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A small bungalow embraces its modern addition

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When documentary filmmaker Shaahin Cheyene and artist Asa Soltan Rahmati decided to enlarge their Venice bungalow four years ago, they embarked on a long conversation about aesthetics, their way of life and the sometimes testy clashes of this evolving beach community.

It was an occasionally contentious, often fanciful discussion further complicated by the dictates of the narrow lot. Bound on two sides by alleys -- one frequented by drug dealers -- the couple had few options for the large living spaces their hearts were set on.

With the front of the 970-square-foot house close to the street, the most logical choice was to tear down and start over, but the couple was uncomfortable with that proposition. Architects then proposed a two-story addition that extended far into the garden behind the bungalow, but the structure's obvious bulk could have fueled charges of gentrification, a criticism the bohemian couple sought to avoid.

"We didn't want our house to be insulting to the people around us," says Soltan Rahmati, whose husband has lived in Venice for 15 years.

Their architects' ultimate solution was this: a handsome, elegantly appositional group of forms. The design spreads the new spaces throughout the lot,

sandwiching the old bungalow between a new living room, master suite and Cheyene's home office and meditation room; a separate building houses a rental apartment, an art studio for Soltan Rahmati and a rooftop deck. The tight collection of structures boosts living space to 2,550 square feet without disrespecting the traditional density and scale of dwellings in the area.

The plan was conceived by three young architects. Ali Jeevanjee was only 27 when friends Soltan Rahmati and Cheyene first asked him about taking on the project. Steffen Leisner and Phillip Trigas, 32 and 33 respectively at the time, were graduates of L.A.'s Southern California Institute of Architecture and shared office space with Jeevanjee, but they had never actually collaborated on a house with him before.

Sloping roof lines

"There are pros and cons to working with young architects," Soltan Rahmati recalls over breakfast in her cluttered kitchen, adding that a lot of whiskey was involved in those discussions. "But they're definitely more open to debating design philosophy."

To help the redesigned house look like it belonged on this street of cottages, the two-story additions were given sloping roof lines, paying homage to the lines of the original bungalow and the neighboring houses.

The design team took full advantage of a building code that allows sloping roofs to go 5 feet higher than their flat counterparts. Besides increasing interior space, the higher roofs allowed windows to be placed high up the walls, letting light pour in but keeping the rooms private.

Because of security concerns, the property is surrounded by high walls, including a handsomely stuccoed side barrier topped by rusted steel plates. Enter the front gate, and a small hot tub and pool form a modest waterfall on one side, the cascades camouflaging street noise.

A miniature modern tower rises in the front, housing an office on the lower floor for Cheyene and a deck leading to the water's edge. Above lies a small room where Cheyene meditates on a Chokwe tribal bed set on the polished concrete floor. The sloping ceiling carries the eye up to a window high on the western wall, and the room's trapezoidal shape and lack of ornamentation evoke a sense of peace.

The middle section of the house consists of the original bungalow, which largely remains intact and still serves as the main entry. The exterior siding simply has been given a fresh coat of paint. Inside, the library, kitchen and dining area retain their original scale.

The back end, however, has been blown out to make way for the living room, whose floor-to-ceiling glass looks out onto a courtyard. With Persian cushions spread out on polished concrete, the space doubles as a screening room. The blank wall used as a projection screen is framed by plywood panels, one of which swings open to reveal stairs leading up to the master suite.

Power lines create art

Here the architects added a touch of luxury, placing a glass-doored fireplace in the wall between the bedroom and bathroom, open on both sides. The view through one high window facing the commode appears to be plain blue sky, but with an unabashed laugh Soltan Rahmati suggests taking a seat: From this lower position, black power lines suddenly fall into view, criss-crossing to form a bit of abstract art.

Across a small courtyard lies the smaller second building: a 400-square-foot rental unit on the ground floor and an art studio for Soltan Rahmati on the

upper level, reached by stairs from the courtyard. The space is crammed with her photographs, paintings and other art pieces, but it still feels delightfully airy, assisted by the deft placement of two large windows.

An 8-by-9-foot conventional window faces west, toward low-income apartments across the street. On the adjacent wall, a metal storefront door rolls up to create a 14-foot-wide, 8-foot-tall open portal to the outdoors, the view stretching north to well-kept houses and gardens. At Soltan Rahmati's request, the architects placed a fully functional clawfoot bath out in the open, on the landing of a plywood staircase leading to the rooftop deck. From here she can look out onto the two faces of her neighborhood.

Squeezing all of these spaces onto a 40-by-135-foot lot took considerable ingenuity. Not only was space tight, but rigorous building codes created additional stumbling blocks.

"We were forced to be loose," architect Leisner says. "You couldn't come on to this project and think you could solve a problem with standard solutions." Because the couple was adding a rental unit, the building code required five off-street parking spaces. Here, the much maligned "crack alley" came to the architects' rescue. By placing a sliding metal gate in the wall bordering the courtyard, they could declare the area as space for two cars. Other parking spots were tucked behind the rental unit.

To ensure cars could fit in the courtyard, the lower portions of both structures had to be set back. The architects pushed in the walls to wonderful effect, the upper floors now extending out into the triangular courtyard. The cantilevers create a more intimate atmosphere, one heightened by the placement of an olive tree in the middle -- a symbol of peace to the Iranian-born Soltan Rahmati.

She adds that the plan for the house is remarkably pragmatic for a husband and wife who work at home. With Cheyene's office in the front of the house on the first floor, and her studio at the back of the lot on the second floor, the work spaces lie separate from each other and apart from the shared living areas.

Artful disorder

The well-ordered plan doesn't mean a certain level of chaos doesn't reign within this home. For this couple, reconciling their personal aesthetic with their architects' design philosophy meant departing from the sort of tastefully arranged modernist vignettes one might see in a Design Within Reach catalog or Robertson Boulevard storefront. Rather, they spread their vast accumulation of belongings throughout the house in a carefree fashion, a celebration of artful disorder.

The architects remain undeterred. "We knew that it would not look like one of those cool Modernist spaces on the inside," Leisner says. "They have so many things." Adds Jeevanjee: "The building has such a strong geometry and such definite forms that it can handle whatever's done to it on the inside."

In this beachside community, where highly designed exteriors are increasingly evident, freedom and anarchy clearly still have their place.

"I've never liked those architects who are control freaks," says Soltan Rahmati, echoing the bohemian spirit of Venice residents before her. "I want to be myself in my own house."

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