



a house HIGH on a HILL



A TIMELESS, ECO-FRIENDLY HOME GETS A HIGH-STYLE, COLORFUL **MAKEOVER**.

IT LIKELY COMES as no surprise to anyone that homebuilders—and homebuyers—in the East Bay area of San Francisco shy away from adobe construction. The hills there have been known to rumble and shift...so a fear of cracking walls and costly smooth-overs is definitely understandable.

But you sure wouldn't know it from the 1936 exposed adobe residence of Sean Gaston and Jim Jewell, built right into the side of the Berkeley Hills. "After over 75 years there's not a crack in the house," says Sean.

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“These builders knew what they were doing—they built this house to the shape of the hill with materials pulled directly from the hill itself using the earliest forms of green building.”

As the story goes, the home was built as a “demonstration house” for Frisco’s third and last World’s Fair: the raucous and fantastical Golden Gate International Exposition of 1939, when the San Francisco Bay area threw open its arms to the world to celebrate the opening of the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge and just plain old show off what the area had to offer.

Inside this little green jewel of a structure, rooms boasted open rafted spaces and wood floors built from native trees or those milled right on the property during construction. “Like a model home or a show house,” says Sean, “this house was built to showcase new building methods—but in this case, the building methods were ancient. You can see *all* of this company’s finishing options inside this one house, but the raw adobe walls are the visual equalizer.”



◀ THERE’S A STORY

Sean Gaston looks high and low for vintage and salvaged pieces. Case in point: a chandelier purchased at Liberace’s estate sale. “This once hung over Liberace’s bed—can you imagine if that light fixture could talk! It’s a perfect mix of rustic and modern with its wrought-iron framework and crystals hand-blown into spheres.”

▶ FOUND STYLE

What? Where? Sean combs flea markets, estate sales, and beaches for natural accents and quirky collectibles. Even simple finds like wooden café rings look chic cradled in a shallow bowl.

Why? “I like beautiful utilitarian pieces. There’s always an honesty about them.”



Archway Finesse

The home’s original builder showed his adobe artistry by giving the home’s doorways three different arch styles: Gothic, Moorish, and Eyebrow. This simple Eyebrow arch frames a peek into the breakfast area and a glimpse at a collection of Bauer’s Ringware line of happy, everyday dinnerware from the '30s.



“Our rooms stay 72 degrees all day, all year, and at every level of the home without additional heat or cooling.”

Guests in this upper-level room will testify to that. Fact is, the thermal quality of adobe is simple, earthly perfection: The insulative bricks block heat during hot days but take in just enough radiant heat to give back to chilly rooms at night.



Naturally easy, and cozy, organic Coyuchi bedding in soft, neutral shades layers like a dream.

Green Choice

Saltillo floor tiles made from the clay scooped from the riverbanks in Coahuila, Mexico, are considered top-drawer terra-cotta. True Saltillo tiles are still handmade, sun dried, and fired in a kiln or cave. Seal them against moisture or let them age naturally.



The unique structure and story of this Kensington area home was all Sean and Jim needed to dive right in—potential cracking, multiple finishes and all. They’re partners in Bee Renovated, a firm dedicated to “restoring history one house at a time.” Sean handles design; Jim is builder and craftsman. Together they’ve put the polish back on midcentury modern gems, Arts and Crafts bungalows, and classic California ranches—or really any vintage classic home in need of restoration and, as one client noted, healing. You can see their transformative work online at beerenovated.com.

This adobe ranch didn’t require much in the way of restoration. Ironically, given the rarity of this type of construction in the East Bay, it was created using one of the earliest forms of sustainable architecture in California—adobe

brick over post and beams, favored by indigenous people centuries ago. Like their ancient cliff houses, this house tucks into the side of the hill for more stability. “The walls are two and three feet deep,” says Sean. “So it moves as one piece—like a big rock.”

As a result, the home’s steel-framed windows are all original, as are random plank red oak floors, knotty-pine paneling, and redwood ceilings, among other materials. “Basically we refinished the floors and oiled the ceiling—the spaces were that intact,” Sean says. The two also left the whitewashed adobe bricks exposed. “We love the authenticity of the look,” says Sean. “The texture of the walls just makes for more dimension and interest with the constant play of light and shadow.”



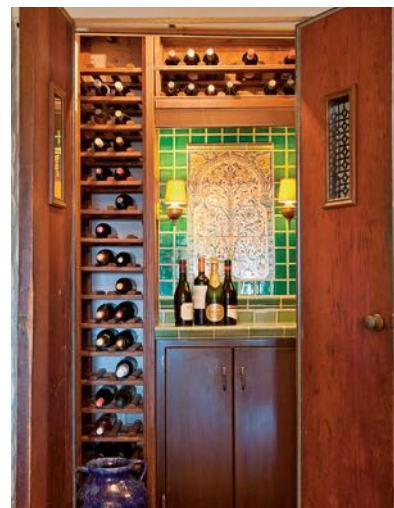
FRESH COLLECTION

Oh Pioneer “Look up Barbara Willis if you don’t know about her. It’s a great story. She was a pioneer of modernist pottery from the ‘40s,” Sean says. She was the first woman to bring pottery that

felt handmade to the masses by creating a commercial process for her cutting-edge colors and crackled glazes. **First Piece?** The bust I found at an antiques store in New Mexico years ago. **Best Piece?** The tiny horse figurines are the most valuable because they are her more fragile early works.

Displays of Affection “In a collection, color blocking organizes the display,” Sean says of composing a grouping, like the pottery below. “It helps the eye get organized and appreciate the piece individually. You focus on the shapes within the color and ultimately see more detail.”

Boxed Set Sean keeps a constant lookout for quirky, storied pieces as well modernist classics and California vintage. The “Betty Box” below was a gift from Jim, purchased from Betty Ford’s Rancho Mirage estate sale. The folk art junco bird perched atop is a sign of good luck for the couple.



Found Space Score

“This odd closet under the staircase had the ideal temperature for storing wine. So we recycled the cabinets from the kitchen, found some vintage Moroccan tile, and created a cellar that holds 365 bottles of wine. It’s our ‘Year Cellar.’”

The simple, rustic interiors make an ideal showcase for Sean’s “design blend,” a thoughtfully curated mix of midcentury modern, Spanish, and Arts and Crafts influences. Pulled from different eras, each piece is a work of art in itself, “so it can stand alone or fold nicely into the overall design,” Sean says. His instincts and sense of style were honed in a design career that led him through the biggest names in approachable fashion and home design, including Pottery Barn, the Gap, and Restoration Hardware, until he started his own design firm a decade ago and joined forces with Jim in Bee Renovated to make a profession out of their passion for restoring vintage and historic dwellings.

“We’re drawn to residential spaces that reflect a time when there was a deeper respect for nature and handcraftsmanship,” says Sean. Though their restorations often modernize the function of the house, their ultimate goal is a noble one: “We want to restore homes to a state where their original builders—and homeowners, if we’re lucky enough to meet them—would be proud.”



AS GREEN AS IT GETS

SUSTAINABLE BUILDING, THE ANCIENT WAY

The adobe house was literally built from the ground up, starting right here in this shallow circular pit. That’s where the adobe bricks were mixed from water, soil, and bituminous rock (sandstone mixed with asphalt) found on the property. Adobe bricks aren’t fired, but dried in the sun in wooden frames of multiple sizes. This makes for a stronger, more insulative brick.

Succulents and other drought-resistant native plants climb the sloping lot of this Berkeley Hills home. Sean’s two favorites, the clumping Artichoke Agave and the large, showy Fox Tail Agave, both below, lend structure and color without demanding precious water resources.

