

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST



## Warm Welcome

Designer Douglas Durkin relaxes a formal Bay Area house with soft colors, subtle textures, and a refreshing attention to comfort

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A Louis XVI chandelier crowns the living room at a 1920s San Francisco-area home by Arthur Brown Jr. that was renovated by Douglas Durkin Design. The space is appointed with a Durkin-designed ottoman by C. Mariani Antiques and a custom-made rug by Beauvais Carpets; a Brunschwig & Fils fabric curtains the windows. **Previous Page:** Boxwood hedges border a path in the gardens, which were updated by Strata Landscape Architecture; the cushions on the outdoor furniture are clad in a DeLany & Long fabric.

In the living room, 18th-century *singerie* panels flank the doors to the dining room. The yellow fabric on the Durkin-designed sofa is from Clarence House, as is the green velvet on the arm-chair at left; the two 19th-century French stools are terra-cotta.



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Arthur Brown Jr. may not be mentioned quite as frequently in design circles as renowned contemporaries like Frank Lloyd Wright or Louis I. Kahn, but aesthetes of all stripes praise the San Francisco architect's local masterworks,

including City Hall, a 1916 downtown extravaganza topped by a breathtaking gilded dome, and Coit Tower, a 1932 fluted shaft rising atop Telegraph Hill. Both of those prominent commissions embody Brown's rigorous training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, so it stands to reason that when the architect—who also advised on the extension of the U.S. Capitol's East Portico in the '50s—created private homes, European classicism often reigned.

One notable 1920s Brown-designed residence in the Bay Area is a distinctly Gallic *pavillon*, replete with mansard roofs, wrought-iron railings, and French doors opening to romantic gardens. "It feels like you're in the countryside," says San Francisco decorator Douglas Durkin, who recently completed a renovation of the place for its owners, a venture capitalist and his wife, who have lived in the house for 25 years and raised their children there.

Once loyal inhabitants of the city's luxe Marina District,

the couple decided to relocate after the neighborhood was ravaged by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. They considered heading south to safer territory but were hesitant to move too far away. Then they came across the five-bedroom house and pounced, being bowled over by the thick cypress hedges that enclosed the two-acre property as well as by the architect's attention to symmetry, proportion, and atmosphere. Particularly impressive is how Brown took advantage of the sun's path. Morning light warms the entrance hall and kitchen, and afternoon's golden glow spills into the south-facing public rooms before sunset reaches the library, a favorite spot for the husband and his friends to play dominoes, backgammon, or bridge.

"This house has a wonderful charm and gentleness to it," says Durkin, who oversaw an extensive refresh that took eight years. ("We'd do a chunk and then take a break," he explains.) In addition to Brown, there was another talent whose work the designer felt compelled to honor: the late San Francisco decorator Anthony Hail, a high-society stalwart who was hired by the couple in the early '90s and had selected a number of the existing antiques. "He was a classicist interested in proper European decorating," Durkin notes. "I have a much more relaxed way of handling an interior." His goal was simple: "Formality you can really live with."

Monochromatic schemes and bright-white ceilings were replaced by a soft palette keyed to Hail's original but rendered



The library paneling has been painted a classic Chinese red with gilt detailing; the 19th-century-style wing chairs are upholstered in a leather by Rose Tarlow Melrose House.



A 19th-century Portuguese tapestry graces the dining room, whose walls were given a faux-linen paint treatment by Stencil Studios; the chandelier is a Russian antique, and the chairs are Louis XVI.



An Ann-Morris light fixture presides over the island in the kitchen, which also includes a Waterworks-tile backsplash, a Wolf range, and Erika Brunson chairs upholstered in a Rose Tarlow Melrose House fabric.

in more complex fashion. Hand-glazed surfaces, such as the linen-textured apricot walls in the elliptical dining room, lend a subtle artisanal touch, while discreet shadowing gives moldings more depth and “a little bit of age,” the designer says. The library’s woodwork, formerly a vivid cherry-red, has been toned down to a deep Chinese vermilion. “I like colors that look slightly deadened,” Durkin says. “Tony Hail’s palette was clearer than mine. If he wanted peach, it was peach. If he wanted yellow, it was definitely yellow.”

Rather than rolling out conventional Persian carpets, Durkin tinkered with timeless motifs to create custom-made floor coverings that have, as he puts it, “the spirit of old rugs without being reproductions.” A 17th-century Polonaise carpet, for example, inspired the living room rug’s vibrantly overscale leaf pattern. Asymmetrical furniture arrangements introduce a friendly air to the room, as do pastel tones—yellow, cream, rose, pale blues, lavender—that mirror the flowers that grow in the garden. The sofas are upholstered in silk velvets whose striations give the fabrics “a bit of a moth-eaten look,” Durkin says. Which is perhaps a good thing since

the owners’ beloved Labrador retriever can’t resist rubbing against them. Observes the designer philosophically, “The things that happen to a room over time are part of it.”

Multiple hands have reshaped the surrounding grounds, too, including those of Bay Area designers Robert Frear—who conceived the elegant pool pavilion—and Todd R. Cole of Strata Landscape Architecture. One of Cole’s projects was to refine the neglected, overgrown rose parterre, centering it on an old stone birdbath relocated from elsewhere on the property and adding a sculpture of a reclining Apollo that had been owned by Brown. Similarly noble accents can be found throughout the lush gardens, from a 19th-century limestone bench tucked against a bank of shrubbery to a sandstone banquet table placed beside the swimming pool.

The house has presented a stately first impression for nearly a century, yet the life it now accommodates is anything but stuffy. Memorial Day, for instance, finds dozens of friends and family members playing volleyball on the rear lawn or crowded into the kitchen for a pie-baking contest—all proof that the house is, as Durkin and his clients intended, truly a formal home with an easygoing attitude. □



**From Top:** The master bedroom is outfitted with a 19th-century chandelier from Bernd Goeckler Antiques and curtains made of a Pierre Frey cotton blend; the carpet is by Stark. Chinoiserie panels are displayed in the master bath.





**Below:** Strata Landscape Architecture restored the rose parterre, which is highlighted by a reclining Apollo sculpture. **Above:** The pool area, designed by Strata, features McKinnon and Harris chaise longues with cushions in a DeLany & Long fabric; the table is from Axel Vervoordt.





**From Top:** A stately canopy bed anchors a guest room; The breakfast room opens onto a terrace.

