

SPACES

Revitalizing a Landmark: A Stunning Renovation Brings New Life to Sausalito's Wolfback Ridge Round House

by LOTUS ABRAMS | PHOTOS BY R. BRAD KNIPSTEIN February 25, 2025



Terraced gardens designed by Blasen Landscape Architecture look out to panoramic views of the bay.

With its distinctive design and lofty position at the top of the Marin Headlands in Sausalito, the historic Wolfback Ridge round house is undeniably atypical compared to most suburban homes. That made it a perfect fit for a pair of architectural enthusiasts from San Francisco with grown children looking to relocate to a quieter locale. The unique architectural design and panoramic views of the bay and Golden Gate Bridge easily won them over, as well as the location, convenient to both the city and the couple's Sonoma retreat.

Built in 1954, the historic Wolfback Ridge round house is one of several in the vicinity designed by respected architect Mario Corbett. This house was designed for the Benson family, who insisted that only a circular home — described in a 1959 issue of *Suburbia Today* as a redwood and glass “turret in the sky”— could truly capture the site's magnificent views.

Virtually untouched since the '50s, the 2,300-square-foot, three-bedroom, two-bath house was in dire need of an aesthetic update by the time the couple purchased it, and they needed more space. At first, they explored building an addition that would nearly double the square footage. Eventually, however, they decided to work within the home's original footprint instead, turning to San Francisco-based **ES | LO Design Studio** to help modernize the aesthetic and optimize the interior functionality while honoring Corbett's original vision.



A 25-foot-long, stadium-style Holy Hunt sofa from Kneeder Fauchère upholstered in silver mohair provides a front row to the view through the staggered windows, part of the original design. Additional furnishings include chairs from A. Rudin and Coup Studio, ottomans from Coup Studio and a floor lamp from Arteriors.

“We were standing in the space together and they said, ‘You know, we really like how it is now; can we just make it nicer?’” says architect Emily Stegner-Schwartz, design principal at **ES | LO Design Studio**, which she and interior designer Lisa Odyniec co-founded in 2018.

As Stegner-Schwartz dove into the project, however, she soon became aware of just how complex the renovation would be, due to the home’s location in a wildland urban interface, its landmark status and circular design. “Nearly every surface is curved, so trying to make rigid materials bend was part of the challenge, not to mention building permitting, fire landscaping and furniture selection.” Another factor to consider was the home’s many asymmetrical elements — all purposeful in their design. The roof plane, for example, is offset to the west of the house to promote passive cooling during the warmest months of the year, and the wall of windows in the living room is staggered strategically to highlight the view of Angel Island, which often pops up above the fog when it blankets the bay. “The whole house twists and spirals up, creating interesting perspectives,” Stegner-Schwartz says.



The relocated central stairwell is crafted with brass handrails that echo the shape of the curved walls and lead the eye toward the view.

The team, including Devlin McNally Construction and ES | LO senior design associate Marie-Claude Appler, relied on more than a dozen consultants to complete the renovation. Their scope of work included updating all of the home’s structural, mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems to comply with the landmark status as well as the environmental requirements focused on fire prevention, energy efficiency and water management, in addition to elevating the aesthetic and functionality to meet the homeowners’ lifestyle and needs.

To accommodate an office, media room, home gym and additional bathroom, the team annexed a portion of the crawl space on the home's basement level, adding nearly 500 square feet. In addition, they removed a deteriorating carport and enhanced the entrance by elevating the entryway ceiling and adding clerestory windows and an exterior overhang. The most transformative change the team made, however, was to remove a large fireplace on the first floor that was obstructing the view. That enabled Stegner-Schwartz to relocate the stairwell leading to the lower level from the edge of the living room to a central location. "It wasn't until we removed the fireplace that I noticed that the front door was on axis with the peak of Angel Island," she says. "It was those types of things that kept revealing themselves to us with this house. Mario just knew this site and the views so well."



The media room features fabric wallcovering from Guilford of Maine, recessed shelving, an RH sofa, and a Faye Toogood chair and side tables from March in San Francisco. Art advisor Caroline Brinckerhoff procured the artwork from the Jessica Silverman gallery in San Francisco.

The new stairwell introduces a sculptural element that redefines the access through the house and leads the eye from the entryway toward the dramatic views outside the living room windows. Brass handrails echo the shape of the curved walls, splaying out and abutting a built-in, leather-upholstered banquette and custom dining table by Fabian's Fine Furniture near the center of the main level. As the stairs descend to the lower level, the slatted vertical pickets transition to a partially enclosed, oval-shaped pedestal where an illuminated cast glass sculpture by Bay Area artist Nancy Legge is on display.

Eschewing drywall on visible surfaces, Stegner-Schwartz clad the radiusing interior walls in full-length, clear vertical grain cedar boards, hand selected for uniform appearance, as well as Venetian plaster. The custom cabinetry is also crafted from cedar with radiused fronts that evoke the structure’s circular design. “It felt a lot like building a boat, since you’re bending wood around curves, and we also used a lot of brass and built-ins,” Stegner-Schwartz says.



The galley-style kitchen features a peninsula spiraling off the radius of the interior wall, generous push-latch cabinetry, Explosion Blue quartzite countertops with integrated Pitt gas burners, a pot-filler, two Gaggenau ovens, and a “secret” doggie door integrated into the lower cabinetry.

In the living room, the team updated the window wall glazing to meet current code while maintaining the original staggered design. Sheer floor-to-ceiling curtains on a custom curved rod and a higher ceiling height, which steps up from a lower height above the stairwell, emphasize the open feeling of the space and the vast views beyond. A 25-foot-long Holly Hunt sofa from Kneeder Fauchère upholstered in silver mohair provides plenty of seating to take in the scenery. “It’s almost like stadium seating because once you open the curtains it’s like a film — you can just watch the whole day go by,” Stegner-Schwartz says.



Enclosed by bi-folding doors, the bar is designed with a mother-of-pearl tile backsplash, backlit Plexiglas open shelving, a stone sink and a beverage refrigerator.

Adjacent to the living room, the galley-style kitchen features a peninsula spiraling off the radius of the interior wall, generous push-latch cabinetry, Explosion Blue quartzite countertops with integrated Pitt gas burners and two Gaggenau ovens. Additional windows bring more light into the space, and thoughtful details like a pot filler above the burners and a “secret” doggie door built into the lower cabinetry enhance the functionality.

A bar flanking the kitchen peninsula opposite the dining area features a striking mother-of-pearl tile backsplash, backlit Plexiglas open shelving, a stone sink and beverage refrigerator. Bi-folding doors conceal the bar when not in use.



Built-in bedside tables, his-and-hers wardrobes, and ceiling-height cabinetry accessed via a library-style ladder and interior pull-down rod help optimize the storage space in the compact primary bedroom, which is open to the primary bath. The bed is also cleverly notched into the curved wall.

On the other side of the living room, the primary suite is accessed through a discreet entrance next to the curtain. The bed is cleverly notched into the curved wall, while built-in bedside tables, his-and-hers wardrobes and ceiling-height cabinetry accessed via a library-style ladder and interior pull-down rod optimize the storage space in the compact room. The bedroom is open to the primary bathroom, which features stone sinks and gleaming Cristallo quartzite walls that extend into the shower. A pocket door separates the space from a petite powder room where the toilet is located, which can also be accessed from the entryway — an element maintained from the home's original design.



The fitness room is outfitted with rubber flooring, motorized window shades, a built-in water-filling station and a mirrored wall.

Downstairs, the media room, gym, office, laundry room and two additional bedrooms and bathrooms are designed with a soft, neutral color palette. “It’s a daylight basement with nearly the same views as the upstairs, and the owners wanted it to feel like a serene environment,” Stegner-Schwartz says. Outside, the terraced gardens designed by Blasen Landscape Architecture offer yet another means to enjoy the property’s sweeping views.



Lotus Abrams has covered everything from beauty to business to tech in her editorial career, but it might be writing about her native Bay Area that inspires her most. She lives with her husband and two daughters in the San Francisco Peninsula, where they enjoy spending time outdoors at the area’s many open spaces protected and preserved by her favorite local nonprofit, the Peninsula Open Space Trust.