



This Midcentury "Treehouse" Is Tailored for Its Tech-Founder Owner— Right Down to the Velvet Conversation Pit and Dry-Erase Board

Aquilo Interiors and Butler Armsden Architects collaborated to preserve a historic Berkeley, California, home while infusing it with personality

By Morgan Goldberg
Photography by Tim Hirschmann

October 12, 2026

Set at the foot of the Berkeley Hills, on the edge of a slope overlooking the San Francisco Bay, a pedigreed midcentury home was recently reimaged with both its original creator and its new steward in mind. Built by regionalist architect Robert Ratcliff, the treehouse-like abode is defined by its steeply-pitched gable roof, teak paneling, and subtly angled walls—all of which [Butler Armsden Architects](#) and [Aquilo Interiors](#) painstakingly restored or replaced in near-identical fashion. They simultaneously tailored the house to educational technology founder Andrew Sutherland's hyper-specific requests, like a [Pattern Language](#)-inspired intimacy gradient and a conversation pit facing a whiteboard for lectures.

"The goal was to honor what came before while also pushing for something unexpected," says Carmen René Smith, the Aquilo Interiors founder. "Andrew himself felt like the inspiration because he was so down for doing such cool stuff. He really likes science, math, and collecting experiences—he wanted his home to reflect that."



A metal loft is suspended in the rafters of the great room. "Early in the project, Andrew actually asked us to stay at the house and just see how the light moves," Smith says. "That's when we were like, What if we could experience this room like we were in the clouds, like we were birds or gods and we're looking out in our city. So that's how the loft came about. It completely changes the experience of the room."



In the dining area, an antique Napoleon III mirror from Smith and Sutherland's shopping trip to Paris juxtaposes a leather-and-oak Croft House Morro Credenza and a statement opaline-and-brass chandelier from Danke Galerie. "I wanted to capture and enhance that retro 1960s California optimism, while retaining the rustic-wood feel and human-scale sizing," says Sutherland.



Scott Lewis of [Scott Lewis Landscape Architecture](#) is the mastermind behind the geometric screens on the decks, which he crafted using colorful squares of acrylic that filter in sunlight while maintaining privacy from next-door neighbors. "His reference was the Denver Art Museum's 1970s Gio Ponti building, which is castle-like with a million little glass tiles, and it has some of these elements in the façade of these horizontal and vertical strips," says Butler Armsden Architects managing principal Federico Engel.



A welcoming front patio gives way to two entries: the main, eight-foot sapele-wood door that Smith designed with tree-ring carvings and a triple slider that completely opens the game room for an indoor-outdoor experience. "I just feel really proud of that because of how long it took to draw," Smith says of the door. "I got to really bring in my artistry. So that door is very meaningful because it tells a story—it's not just decorative."



"The sunken living room, I love it—it's so major," Smith says. "The opportunity to have the nod to the past with the carpet and then making it a maximalist moment by doing the red fabric... I really wanted him to feel like he was in another world and that he could just reach out and touch the moon."

The balance of old and new, classic and quirky, starts on the exterior, where the historic redwood siding was salvaged and reinstalled wherever possible. It's juxtaposed with a custom sapele front door carved with hundreds of rings that Smith drew by hand to represent growth. Beside it, a triple slider reveals an indoor-outdoor game room with sunken chili-pepper-red velvet seating, a realistic Ben & Aja Blanc Moon Light recessed into the ceiling, and Sutherland's must-have dry-erase board.

"I've spent my career in education, and many of my fondest memories are in front of a whiteboard, figuring out a hard math problem or a new product idea," says Sutherland, who founded learning software company Quizlet in 2006. "I wanted my home to be a place where people could work on hard problems together." A chess table niche and two Freifrau Manufaktur swing loungers complete the eccentric space.



A custom oak-and-walnut chess table is nestled into a recessed niche with a 1960s "Kull" Ceiling Lamp by Svea Winkler hanging from a lattice feature, which lets light flow in from above so potted plants can thrive. "The built-in chessboard always invites visitors into a quick game whenever they see it," says Sutherland. "Carmen made that a very special moment."



"I'm an eclectic designer," Smith says. "I love blending styles, and that's how we approached it. So the rug in the living room is 300 years old. It actually reminds Andrew of Paris—he loves Paris. We brought things in that felt meaningful to the client."



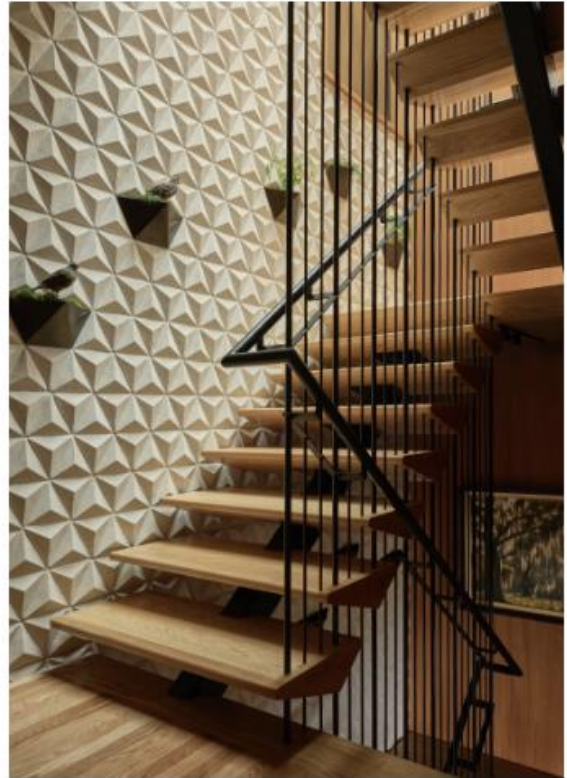
"Historically, kitchens have been separated from living rooms and dining rooms—that was definitely the case here," explains Engel. "The big gesture was to open the kitchen to the great room. And that's very much how Andrew lives. He loves to entertain and cook for people. I was fortunate enough that, at the end of the project, he invited over the team and made a super lovely meal for us."



Smith designed a cozy banquette with a channel-tufted Zak + Fox [Bayan-fabric](#) back and a Moore & Giles [Cuero-Brentwood-leather](#) seat to hug the angular custom oak table with brass inlays. Smith chose a monochromatic grout for the glossy Caspian Sea ceramic Fireclay Tile backsplash for a saturated look. "I wanted to minimize decoration and knickknacks, and instead create interest through the materials—bold patterned fabrics, textured tiles, colorful carpets, carefully chosen wood grains, and surprisingly shaped built-ins," Sutherland says.



"The powder room is my baby," Smith says. "That is where I could go wild. I call it the fifth dimension, because it's just fantasy and sci-fi. It originally was something a lot more crazy, but it got refined to the black mirror, the ripple metal on the ceiling that looks like water, and the [cylindrical Stone Forest] onyx sink that glows from within."



"The staircase was a huge project," Sutherland says. "We added one level, a skylight, and a three-story 3D tile wall that was a challenge to make straight. Federico designed the stairs with midcentury flair—vertical bars, a centered stringer, and the beautiful angular steps, while Carmen designed the gorgeous tile wall and integrated lighted planters."

In the teak-and-black basalt kitchen, which Butler Armsden opened up so Sutherland could easily cook while entertaining, the personalized elements are a bit subtler. Smith commissioned black-and-white striped cement floor tiles from Da Vinci Marble based on a 1950s magazine image that Sutherland loved. She also differentiated the kitchen trash can with a different handle than the bronze Rocky Mountain Hardware Barre Grip used throughout because Sutherland said he needed it easily identifiable. "I wanted a sanctuary that would feel timeless, but it was hard to source appliances without Windows 95-looking screens," he adds. "We made everything tactile with physical knobs and buttons."

The adjacent dining and living areas sit beneath a wooden cathedral ceiling with exposed beams, setting a dramatic scene for Sutherland's frequent gatherings. He serves dinner at his custom white oak and powder-coated steel table, which is surrounded by eight cane and maroon mohair Cesca Chairs. Discussions flow around the preserved concrete and painted metal fireplace, where Smith mixed a Lawson-Fenning Portola Sofa, vintage caramel leather armchairs, and a custom modular sectional that can be rearranged as the night goes on. "We were designing how people connect with each other, and that was very important to him," Smith says. "He approached it with a lot of curiosity."



On each side of the custom bed, Smith placed a 1950s Italian Stilnovo sconce and a midcentury nightstand. She then created a custom groovy asymmetrical bench that follows the angled line of the millwork. "The adjectives I asked for: "Timeless, cozy, serene, sunny, contemplative, private, organic, unpretentious," Sutherland says.



"I'm really proud of that angled concrete bathtub," admits Smith. "We were all trying to problem solve the space plan because the bathtub was getting in the way of walking into the shower. Then we came up with this angular shape that I'd never seen before, but it solves the circulation issue. It feels original. It's so big."

A seemingly floating suspended staircase—introduced by Butler Armsden to connect the three levels—leads to the primary bedroom, done in a minimalist, Japanese-influenced style. Smith hung an oversized Nelson Angled Sphere Bubble Pendant above a custom teak bed with a speckled bouclé headboard and a drapery saffron velvet coverlet for a tranquil effect. To transition from relaxation to work (and to accommodate Sutherland's large book collection), a library labyrinth offers a switchback path to his office, where the built-in teak desk continues onto the deck. "Andrew's a tech person. All he needs is a laptop, so why not have an outdoor desk as well?" says Butler Armsden Architects managing principal Federico Engel.

Sutherland can luxuriate in his outside spaces too. "For something intimate, there's nothing better than having a cocktail from the top deck, looking out on the expansive view," he says. "It's a bit chilly most nights, but with the built-in heaters, you can stay up chatting all night." And just beyond the gym in the newly excavated lower level, the backyard is equipped with a bubbling hot tub, teak-and-mesh chaises, and a colorful, Gio Ponti-inspired privacy screen so he can enjoy his storied and bespoke home in peace.



In the guest room, with its bold green Stark Melton Velvet carpeting and a brick-colored Zara Home Washed Linen Bedspread, Smith opted for teak-framed jute paneling from Phillip Jeffries Japanese Woven Jute. "I really love how the headboard fits in it," she says. "It's really cool. It just feels very integrated."



The guest bathroom combines vintage Verner Panton flowerpot pendants, Popham Design [cement square tiles](#) in Lawn green, and a Kristina Dam Studio rotating mirror. "I just love all of the plaster walls everywhere too," Smith adds, referring to the Portola Paints [Roman Clay](#) in Shining. "That just gave a little bit of that velvety feel."



An indoor-outdoor desk takes advantage of the temperate weather in the East Bay. "In the afternoon, I like to work with the doors fully open," Sutherland says. "You get an amazing view of San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge, and you get a gentle Bay breeze. I love writing from the outdoor desk as the sun is setting. The rosemary from the garden below wafts into the office. It's a perfect sensory experience—the sunlight, the fragrance, the Bay view, the wood desk."

