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## Two Lafayette Homes on AIA Tours

By Cathy Dausman



A blueprint of Rancho Diablo was etched into the fireplace flu in the living room. Photo Cathy Dausman

Six East Bay homes - two each in Berkeley, Oakland and Lafayette - are featured in this year's American Institute of Architects East Bay Home Tours on Aug. 10. The Lafayette homes are as different as night and day. One is a multi-acre estate, the other an in-law add-on. One was built in 1929; the other is less than 10 years old. But large or small, what they both do well is blur the lines between nature and home.

It is impossible to focus on the architectural details alone of Rancho Diablo in a 90 minute tour. Better to have nine days, or even 90. One even gets lost in the details that fill each room - the light, the furnishings, paintings, window placements, architectural collections and careful blending of old and new space.

Built in 1929 by society doctor Clarence Wills, it almost didn't survive. His daughter Helen Wills Moody didn't like the house (a story for another time), and deeded it to the University of California, Berkeley. UC Berkeley nearly sold it to a developer, who, the thinking goes, surely would have torn it down.

Instead current owner/architect Lucia Howard bought the house in 1989 and became its second owner. She named it Rancho Diablo because it faced Mt. Diablo and because of her "love of things devilish."

"It was built to beat the band," Howard said of the original home, which had foot-thick brick walls, hand forged hardware and a handmade clay tile roof. Good thing it was, because 1989 was also the year of the Loma Prieta earthquake.

It "stood pretty firm" then, Howard said.

Howard restored the home before moving in, and began serious renovations in 2000. The original house footprint has been well preserved, with its hand-painted California Faience tiles still in evidence and centuries-old first-growth hand hewn redwood which frames many

archways. Howard planned the additions like bookends on either side of the original house.

Where the old wood is heavy and dark, she brought in heavy but light colored wood in the new wings; where there was brick, the new wings feature rough stucco. Light fir in wide strips echo the board and batten wall covering in the old house section.

The original road leading to the house was long and winding and approached the site from the south exposure. When a newer road was built into the area, a dogtrot entry facilitated flipping the front door to the north side.

Windows are unexpectedly built into room corners in the new wings, leaving the walls free to display artwork from the 1700s to 1900s, much of it part of a collection of architectural models from the European Grand Tour tradition. An additional several thousand 20th century souvenir models are housed in a museum space, a separate building with a soaring ceiling and a spiral staircase off to one side.

The landscape has been re-designed, leading those indoors outside, and inviting inside much of the surrounding oak trees and private hillsides. It doesn't feel like a 5,000 square foot home (some of which is off-tour), but it certainly invites you to take in the California hillside on which it is built.

The second Lafayette home is a bit of a Cinderella story - a free standing unit on a hillside intended to become an in-law/rental in a neighborhood of single family homes.

When its owners saw it for the glass slipper that it was, they moved in themselves. At only 750 square feet, the home still manages to be "neat, tidy and elegant," said architect Thomas Lee.

It is the smallest whole house project Lee has ever designed, and one of his very few residential projects. "Just because you downsize, you don't have to lower your standards," he said.

The original home design was submitted by a different architect and imagined as a tall and vertical structure climbing the hillside. It failed - twice - to pass the city's design review board.

Enter Tom Lee. The clients accepted his first design of a single level rectangle with recessed entry, with a bedroom and common room (kitchen/living space).

Wisteria vines cover the entry arch, providing shade and color in summer.

The eastern walls are floor-to-ceiling glass, and the lines blur between the inside and out, with features like a

river rock "streambed" running the inside length of the common room. A trellis brought inside became a ledge for displaying the owner's artwork.

The west side of the building is nestled into the earth, acting as insulation and minimizing view disruption for neighbors uphill. "We built a house that's responsive to the environment," said Lee.

He likes his work to present the owners with "little surprises," noting that the entry arch frames the best hillside view, and the front door opens onto a sky lighted niche, allowing yet another spot to feature artwork. The single bath shares that same skylight; the 11-foot-tall ceiling increases the feeling of abundant space.

East Bay AIA Home Tour 2013 runs from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 10.

To purchase tickets (\$40 in advance; \$50 day-of) visit <http://tinyurl.com/jvqzd6v> and click on "register now."



Bringing the outside trellis indoors creates a built-in ledge to display some of the owner's art collection. Photos courtesy of LDA Architects



The bedroom gets morning sun through its west and south-facing windows, and shade from the protruding wisteria vines.

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