

Flame-finished natural stone and cedar slats carry over from the front of the house into the foyer. Inset: Floor-to-ceiling and wall-to-wall glass doors blur the boundaries between the interiors and backyard.



Silicon Valley

MODERN LUXURY

JUNE, 2018

A NEW BEGINNING

FOR DISCERNING CLIENTS ON THE PENINSULA, ARCHITECT STEPHEN VERNER DEVICES A MODERN HAVEN WHERE CREATIVITY AND LIVABILITY GO HAND IN HAND.

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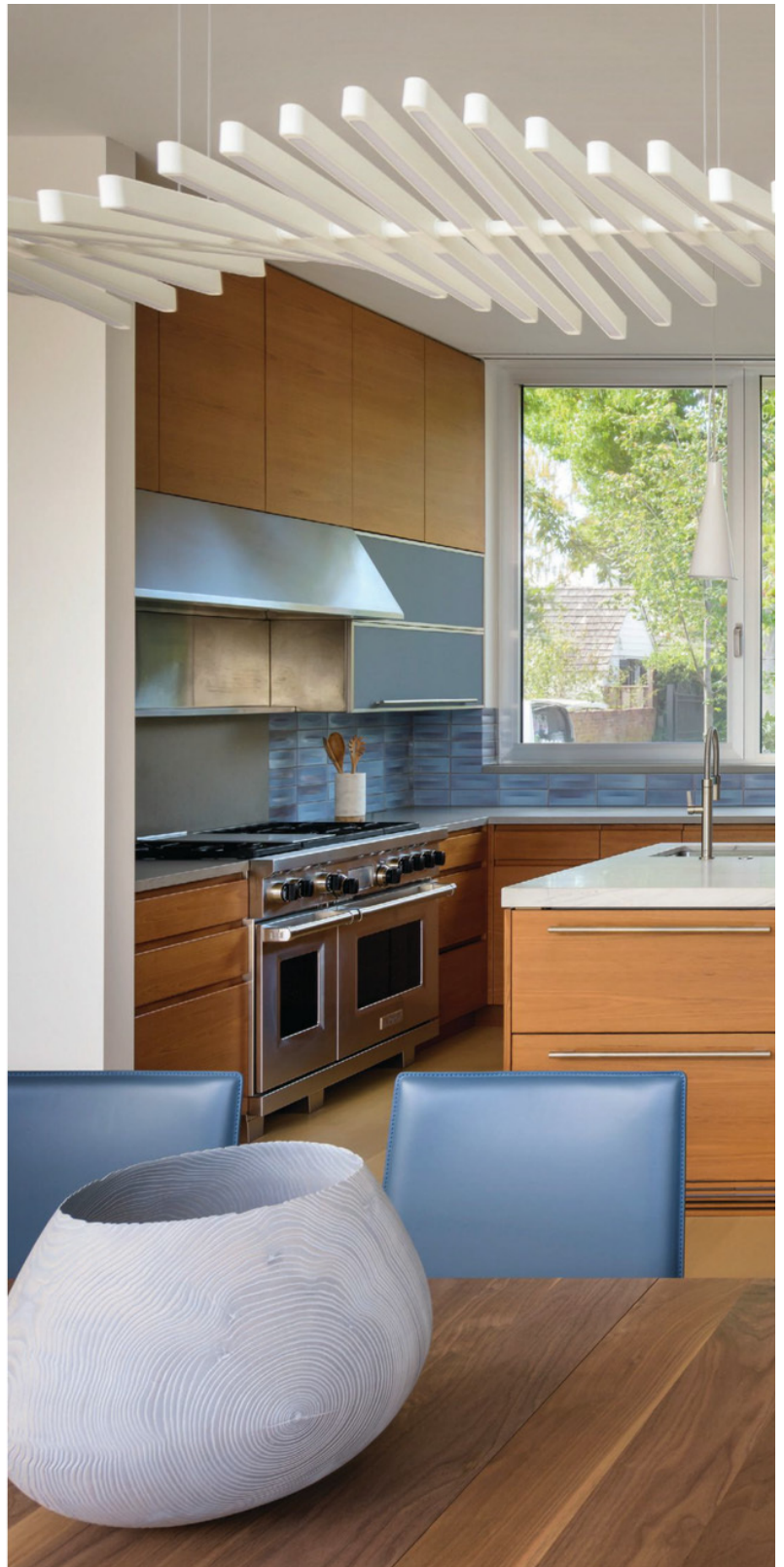
It's an all-too-familiar story around here: an aging house undergoes decades' worth of piecemeal updates—what amounts to “an attrition of bad renovations,” as architect Stephen Verner puts it. That was the case for a property his eponymous firm (vernerarch.com) recently overhauled on the Peninsula. The clients, a couple in the tech industry, initially thought they would simply make minor changes to the kitchen. But the problems with the house went well beyond the kitchen. “The layout had been added onto over the years—your typical ‘hire a contractor and add a room on the back’ scenario, with no real thought of how it fit in aesthetically or from a flow standpoint,” Verner explains. “The spaces were oddly configured and typical of a nonarchitect-derived design. The main attraction was the yard and the garden, which was mostly cut off from the house.” As the scope of the modifications ballooned, it became apparent that it made more sense

to start fresh, with Verner collaborating with Drew Maran Construction (drewmaran.com), Scavullo Design Interiors (scavullogdesign.com) and Arterra Landscape Architects (arterrasf.com) to devise an indoor-outdoor sanctuary for the clients and their children.

The project entailed two adjacent lots: one on which the existing house was demolished in favor of a newly constructed 5,500-square-foot modern dwelling; the other that was occupied by only a garage (plans by a previous owner to build a home on the tract never materialized). The latter has been replaced by well-appointed guest quarters—complete with a bedroom, sleeping loft, kitchen, full bath and living-dining area—totaling 1,000 square feet. Verner and his team—which included Monica Ream, Brailio Soto and David Swaim—also gave the family ample reasons to head outside. Next to the pool, a sculptural canopy of cedar slats and painted steel shades a built-in bench, lounge chairs and a fire pit. Elsewhere in the backyard, a gray sail shade offers relief from the sun while dining alfresco. The architects even turned an oft-overlooked area—the basement's egress path—into an unexpected oasis with a rock garden, water feature and greenery.

Zinc, stucco and glass make up the material palette for the exterior of the main house. Inside, various woods, stone floors and crisp-white walls—painted in Benjamin Moore's Steam—provide a visual through line. Just past the mahogany and bronze front door, the entry offers an ideal vantage point of the clients' beloved apple tree, which the house was designed around. A nearby library/living room boasts a 13-foot-high ceiling and, along with a window bench and lounge chairs, is outfitted with a wall of bookcases with a library ladder. A blue Venetian plaster wall is a nod to one of the clients' favorite colors; purple is also beloved in this household. Both hues appear in the family room too. Backsplashes in watery tones can be found in the clean-lined kitchen appointed with Heath Ceramics tiles and teak millwork, as well as in the powder room, where Oceanside tiles line a wall behind a sink comprised of teak and concrete. A home office adjacent to the kitchen is furnished with floating blue cabinetry. This space can be cleverly closed off with either a whiteboard-sheathed door or a teak-veneered panel that slides on a track.

The residence's three stories are connected by stairs composed of rift-cut white oak treads and steel plates water-jetted with an intricate custom motif. "We knew we wanted to do open stairs because of the three-story light well," Verner recalls. "The open stair allows for a secondary light source in the adjacent spaces. It also creates views from these spaces into and across the light well. We presented [the clients] with some common modern stair designs—steel stringers, wood treads, cable rails—and also presented them with something a little more edgy." Edgy won out. Based on the client and Verner's concept for the





From left: The kitchen includes Heath Ceramics tiles for the backsplash, along with countertops comprised of quartzite (island) and Caesarstone (perimeter); the geometric pattern on the wood screen on the guesthouse's sleeping loft was inspired by a bird's nest.



The library/living room features a blue Venetian plaster wall as well as John Pomp's Infinity Cluster lighting fixture, a custom design with crystal shades.



From left: The staircase's custom water-jetted steel plates were a major collaborative effort; a poolside canopy provides a perfect spot for lazing alfresco.

pattern that graces the steel, which draws on Chinese Zodiac characters, artist Adam Feibelman created a series of paper cuts. The final scheme by the clients and Feibelman was digitized and then water-jetted on the 1/2-inch steel plates by Mach 1 Waterjet. The fabrication and structural design of the stairs was handled by Irongrain and Daedalus, respectively. "It was definitely a labor of love to get this executed," says Verner.

The architect's ability to push the limits of design—and garner the trust of clients that allow him to do so—may have something to do with his multidisciplinary background. Verner earned an engineering degree from the U.S. Naval Academy, and in between undergrad and enrolling in the University of Pennsylvania's architecture program, did some carpentry work. After grad school, he dabbled in metal fabrication for high-end clients such as Barneys and Calvin Klein. Verner subsequently ran his own firm on the East Coast for six years before landing in the Bay Area. "I have an appreciation for what can be done, and I understand what potential issues can arise," he says of his unique expertise. "I don't

like to take 'no' for an answer if I know something is possible. Instead, I try to work with a contractor or subcontractor to figure out a solution."

According to Verner, aesthetic endeavors "always present challenges, but they are a pleasure to deal with and resolve—and yield the most sense of achievement. The nonaesthetic challenges are also ever-present in any custom home and often require more effort and coordination to resolve." In the latter category was the task of integrating "the building systems—heating, cooling, audio-visual and home control—so they work in harmony." Of course, the end result makes it all worthwhile. "I think this is what [the clients] envisioned," says Verner. "The layout of the house is achieving what they wanted it to: It's a big house, yet it manages to feel very comfortable and intimate because the spaces are well-scaled. There are areas that are open and others that offer more privacy. Striking the right balance is what ultimately makes it a success. The small details; quality of the millwork, construction, craftsmanship; and how everything came together were also extremely rewarding." ■