoothed that to a single plane to add to the easy flow among spaces in the living area and to make it all fit more neatly together. The open design of contemporary homes with fewer walls and design details that delineate spaces, allows for more flexibility.

The house had steeply pitched open ceilings that were popular when it was built. The Wichmans visually brought them down and softened the severity of the sharp angles with simple cross beams of alder throughout the house.

"It's quieter now," Efraim said of the home's new look.

"It's funny. A lot of people like to add pizzazz but this is actually kind of humble, with just a few accents. It's a nice result. It feels very luxurious, but not in a loud showing-off kind of way."

The project was about \$600,000, not a small sum. But updating an existing home can be worth the investment, the Wichmans said, considering the value of Wine Country real estate.

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