Sunset

This San Francisco ADU Was Designed to Look Like an Elevated Garden Shed Instead of a Back House

It blends in with the surrounding beautiful garden.



R. Brad Knipstein

Many ADUs are designed to look like a guest house in the back—which makes sense because essentially that's what they are. But the unique thing about this one in San Francisco is that it was designed to feel like a charming garden shed that had been in the backyard for ages.



The ADU meets the basic requirements for a simple shelter and we noticed the opportunity for the ADU to be architecturally meaningful spatially, in light of the simple yet distinctive main house," Lisa says.

R. Brad Knipstein

Written by: **Sarah Yang** September 30,2026

"The concept of imagining a shed structure which accreted to this larger dwelling structure in the garden served as the basis for inspiration. Moving away from the building resembling a 'little house' in the rear garden." explains Emily Stegner-Schwartz of **ES | LO Design Studio**, who worked on the project with partner Lisa Odyniec.



Natural light streams into the vaulted main space.

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The main house was built in 1910, designed by legendary Bay Area architect Bernard Maybeck (his most well-known project is the Palace of Fine Arts). It's one of a few houses he designed, so the homeowners were adamant on leaving the main house intact and declined any opportunities to build an addition. Instead, they focused on the ADU, with the goal that the Maybeck architectural details will be incorporated in a modern way in the new structure. It's a 976-square-foot space with two bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen, laundry area, and living space.



"Materials should be simple," Emily says of the clients' wishes. "Wood type throughout is Douglas fir which they will maintain by tung oil. Stone surfaces are a durable soapstone and the floor (interior and exterior is) large-scale porcelain tile in the manner of bluestone."

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"Originally our clients envisioned a studio space for small boat-building/woodworking projects and ceramics," says Lisa. "They are strong sailors and their children are accomplished artists and the existing basement space was cramped and difficult to access. The studio space type-of-use was not supported by the city, and the vision changed to an ADU, which they realized made sense for accommodating a living space for extended family or a caregiver at some point down the road."



"The dining banquette is tucked beneath a shed dormer, on the east edge of the space and provides a quiet expressed moment of a sculpture niche side, lit by one of the special windows and only observable in the Dining space," says Lisa.

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Another priority for the clients was to maintain as much of the existing garden as possible. Maximizing natural light was important, too.



A patio is a nice spot for enjoying the backyard.

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"The scale of the wood-framed shingle-clad ADU is central to the design, balancing the impactful interior volume of space with an interest in keeping the roof profile from overpowering the rear yard, providing an experiential surprise in the main vaulted space once inside," Emily explains.



The living area opens to the patio.

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In that vaulted main space is the kitchen, living room, and dining area. The double rafter detail from the main house is echoed in this space.



The kitchen island separates the kitchen from the rest of the main room.

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The homeowners wanted a kitchen that didn't feel like an obvious kitchen, so the design team put the pantry behind pocketed **bi-fold doors** and the installed Douglas fir cabinetry that features minimal integrated pulls. The kitchen island separates the kitchen from the dining area and living room.



A pantry is hidden behind pocketed bi-fold doors.

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Off the kitchen is a hallway that leads to the two bedrooms and bathroom. “The first bedroom is also vaulted, through sleight of hand, within the poche of the roof lines,” says Lisa. “It emulates the main space, but on a scale for a bedroom, with one more of the special windows at the peak, and views from the room windows to the gingko tree. The skylit bath shares the loftiness of the tall roof lines, which bring natural light into the bath and circulation spaces. On a good day, you can see from the shower window the spires of St. Ignatius Church and the tops of the Golden Gate Bridge.”



The bedroom’s vaulted ceiling echoes the main room’s.

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Since the ADU was one of the first to be built under **California's new ADU law**, the ES | LO team believe that it paves the way for others.



You can see the Golden Gate Bridge from the shower window on some days.

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"Our discerning clients, who went through the wrenching permitting process, blazing a trail for future ADU aspirants in **San Francisco**, are loving their ADU," says Emily.

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