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PHOTOS BY ADAM POTTS

Rising Amid the Redwoods

A PORTOLA VALLEY RANCH HOME
GAINS AN UPPER-STORY ADU

The timing of Serra Butler Simbeck and Mauricio Simbeck's home remodel in Portola Valley was inspired by much more than design goals. "In 2020, I lost my brother Lewis W. Butler to cancer," Serra says. "His passing was sudden, and he was only 63 years old." Over the years, during countless family dinners at Serra and Mauricio's home — the official gathering spot for holidays and celebrations — the couple discussed with Lewis, a prominent Bay Area modernist architect, how the house could evolve, how they'd someday optimize its design. "His passing made us realize there was no reason to wait any longer," Serra says. "The remodel became an opportunity not only to better connect the house to its remarkable setting and adapt it for the next chapter of our family's life, but also to honor my brother's architectural legacy and find a meaningful way to cope with his loss."



Above: The Portola Valley house, that Butler Armsden Architects and Sabra Ballon Studio redesigned, features an enlarged foyer.

Opposite: Architect Federico Engel added a standing-seam metal roof and an entrance canopy for the 1960s ranch-style home.



Ballon's design touches mesh with the home's wooded setting. The new great room—which comprises the kitchen, dining space, and family room—has walnut cabinetry, cast concrete counters, and Heath Ceramics Tile on the backsplash. The pitched ceiling is cedar, and the flooring is white oak.





Above: A wall of windows opens the great room to the backyard. In the background is the primary suite. Dappled sunlight falls onto white oak flooring.

Opposite: A skylight brings more sunshine into the open kitchen where a new walnut-wrapped enclosure around the stove also envelops other utilitarian areas.

Originally built in the 1960s, Serra and Mauricio's ranch-style home is marked by a creek that runs through the backyard, where magnificent redwoods present like towering guards. "Their beauty and sheer size take your breath away," Serra says. As discussed with Lewis for years, the couple wanted to better frame backyard views from the great room, where they spend most of their time. The second order of business was to improve the flow of the main living spaces. And lastly, they wanted to add an ADU that would provide space for their three adult sons when they visit.

With a plan in place, Serra called Butler Armsden Architects, founded by her brother with his wife Catherine Armsden. The San Francisco firm, now owned by architects Chandra Campbell, Glenda Flaim, and Federico Engel, was her first choice for obvious reasons. Engel, who was hired and mentored by Lewis, agreed to take on the project. "I'm a great admirer of his work, but also of him as a person, and I knew we'd work well together," Serra says. Choosing Sabra Ballon to design the interior was equally straightforward as she previously worked for Butler Armsden and was also mentored by Lewis. "She understood the midcentury vision I was hoping to achieve as well as my love of colors, natural materials, and interiors that bring the outdoors inside," Serra says.

Engel's redesign for the architecture began with rearranging the kitchen





and the dining space so they connect to the family room, creating one efficiently sized great room in the center of the floor plan. (The pantry and the laundry room were relocated so they back the great room.) The architect then connected the great room to the backyard by replacing the rear façade—which was opaque but for a small slider—with a massive window wall that gives the feeling of being outdoors among the redwoods. And to better capture the redwoods’ colossal stature, he raised the ceiling and replaced the gable roof with a shed-style one that soars in the direction of the redwoods. “We call it the redwood cathedral,” he says. “The gable reduced the amount of sunlight and views, but the shed roof and the glass wall open the great room to the redwoods and really kind of lift and extend the space.”

In choosing finishes for the new spaces, Ballon opted for colors and materials that echo the bark and the greenery of the trees. She outfitted the kitchen cabinetry with walnut that ties to the cedar ceiling and the white oak flooring. “We painstakingly fine-tuned the wood to look like a mid-century walnut,” says Ballon, who also selected cast-concrete for the kitchen counters and green-black Heath Ceramics Tile that mimics the color and reflectivity of the backyard creek for the kitchen backsplash. According to Ballon, the interior elements are understated so the landscape through the windows becomes like wallpaper and is the focal point.



Above: Red Lady, a painting Serra and Mauricio purchased during a 2010 trip to Cuba hangs on walnut casework in the great room.

Opposite: A skylight illuminates the foyer, where an abstract painting hangs above a metal console paired with a vintage side chair that belonged to Serra’s parents. The new walnut-wrapped “cube,” contains the laundry room, a pantry, and a bar/ kitchen.

A wall of glass separates the great room from a small creek-fed redwood grove in the backyard. The shed-style roof Engel designed, was originally gabled. It allows for higher ceilings and clerestory windows. Brown-tinted stucco siding complements redwood bark.







The ADU Engel and Ballon designed perches above the garage and functions as added living space and as an office for Serra and Mauricio, who work from home. Clad in stucco, wood tile, and glass, the structure is accessed by an exterior spiral staircase. “The ADU is like a treehouse that looks out to all these amazing tree canopies,” Engel says. Ballon employed cork flooring, yellow Heath Ceramics tile on the kitchen backsplash, and brilliant blue penny tile in

the shower. “Serra studied and met Mauricio in Mexico City, so we included the colors of Mexico,” Ballon says.

Family heirlooms are sprinkled throughout the ADU and the house. Ballon hung a painting of a dog that belonged to Serra’s parents in the ADU bedroom and placed a traditional-style chair from her parents’ home in the main house entry, where angel sculptures from Mauricio’s childhood home in Mexico hang near the front door.



The above-garage ADU is sided with earth-toned stucco and tile that simulates wood. Wildfire restrictions prohibit real wood.

Opposite: Entry, through a rear courtyard, is up a spiral staircase.

Sunshine-yellow Heath Ceramics tile covers the kitchen backsplash in the ADU, where midcentury design staples such as cork flooring dominate. An abstract painting by Mauricio's sister, Mexican artist Julieta Simbeck, hangs in the living room. "We commissioned it when we first moved into the house in 2005," Serra says.







The redesign for Serra and Mauricio's house is a love letter not only to the redwoods, but to their families—especially Lewis. Each time the design team had a question during the remodel, Serra asked, what would Lewis do? "It was this beautiful ritual that helped us process his passing," Ballon says. "We each had our history with him. He's part of this house." 🐾

The compact ADU bedroom suite is livened with pops of color: On the wall a canvas of the owner's dog. In the skylit bathroom above, blue button tile.



