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ERIC RORER





let the sunshine in

A Mill Valley family finds that true happiness means enjoying the place and space you are in. **BY PJ BREMIER • PHOTOS BY ERIC RORER**

Scott Kalmbach and his wife, Tjasa Owen, knew they wanted good public schools, plenty of sun and a family-oriented community when they moved from San Francisco to Mill Valley three-and-a-half years ago.

“We looked in Tiburon and Mill Valley, but we kept an open mind,” Owen recalls. “We always knew the house would speak to us, would find us.” The family found that perfect house in Mill Valley’s Sycamore Park neighborhood.

“This area had all of the things we were looking for and more,” says Kalmbach, a real estate agent with Pacific Union International. “And this property, in particular, had charm and warmth with large outdoor spaces in both front and back.”

For Owen, whose landscape paintings can be seen online, in 13 galleries on either coast, including her own on Union Street in San Francisco, and on the covers of *Marin Magazine* twice since 2005, the Sycamore Park lifestyle has been the biggest reward of the move. “We wanted to be in ‘the flats’ to be close to everything, including the highway for commuting, close enough to town to walk and close enough to the schools so the kids could bike there on their own,” she says.

That liberty was important to her. Her children “can leave a note that they’re at a friend’s house and I don’t worry. In the city, I had to monitor the kids all the time for safety.”

City life for the adults in the family was structured too. “Everything had to be planned in advance,” she notes. “Here, dinner parties or just getting together with other families is more spontaneous.”

Her husband agrees, and he prefers the topography in Sycamore Park compared to other places he looked. “It’s so flat here that it’s easy to get to know our neighbors because everyone’s on the street playing basketball or riding bikes. You don’t have that, living on a steep slope.”

And although they were open to any architectural style, they were determined to find a house that hadn’t been



recently remodeled. “We knew we wanted to remodel,” Owen explains. “It’s our nature not to buy a finished house because we like to put our own stamp on it.”

What they eventually found was a three-bedroom residence with a walk-in playhouse for the children and another 700-square-foot building that once served as the former owner’s design studio. The place has now been remodeled to accommodate a small studio for Owen, an office for Kalmbach, a new bathroom and a family room.

“There was something special about this house; it had a great vibe,” Owen says. “But we had a vision of how the house would serve our needs as a family.”

Kalmbach and Owen, who had previously renovated and then sold two Victorian homes in the Cow Hollow area of San Francisco, took their time fleshing out the design for this north-facing home. “That was key,” she says. “We moved in for a few months while we were in the planning stages. We saw how the spaces worked in the morning light, the afternoon light, and the evening light, and we changed certain things but also decided not to change things we originally thought we would.” »



DESIGN TIP: Top left to right: Maximize space with a kitchen island; use floor-to-ceiling storage and built-ins to create functional space.



“IT’S OUR NATURE NOT TO BUY A FINISHED HOUSE BECAUSE WE LIKE TO PUT OUR OWN STAMP ON IT.”



DESIGN TIP: Small spaces can benefit from the drama of large objects of art, like the painting by Tjasa on the right or the one by Eric Zener on the left.



DESIGN TIP: The unexpected use of sliding barn doors adds a surprising visual element and also helps save space.



They worked with their longtime friend Tineke Triggs, of Artistic Designs for Living in San Francisco, to achieve a contemporary rustic look for the home by bringing in reclaimed wood, dark bronze and warm tones. “Scott and I have our own style and we’re very verbal about our design decisions so it was like having three designers on the project,” Owen says. “The goal was to give the house an old-world, lived-in feel.”

Instead of choosing a colorful palette, as the couple had done in previous remodels, they settled on a neutral color scheme of whites, tans and beiges, accented with natural accents and artful objects. And by tearing down walls, moving some interior doors, and gutting the kitchen entirely, they imparted a lively openness without increasing the building’s original footprint.

“We loved the fact that the floor plan was a small three-bedroom with one main space for the living and dining areas and kitchen,” Owen says about the 1,700-square-foot cottage built in 1942. “It meant that we’d have to constantly run into one another.”

In the foyer, they switched out the existing front door with a Dutch door — “it’s more welcoming,” Owen says — and in the great room, they defined the living room space with a pair of custom barn doors, each leading to a bedroom.

By doing that, they were able to eliminate a small hallway that they then reconfigured to give daughter Remy, 7, more space in her bedroom and also find space for a master bathroom. They made the master bedroom slightly smaller to incorporate his-and-her walk-in closets. In 10-year-old Finn’s step-down bedroom, they beefed up the overhead beams with a facing of recycled barn wood and added a built-in desk that overlooks the front garden. »



DESIGN TIP: From top to bottom:
A look at the outside area; architectural alcoves, like this built-in desk, help reclaim living space and add welcome sunlight.



DESIGN TIP: The use of glass for the shower door helps open up the room.

The walls of the adjacent kitchen were torn down, bringing the space into the open, and they added new cabinetry, countertops and a convenient island and installed all new appliances including a G.E. refrigerator, Viking range and Brian hood.

Outside, they removed the existing rose garden but kept the small orchard of fig, quince, apple and peach trees and, using the design services of Outer Space Design and Gentry Landscaping, both of San Francisco, gave the landscape a contemporary aesthetic by adding feathered grasses, lavender and bamboo surrounded by concrete pavers. The garden is simple and relaxed with an expansive feel that lends itself easily to active children's play.

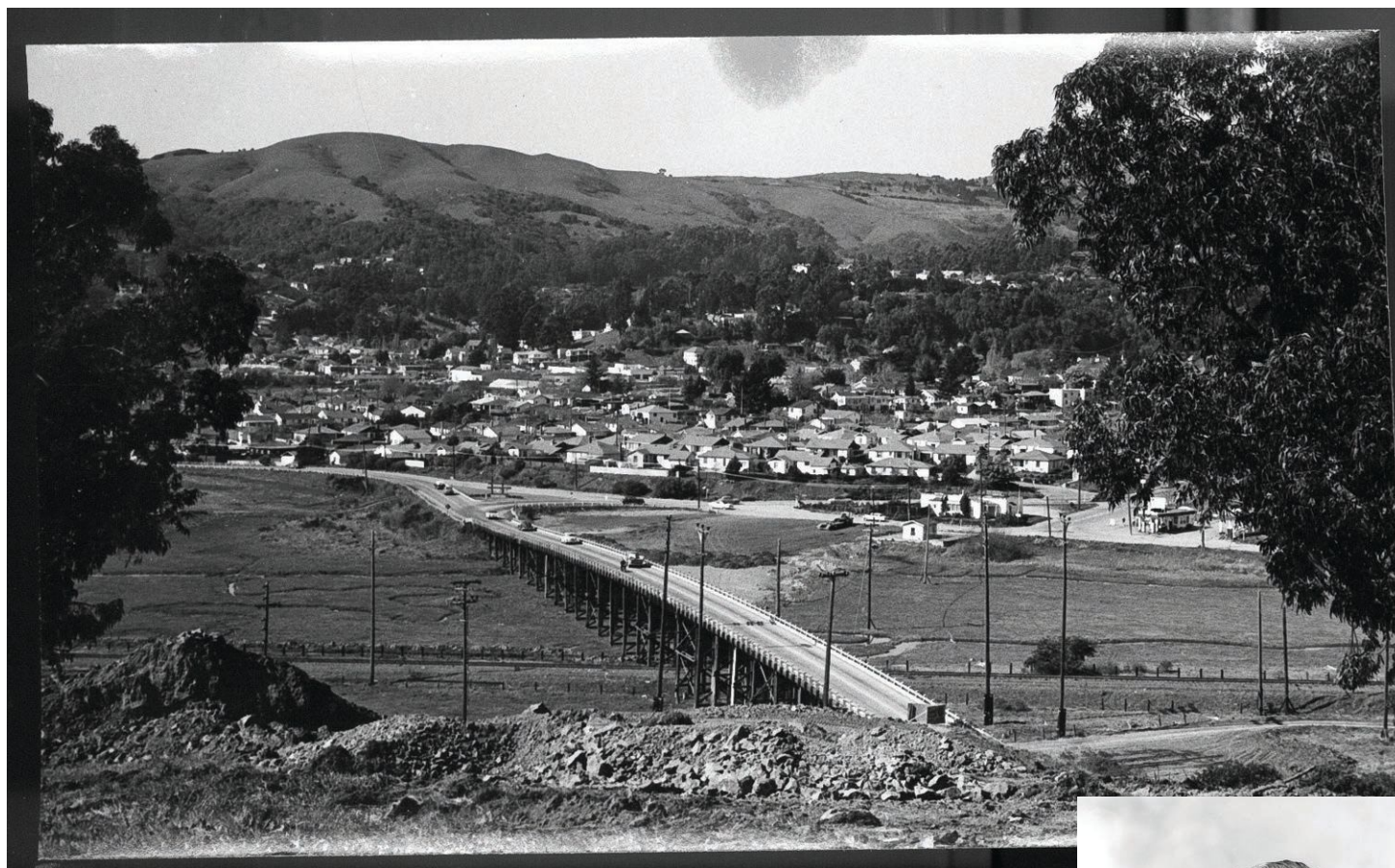
From both a personal and professional perspective, Kalmbach recognizes that it's hard to find everything on someone's wish list all in one house. "If the aesthetics aren't exactly to your liking," he suggests, "you can do so much cosmetically in so many styles. Be open-minded and excited about finishing the space in your own personal way."

He advises his friends from San Francisco to broaden their views, too. "A lot of people from the city feel they have to move downtown because they are so used to walking to everything, but I tell them to let go of that notion. Instead, focus on the neighborhood and community."

As Owen notes, "we use this town well and we use Mount Tam well. Without a doubt," she adds, "we thought we'd go to the city more, but we have learned to take advantage of what Mill Valley has to offer. And with Beerworks, the new Sweetwater and the city of Sausalito so close by, we find that our friends from San Francisco are excited to come over here." **M**



DESIGN TIP: French doors open onto a deck creating a seamless transition to the outside and increasing the sense of space.



{ Wartime Roots }

"FIRST, DON'T CALL IT SYCAMORE PARK," cautions Matt Cramer, a former board member of Sycamore Village Neighborhood Association, talking about the enclave of homes nestled between Miller and Blithedale avenues and Camino Alto in Mill Valley. **"It's officially Sycamore Village. I'll have this chat with everyone who calls it Sycamore Park until my last day."**

He's right. Officially, Sycamore Park refers to a small neighborhood park that served as Marin's first little league field; over the years it became the vicinity's informal namesake.

The neighborhood began to take shape in the early '40s after an entrepreneurial developer named George Goheen purchased lots along lower Sycamore Avenue, an area that would soon be dubbed Goheen Gulch. According to Cramer, Goheen leveled a hill, used the soil to fill in the nearby marsh and eventually built about 350 of Marin's first spec homes here. He sold them for around \$4,000 each.

Interviewed in 1979 by the Mill Valley Historical Society, Goheen said that both Bank of America, which offered to finance the development, and the War Production Board, which would oversee the project, encouraged him to build these homes as defense-worker housing during World War II.

Goheen was rightfully proud of his sturdy, low-cost little houses, most of them two-bedroom, one-bathroom homes with a fireplace and a yard. Due to the war-time need for metal, they had no heating systems or showerheads.

Realtor Chelsea E. Ialeggio, a Decker Bullock Sotheby's agent who lives in Sycamore Park, says there has been a big migration of young families from San Francisco to the area over the past few decades, when homes were selling for \$100,000 to \$150,000 (today homes in the area can sell for as much as \$1 million). **"They're looking for strong public schools, a beautiful setting and an easy commute,"** she says. **"Over time, these little homes get updated and added on to."**

Cramer agrees. **"Historically, this neighborhood has always been about families,"** he says. **"People move here to put down roots. We embrace them and do our best to get everyone in the mix."**



Top: East Blithedale Avenue (right, center) meets Camino Alto (running from right to left in center of photo) as seen in 1952 with Sycamore Park in the background. The building at this intersection is now Gira Polli restaurant; the trestle has long been removed. Inset: Builder George Goheen in 1965.