

Every Home Needs a Heart

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Originally built as a minimalist home with a detached garage, the main mid century ranch style structure sprouted from a hill above the Orinda Country Club more than half a century ago, and was most likely created as a getaway cottage, according to present owners Susan and Howard Warner.

When she first viewed it roughly 14 years ago, says Warner, the property had “almost a magical feel.” She is still clearly mesmerized. “I loved the house from the very beginning.”

Woven into the house’s historical tapestry are tales of fitness legend Jack LaLanne’s



Facing toward the dining room’s glass doors, guests feel part of the greater natural world. When facing away, the dining experience is cozy.



Designers maximized important historic characteristics of the home, including this original brick fireplace.

time here. The LaLanne family is credited with at least one of the residence’s numerous remodels – the enclosure of the walkway between the main house and detached garage which created a new living room area.

Since that time, the house has “undergone a number of discordant remodels and additions,” according to Jarvis Architects, a recipient of previous Orinda awards for architecture and the firm chosen by the Warners in 2009 to modernize their residence while still retaining its old Orinda charm.

Robin Pennell, the lead architect on the Warner’s project, has been a partner with Jarvis since 1991. “He was very keyed in to what we wanted,” says Warner. “He really kept the integrity of the house.”

That house, says Pennell, “had probably six distinct additions, each done a little more poorly than the last. There was nothing that held the house together.” Warner points to the different styles of flooring employed in each room as major contributors to the home’s “hodgepodge” feeling prior to its re-design.

Both echo the other’s sentiment— “The house had no heart.”

Saying that “none of the rooms were in the right place” and describing the residence as having “a lot of rambling spaces,” Pennell said his job was to simplify the house and pull it together by removing much of the offending work that had been done over the years.

Both Pennell and Warner note that there were features with fascinating and important character that were worth preserving – flush doors with distinctive grooves that evoked an almost art deco feel, beamed ceilings, and a living room that was unusually large for this period of ranch home design. That room, says Warner, was and still is “the true essence of the original home.”

A sense of history resonates from the living room’s original old brick fireplace, which has been transformed into a focal point for visitors by flanking white bookshelves and comfortable, inviting furniture.

Warner and Pennell decided to replicate the grooving on the majority of the home’s doors, as well as other pewter and wood touches to create a more consistent feel from room to room.

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The living room’s original dark wood beamed ceilings and more subdued lighting contrast nicely with the home’s sunlit kitchen and dining room.