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Shingle Style by the Bay

A PACIFIC HEIGHTS
HOUSE BUILT TO CAPTURE
LIGHT AND THE SEA



To architect Robert A. M. Stern, entering a residence should be a little bit like peeling an onion. “You want to open the door and not have everything unfold all at once,” he observes. “If you can take it in in a glance, you can dismiss it in a moment.”

The element of surprise—of unfolding—is ever-present in a classically inspired Shingle Style house he recently designed in San Francisco, perched high on a hill in Pacific Heights with a commanding one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of San Francisco Bay.

The clients, both of whom have advanced degrees, are a



“The clients asked that their house look as though it were constructed for a retired sea captain who wanted it to reflect his voyages around the Pacific Rim,” architect Robert A. M. Stern says of the San Francisco residence he designed with partner Grant Marani. ABOVE: Cedar clads the Shingle Style residence.

LEFT: Black trim, lattice, scalloped shingles and elliptical details define the welcoming entrance porch. OPPOSITE: Light filters into the stair hall through Diocletian windows and a lantern. Designers Agnes Bourne and Geoffrey De Sousa did the house's interiors. Globes and Spanish table, Foster Gwin.

Architecture by Robert A. M. Stern Architects/Interior Design by Agnes Bourne and Geoffrey De Sousa
Text by Patricia Leigh Brown/Photography by Peter Aaron/Esto



literate, culturally active couple who have two sons, one grown. They dreamed of a house that would relate to the water, "a house fitting for a retired professor who wants to look at the sea from every room," in the husband's words. The residence, where balconies, porches and galleys spring up in delightfully unexpected places, was built to capture light, a precious commodity in fogbound Pacific Heights. The architect had in mind a place where a retired sea captain—or the founder of a technology company with a fantasy of being one—could reminisce about his sails around the Pacific.

The captain's study is conceived as a crow's nest, with a deck from which it is possible to survey the bay, from the glinting beacon on Alcatraz island and Bernard Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts to the Golden Gate Bridge. "You have the sense of living on a creaky wooden boat, with the city lying before you," says the husband.

For the overall design, Stern drew on the rich legacy of San Francisco's domestic architecture, especially the large rustic shingled houses built at the beginning of the twentieth century by Coxhead & Coxhead, Willis Polk and Maybeck. These residences, less formal than their East Coast counterparts, due to some extent to the city's irregular topography, were at once sheltering and grand, sophisticated yet attuned to the rugged, windswept quality of the landscape.

Like its predecessors, the

"The living and dining rooms provide a counterpoint to the stair hall; the columns and pilasters give them formality and scale," explains Stern. The landscape is by David Ligare. Tufted and caned armchairs, Ann-Morris Antiques. Daybed, Amy Perlin Antiques. Pierre Frey drapery fabric; Cowtan & Tout sheers.





RIGHT: Painted wood cabinets and trim, ceramic tiles, granite countertops and oak floors are combined in the clean-lined kitchen, which opens onto the family room and the terrace beyond. Nickel pendant light fixtures, Ann-Morris Antiques. Waterworks backsplash.

house responds to the compact, picturesque fabric of the city. The front, which faces the street, has an asymmetrical, slightly playful silhouette, enlivened by porches and setbacks; the back, anchored by two overscale bay windows, is classical and regal. Pointy exposed rafters beneath the roof add a subtle Japanese dimension.

The heart of the residence—and the defining architectural idea—is a central stair hall that opens to all three floors, crowned by a glowing elliptical lantern that floods the center of the house with ever-changing southern light.

A main staircase, punctuated with whimsical egg-shaped finials, wraps around three sides of the stair hall, providing balconies and vantage points for peering down into what is essentially an enclosed indoor courtyard. Interior windows line the upper floor landings, tilting open.

The residence came to be known as the Lantern House. Lanterns have been used throughout the history of architecture, notes Stern, “but this one is bigger and more generous.” It serves as an interior organizing element that is also inviting from the street. The device was loosely inspired by Sir John Soane’s house in London, a city where the lack of light is also an is-



sue. “He, too, grabs the light,” says Stern. “We also thought of Soane’s Bank of England building, now mostly destroyed, a series of spectacular rooms with light coming down from above.”

As is his wont, Stern played

professor during the design process, encouraging his clients to go to London to study Soane’s architecture and plying them with books—“two Vincent Scullys, two Colin Rowes, a Bob Stern and Edward T. Hall’s *The Hidden Di-*

mension,” the husband recalls. “It helped to have a language and a sensibility to what architecture can do,” he adds.

The couple had previously lived in an imposing Victorian-style residence. They

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“The residents wanted a house filled with light,” says De Sousa. RIGHT: A bay window in the master bedroom frames a panorama that encompasses the Palace of Fine Arts and the Golden Gate Bridge. Fauteuil, Amy Perlin. Brunswick & Fils daybed fabric. Elizabeth Eakins rug.



A fire surround of deep green tiles adds color to the master bedroom's sitting area. "An elliptical window was sculpted out of the ceiling and wall to allow dramatic east light to enter," Stern points out. Hanging near it are 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century Indonesian theatrical masks.



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looked at over fifty houses before enlisting Stern to build a new one. "To me, the majority of houses have rooms that are psychologically uncomfortable," says the husband, who was trained as a psychiatrist and has a keen sense of light and proportion. "Most architects can't design internal spaces that don't cause anxiety or depression."

Above all, they wanted a restful house. "Our big statement—what we told Bob we wanted," the husband explains, "was being able to eat, sleep and read *The New York Times* in every room."

Stern and partner Grant Marani, along with San Francisco interior designers Agnes Bourne and Geoffrey De Sousa, of De Sousa Hughes, granted that wish—even at the front door, where an alcove bench sits invitingly in a scallop-shingled entrance porch.

Although the house is formal in plan, the spaces are warm and intimate. The library, for example, is a clubby oak-lined room infused with a golden patina. Light emanates from an elliptical window that is strategically placed over the fireplace, which borrows light from the entrance and an adjoining courtyard.

The ellipse, in fact, is the Zelig of motifs in the residence, reappearing

like the galley of a ship. Secret tucked-away spaces are positioned throughout the residence: The wife's study has both a cozy built-in daybed and a private porch with a view to the bay. Nearby, a door opens to yet another private porch, this one sheltered by a shingled roof, providing an instant feeling of having been transported to Cape Cod or Maine.

Bourne and De Sousa decorated the house to reflect the couple's sense of "curiosity and adventure," says Bourne. To complement Stern's classical sensibility, they brought in idiosyncratic, whimsical pieces created by artists, such as a light fixture in the dressing room that James Misner made of braided hoses, an old kitchen strainer, bed coils and other found objects. They also brought blue and green marble to the kitchen and master bath, respectively, a counterpoint to the architect, who likes "all white, all the time," says the wife.

The couple are energetic collectors of nineteenth-century California land-

scapes and have also acquired an intriguing array of scientific instruments that "recapture an era when there was a fascination with studying the physical world," the husband says. Among them are several nineteenth-century globes from Prague and a Van de Graaff generator—for static electricity—transformed into a lamp. They also enjoy entertaining; the dining table and chairs sit on a platform that doubles as a stage for string quartets.

On weekends they gather up the newspaper, light a fire, crawl under blankets on the récamiers and read, deeply rested. "The staying power of comfort is in the details," the husband reflects. "When you live here, you see another beautiful thing every time you sit down. The details ground you and make each room an ongoing experience."

At twilight they often find themselves up top on the deck, leaning out over the rails. "You go out and smoke a cigar, or take a glass of cognac, and it's as if you were on a boat," says the husband. "The *HMS Stern*." □

They dreamed of a house that would relate to the water, "a house fitting for a retired professor who wants to look at the sea from every room."

in many guises on transoms, windows, doorknobs, pavers—even an umbrella stand. It is a vehicle for one of the primary architectural surprises: oval and round windows, placed in a nook off the master bedroom and in the master bath, offering cameo views of the Presidio and the Palace of Fine Arts. Where the architects could snag a view, they did.

A door off the kitchen leads to a hidden deck that hugs the side of the house


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