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Russian Hill Revival

Expanding and Redefining an 1850s Sea Captain's Mansion in San Francisco

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"It's a formal country house in the heart of the city," says interior designer Paul Vincent Wiseman of a circa 1850 Italianate residence on San Francisco's Russian Hill. "The original entrance was on the other side of the house," he explains. "Sandy Walker, the architect, built a new one. You now walk through the prettiest part of the garden to reach it."

THE FORTY-NINERS often abandoned their ships upon reaching San Francisco by either burning or scuttling them. Yet in the 1850s, it is said, Captain R. C. Ruskin recycled his by using its timbers for his mansion, which he built in lone majesty on Russian Hill, facing Alcatraz. The house went on to survive the catastrophic 1906 fire, because (the story goes) gunny-sacks doused in wine from its well-provided cellar were spread on the roof. On another occasion, in order for people to review the Great White Fleet in 1908, grandstands were set up in its garden, an act of civic hospitality that was rewarded by the city fathers with a gift of Irish yews that continue to flourish to this day.

Decades after these events, the current owners were attracted to the residence most of all by the chance to satisfy their impossible dream of having a country house in the city. He wanted a view; she wanted a south-facing garden.

The couple had been interior designer Paul Vincent Wiseman's first major clients, had kept in close touch over the years and had recommended him to their friends. They involved him, along with architect Sandy Walker, from the beginning. All told, the project took four years.

"Fortunately," says Wiseman, "the house didn't become a protected landmark; as awkward as its floor plan was, it needed a major reenvisioning. We remained within the Victorian vernacular, but I fought—and won—the battle for some mullioned windows and for two Palladian ones as well."

The structure was expanded in every direction: The entrance was switched from the north to the west side to take advantage of the lot-size garden with its brick stairway. The side facing the street (obliquely, because there was no street there when the house first went up) was pushed out fourteen feet and enhanced with bay windows and a balustraded porch.

A conservatorylike bay was added to the kitchen, and a library and office to the east side. Even the roof was torn off, and an attic was transformed into



"Inside is a very traditional setting meant to accommodate a growing contemporary art collection," says Wiseman. "We set aside a major art wall as the focus in the entrance hall, an area the clients use when entertaining on a large scale." Christopher Brown's *Retreat*, 1990, dominates one wall. Antique Malayer carpet, Claremont Rug Company.

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"We added a bay window and an extension to the front of the house, which created the new living room. The space needed to be large enough for the antique Sultanabad carpet." Lee Jofa drapery fabric. Pillow fabrics from Clarence House, Scalamandré and Henry Calvin. Brunschwig & Fils fabric on chair at left.





"The library is also a new room," says Wiseman. "It's modeled after the Jockey Club in New York and was fashioned in a way to make it seem original to the house. We put in an antique marble mantel and aged the pine paneling to underscore the effect. It's used for reading and relaxing and is an office as well." Brunswick & Fils chenille.



LEFT: The dining room's 18th-century English table and Oushak carpet attest to the clients' love of English antiques and Oriental rugs. *Jazz Ensemble, Afternoon Music*, 1986, is by James Weeks. Lane Furniture chairs. Moiré wallcovering from Old World Weavers.

a guest suite. The swimming pool, perhaps the first outdoor pool in the city when it was built in 1949, was enlarged to lap pool dimensions.

The owners have grown children who visit often, and they entertain frequently, but their chief desire was that the house be agreeable for just the two of them. "Because I've known them for so long," says Wiseman, "I understood that they wanted elegance but not excessive grandeur."

Even before the house was found, Wiseman had spotted two Regency mirrors he insisted would eventually find their proper place: They now flank the main entrance. A wonderful Sultanabad rug dictated the dimensions of the living room and provided the key to the general palette. Working with color consultant James Goodman, Wiseman chose a warm spectrum ranging from apricot to beige to pink.

A great deal of furniture from the clients' previous house in Sausalito was serviceable—the former living room stocked much of the new library, for example—because Wiseman believes "in buying good things to begin with." Actually, the library is modeled on the Jockey Club in New York (the wife went there armed with a Polaroid to document it). It contains an English painting of a horse—to symbolize the racehorse the husband owns—and an oil of a clipper ship, a reminder of the original provenance of the house itself.

Since the couple are dedicated readers, the master suite was provided with comfortable chairs and lots of



LEFT: The kitchen's breakfast area "provides light and access to the garden," says Wiseman. "It resembles a conservatory, which is appropriate for a Victorian house." A Directoire lantern hangs above a 19th-century weathervane. McGuire table and chairs. Botanical-print fabric from Clarence House.

RIGHT: "The addition to the front of the house also allowed us to enlarge the master suite," says Wiseman. Beyond the bedroom is the wife's dressing room, which is lined with mirrored closets. Henry Calvin drapery fabric. Bedcovering fabric, Sanderson.

light. An apricot-colored wallcovering, "good," the designer feels, "for both men and women," gives the room "an inviting, lived-in look."

The walls of the dining room, on the other hand, are upholstered in silk-and-linen moiré to enhance intimacy and provide soundproofing. There is no chandelier, because the residents would have considered one to be too fussy. And although the dining table is eighteenth-century English, the chairs are not antique, because, notes Wiseman, the clients "like to linger after dinner, and they shouldn't have to worry about fragility."

During the course of the project the owners became committed to collecting art, at first focusing on the New York School—Hans Hofmann, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell—then turning with increasing interest to the Bay Area Figurative School.

A major painting by Christopher Brown, one of the Bay Area's leading younger artists, commands the entrance hall. An important David Park oil is in the living room. Two canvases by Bay Area "expatriate" James Weeks, one executed in 1967 while he still lived in San Francisco, the other in 1987, after he had moved to Bedford, Massachusetts, grace the dining room.

"My biggest thrill, always," says Paul Vincent Wiseman, "is getting to know clients really well, so we develop great trust in each other. It's exciting when they begin to pick up on what I'm trying to say and start to discover new passions and new ways to express themselves." □

"The residence is one of the oldest in the city," says Wiseman, "and it was one of the few in the neighborhood that survived the great fire that followed the 1906 earthquake. It sits on a double lot. Each of its levels has bay views." RIGHT: The master bedroom looks out to the Golden Gate Bridge.

