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How the Pros Do It

Before & After



Midcentury Matters

UPDATING A WILLIAM WURSTER HOUSE IN SAN FRANCISCO

Renovation Architecture by Brooks Walker of Walker Warner Architects
Interior Design by Douglas Durkin/Text by Therese Bissell
After Photography by Matthew Millman



AFTER

AFTER



BEFORE



BEFORE

TOP: Brooks Walker, of Walker Warner Architects, sensitively updated a 1951 William Wurster house in San Francisco. “We kept the spirit of the building but enhanced it,” he says. Approximately 1,030 square feet were added, including a new top floor. LEFT: Light fills the living room, for which, as throughout, interior designer Douglas Durkin, who worked closely with Walker, created clean, modular furnishings. Above the sofa is an oil by John DiPaolo. Manuel Canovas wallcovering. Beauvais carpet.

Docomomo. It sounds like a downtown nightclub or indie music label. It’s instead an organization founded for the worldwide documentation and conservation of architectural sites of the Modern movement. If architect Brooks Walker was only vaguely familiar with the group and its mission before he and interior designer Douglas Durkin began remodeling a Modernist building listed on the National Register of Historic Places, by project’s end the catchy quasi-acronym—certainly, the challenge it represented in comingling new architecture with old—was a steady backbeat to the work.

The San Francisco house was designed in 1951 by the late William Wurster, who typically conceived the interior spaces for easy living and to connect with the outside, and kept the exterior devoid of elaboration. Docomomo International and the city planning department took particular interest in the renovation and expansion, which also fell under U.S. Department of Interior guidelines for historical preservation, as the building is part of a small



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cluster of midcentury-modern residences within vastly traditional Pacific Heights.

Also interested in the house's fate, even before being tasked with its remodel, was Walker, who grew up uniquely schooled in California architecture of the period. His grandparents had residences by Wurster and fellow Bay Area Modernist Joseph Esherick; his great-grandmother commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design the famed Walker House in Carmel. Further, he often visited Wur-

ster's most acclaimed building, the architecturally reductive, ranch-style prototype Gregory Farmhouse in Santa Cruz, owned by family friends ("We all remember times from childhood—I remember certain spaces just as well").

Completing the "Wurster circle," Durkin came to the project having renovated the interiors of three of the architect's other residences. Greg Elich, Durkin's design director, and Walker Warner Architects project manager Clark Sather



BEFORE



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rounded out the design team. As Walker succinctly describes his office's successful collaboration with Durkin's: "In a Modern house, it's all about the details. We didn't want to see a valance, and neither did they."

The larger program was to save the valued elements (delineating new versus existing architecture for preservationists) while gaining desired space and energy efficiency. Functionality for a young family was key: improving the circulation by taking out nonbearing walls

OPPOSITE: The dining area is framed by a floating wall that displays a 2007 photogram by Adam Fuss. "The dining chairs are by Carlo Hauner," notes Durkin. "They're a slightly quirky choice." Hunter leather on seat cushions.

ABOVE: The family room was once the master suite. "The furniture follows the flow of the rooms," says Durkin, who designed the sofas, tables and carpet. "The palette was chosen to contrast the light floors and walls." Beauvais carpet.



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ABOVE: Landscape architect Ron Lutsko, Jr., reinforced Wurster's emphasis on integrating indoors and out. Explains Walker, "Wurster's genius is that the house has lots of light and air but is extremely private." OPPOSITE: Works by, from left, Robert Kelly and Donald Feasél are in the master bedroom. "I wouldn't have placed the windows at that height, but we played off them when hanging art," Walker says. Carpet from Stark.

and opening up the floor plan—and strengthening the inside-outside relationship with enhanced glazing and access at the refurbished courtyard.

Although contemporary for the time, the rooms were compartmentalized. The living room was isolated; it now flows from the dining area and better coexists with the courtyard. The former first-floor master suite became the light-filled family and breakfast rooms. On the expanded second floor, the new master suite opens to a translucent-glass-banded terrace and leads to the sitting room, converted from an unneeded bedroom.

An added third floor contains the library. Now 16 rooms, the house's living area grew by roughly a quarter to just over 5,000 square feet.

Durkin's custom furnishings play off the architecture in form—particularly the modular sofas—in texture and in color. "The clichéd way of dealing with modern space is to fill it with midcentury classics," he notes. "We used very few found pieces; practically everything was drawn and produced for this interior. The idea was to transcend the trend, to impart a sense of timelessness so you can't really place the vintage."

Light cream instead of white

“Our intention was that it look seamlessly integrated, that the addition not consume the original structure,” says Walker.

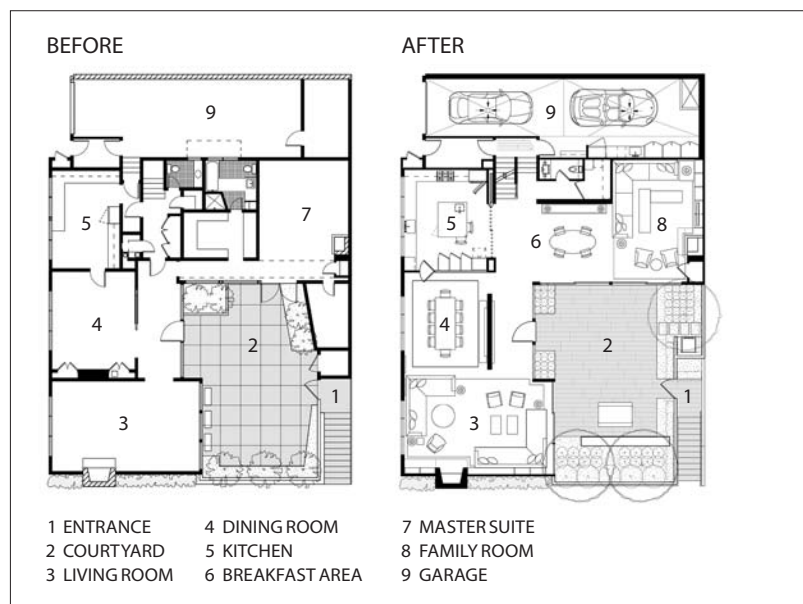


on the walls throughout (where not fabric covered for improved acoustics and warmth) was a Durkin directive. “That one color is very much the story of the house,” he says. “White is an overthought idea. If you treat everything with a single pale color, you’ll have the impression of white but with enough depth of tone that the rooms feel settled, not agitated.”

Walker’s lift to the tired façade, beyond upgrading the wood siding and windows, was to uniformly paint it, as well, a light cream: “It makes it more of an abstract shape, which I think Wurster would have liked.” (He also extended the

contrasting detail of Wurster’s black soffits elsewhere, in dark zinc.) In stepping the massing to reduce both visual impact at street level and shadows in the courtyard, he says, “our intention was that it look seamlessly integrated, that the addition not consume the original structure.”

And Docomomo? “I saw the power in the building’s brutal, pedestrian quality,” says Walker, “the quality they wanted to retain. Initially I might have wished to make a larger gesture; in the end, we were in full agreement about the importance of preserving architecture worthy of preservation.” □



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