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Pacific Heights French Lesson

A San Francisco town house by David Darling and Richard Brayton speaks with Continental flair

Architects David Darling and Richard Brayton created a contemporary version of a Parisian town house for clients in San Francisco. **right:** The library has luxurious Carpathian-elm burl paneling and drapery fabric from Gretchen Bellinger. The leather chair is by Christian Liaigre for Holly Hunt.





In Pacific Heights,
one of San Francisco's most affluent
and architecturally conservative
neighborhoods, a Parisian town house
would fit right in.

That's what architect David Darling thought when his clients approached him with an old postcard of their dream residence. Darling, who at the time worked for Richard Brayton of Brayton + Hughes Design Studio, began by tearing down the clients' 1950s cottage, which sat on a north-facing lot that sloped steeply upward.

Before long an elegant four-story 8,400-square-foot structure with six bedrooms took shape. The house's copper mansard roof, wrought-iron railings and vaulted vestibule with a working fireplace were certainly borrowed from Haussmann's Paris, but the lines were distinctly modern, in keeping with Brayton + Hughes's penchant for updating classic designs. Unfortunately, despite custom details that included an interior car port, the clients didn't stay long to enjoy it.

But it was fortuitous that the new owners, who moved in weeks after they bought it, delighted in their Paris of the West. A globe-trotting family of four, they had frequently visited Europe, and for them Darling and Brayton's updated version of old-world living was near perfect. The wife was instantly charmed by the elegant proportions: living rooms with eleven-foot-high ceilings, an intimate library and a spacious master bedroom on the third floor with even more rooms above it.

Almost immediately, the owners contacted the architects to see about making a few changes. "They needed more storage, an exercise room closer to their bedrooms and bigger rooms for their college-age children," says Darling, who now has his own firm, Aidlin Darling Design, which he founded with architect Joshua Aidlin. "Accordingly, the top level changed most. The rest was just a face-lift." Small rooms originally intended for five children were reconfigured into two suites: a north room fitted under the mansard facing the bay and another overlooking the sunny south garden. Reworked bathrooms on the top floor were freshened with crisp French limestone. "We also enlarged the hallway to increase the sense of grandeur in the stairwell," says Darling.

Much of the original design, however, remains unscathed. In the library, next to the master bedroom, Darling preserved rare Carpathian-elm burl paneling, typically used on Rolls-Royce dashboards. The new owners' furnishings—consisting of modern art, 1930s-style items, Chinese sculpture and pieces by Christian Liaigre—fit comfortably in the space. On the second floor, a front salon with bay views and an antique French fireplace were left untouched, now enhanced by Paris flea-market treasures. The kitchen and dining areas, both with garden access, needed little more than neutral shades of grey and pale-yellow paint.

The kitchen was also left as is because it works well for the new owners. "It was inspired by Dutch paintings where the living spaces are spare and utilitarian," says Darling. A vaulted ceiling bounces light evenly from skylights along the east wall (above the sink), while vertical pantries opposite the range consolidate necessary storage. Pushing the French idiom are built-in cabinets under stainless-steel counters that were designed with legs to make them seem freestanding.

To put their own stamp on this practically ready-made space, the owners asked Darling to create new custom pieces, including a metal console in the living room that started with a sketch the wife had done. Large wall expanses provided space to hang works by Robert Motherwell and Ed Ruscha alongside photographs by Michael Kenna and Robert Mapplethorpe.

When the owners suggested a Mediterranean-style garden for their French town house, Darling invited Marta Fry, a protégé of renowned landscape architect Peter Walker, to help. "Her formal style is suited to the house and its neighborhood," says Darling. Fry's classic stepped design mimics the multilevel house. The garden's four tiers are aligned with concrete buttresses that form the east retaining wall, which is topped by a lap pool. To soften the strict geometry, Fry planted vines such as clematis, Boston ivy and Chinese fringe flower to cascade over edges.

"The house is not precisely one thing," says Darling. "At the same time, we all tried not to stray too far from the theme. The owners liked the house as it was, but to suit their own collection they wanted to move it more toward the contemporary." +

opposite: Darling and Brayton called on landscape architect Marta Fry to design the garden, which has a carved limestone fountain (top left). Lorna Simpson paintings hang above a side table by Aidlin Darling Design in the living room (top right). "The idea was to create classical spaces with modern nuances," says Darling. In the dining room, silk-covered walls and a walnut table add richness (bottom).



"The house is confined by buildings on each side and a steep slope in the rear," says Darling. "So we designed a linear program that would lead from the bay views in front to the garden in back." The family room opens to the garden and has a pair of wood tables by Christian Liaigre for Holly Hunt.



Darling and Brayton devised a utilitarian plan for the kitchen. **right:** Simple brushed-nickel pendants and plenty of sunlight brighten the space, which has traditional-style cabinetry, ceramic crackle-glaze tile from Ann Sacks and a Viking range. **above:** "We turned to Dutch paintings for inspiration," says Darling. Low overhead racks were added to accommodate the clients' collection of utensils and objects.





above: During renovation, smaller rooms upstairs were reconfigured into two suites. The bayside suite has a photograph by Tom Baril, a Vicente Wolf chair and a birch daybed by Aidlin Darling Design. "The views add another element to the decor," says Darling. left: In the master bedroom, which overlooks the garden, a painting by Robert Motherwell hangs above an antique French fire surround. The carpet is from Stark. opposite: "We went with a Mediterranean plant palette," says Fry. Potted olive trees, Italian cypress, boxwood, roses, jasmine and lavender are found throughout the garden, with a lap pool at the top level.

