



*a love story  
in collaboration*

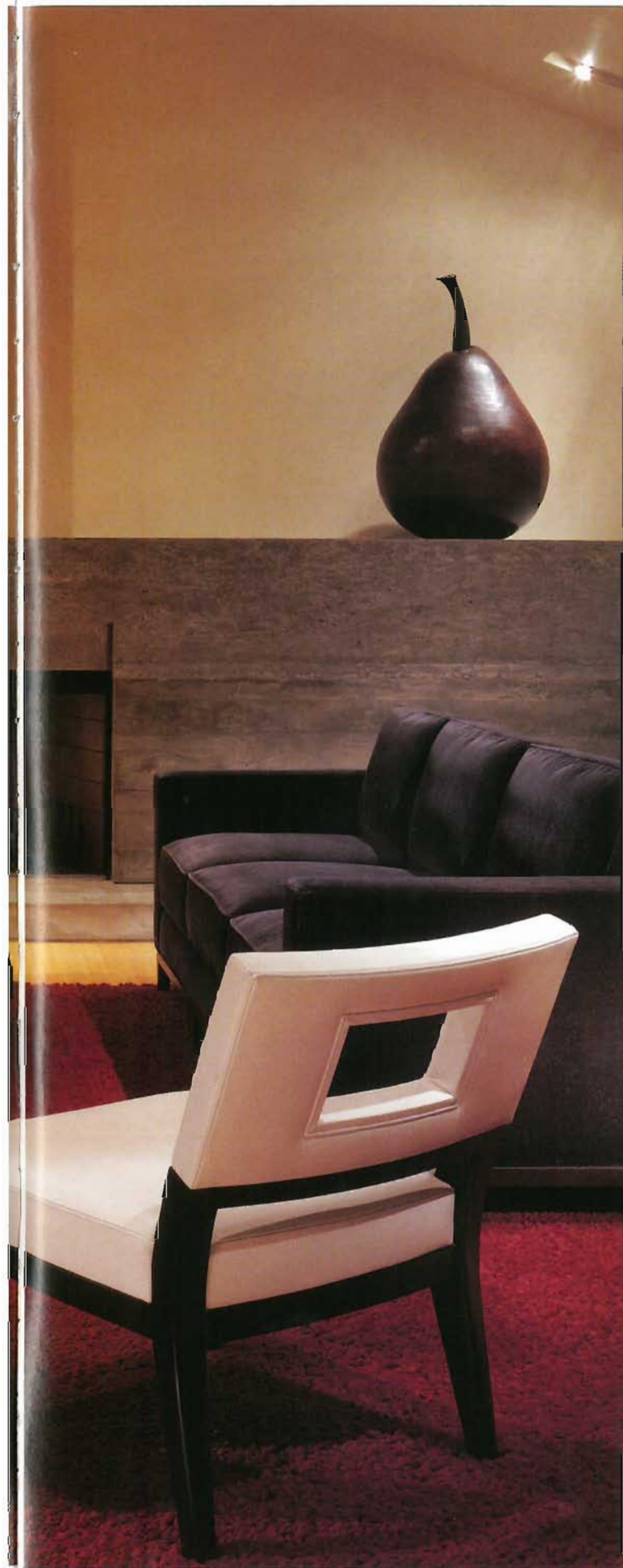
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CESAR RUBIO AND MATTHEW MILLMAN

ARCHITECTURE BY FU-TUNG CHENG OF CHENG DESIGN  
AND AVILA TOM ARCHITECTS

BUILDING BY THOMPSON-BROOKS INC.

INTERIOR DESIGN BY PAUL LEVINSON DESIGN

STORY BY NICOLE BESTARD



*The living room, left, features Chamani chairs by Christian Liaigre in white "Matt Damon" leather. Levinson found the chairs, mobair Mousson sofa, and cocktail table at Holly Hunt in San Francisco. The "Piu" 100% wool felt rug is by Ruckstuhl, from Sloan Miyasato. The pear on the mantle is antique copper by Robert Kuo for Gump's. Cheng made the concrete fireplace to resemble wood and created the basket-weave pattern in plaster for the ceiling.*

*The view from outside, below, showcases the well-executed clean lines and emphasizes the transparency to the outdoors the owners sought.*

Upon entering the walk up to the front door of this tranquil Tiburon home, one is greeted with the words of Christopher Marlowe from *A Passionate Shepherd to his Love*. "Come live with me and be my love" . . . the poem begins. The message is intended for the heart, of course, for it is laid out in braille in the granite blocks of the path. Owned by Judith Thompson, principal of Thompson-Brooks contractors in San Francisco, and her partner, Cindy Brooks, the home is a true work of art and of love, evidenced by the many talented craftsmen, artisans, and idea people who had a part in its making. While to some any gathering of gifted folks might lead to a case of too many cooks in the kitchen, to Thompson, who is accustomed to coordinating and combining hundreds of people on several high-end remodeling projects at one time, there couldn't be a better recipe for success.



Like so many things that start out small and end up big, the project began with a simple kitchen remodel. Thompson and Brooks had seen and admired architect Fu-Tung Cheng's work before, so they called him in to consult on the kitchen, "and it evolved from there," says Thompson. Indeed, Cheng says, "They asked us to do this room and then that room and before long we had re-done the whole



house.” For Cheng, the opportunity to work with fellow professionals in the design/build business was a lot of fun: “We both share the same scars and wounds of outrageous fortune in the building industry,” he laughs.

“There were a few times Fu-Tung would come and show me something, and I’d go, ‘Oh, that’s not going to last,’” says Thompson. “And he’d say, ‘No, I think it’ll last.’ I’d think, ‘Well, okay, what’s the worst that can happen? I hired this guy because I liked his ideas and I’ll go with it.’” Go with it she did, and she’s more than happy with the results. While the old house was dark, the new house maximizes the views of Mt. Tamalpais, the Bay, and the Richmond Bridge—and it’s amazing.

“We actually ended up tearing down the whole house because it was built so poorly,” says Thompson. She recalls that when they began to open up the bottom floor, it became clear that half of

the house sat lower on the foundation than the other half. For contractor/builders like Thompson-Brooks, it was a worthy challenge. “We are often so fast that architects can’t keep up and that became an issue. So we had two architects working on the pro-

*The 12-foot-long dining table, above left, was custom made in walnut by Berman Rosetti. The “Bison” chairs are from Holly Hunt in olive “polished cow” Keleen leather. The candelabras are custom-made from DeSousa Hughes.*

*Levinson commissioned Ted Boerner to custom-make the breakfast nook for the kitchen, below left. The chair to the left is a Hi Q 2 stool from Wendell Castle at Enid Ford.*

*Cheng commissioned Berkeley potter Gary Holt to make the crackle-glazed tile for the back wall of the kitchen, above.*







*The Berman Rosetti custom sectional in the family room, above, is Tiburon chenille from Nyung Jian fabrics in Sausalito. The “Zen” coffee table is by Berman Rosetti, and the oak ottomans are by Pablo Pauf through Enid Ford.*

*Ted Boerner custom-designed the bed for the master bedroom, above right. The bedding and wall fabrics are from Larson; Levinson made the bedding, and Fabric Walls installed the upholstered wall. The chairs are also by Ted Boerner in Clarence House Mobair, and the antique copper ball is by Robert Kuo for Gump’s. The chest of drawers is designed from chiseled oak and ebony by Hurel Louvre for Enid Ford.*

*The child’s room, bottom right, features Roche Bobois children’s furniture and floor to ceiling curtains in acid green. Levinson designed the striped rug and had it made by Savnick through Sloan Miyasato.*

ject,” Thompson says. Avila Tom Architects provided the back-up details for the construction, while Cheng provided design ideas and surface material selections.

The whole construction process was complete in 11 months. No small feat, but not a big deal either when it comes to the type of work the largest women-owned remodeling company in the country is used to. By applying a commercial building mentality to residential projects, Thompson-Brooks is able to handle six to eight projects at once, often with anywhere from 50 to 100 people working on one project at a time.

When it came to choosing an interior designer, the couple interviewed several, only to feel that they didn’t really connect with any of them. They asked a friend whose house they loved, interior designer Paul Levinson, for his input, and a match was made. “Paul was really great to work with because instead of showing us 10,000 fabrics, he showed us three, and he would say, ‘This is the one I like, which one do you like?’ And 90% of the time, we’d go with his choice,” says Thompson. She mentions the red carpet in the living room. “This rug is great. It’s got these big loops of shag sticking up. Paul brought in a little sample and I

thought it was ridiculous because it looked like it came from under the sea or something. And then I went, 'Okay.' Of course he was right. In the scale of that room, all of a sudden it doesn't look crazy. Everybody loves it."

"The whole collaboration worked well," adds Levinson. "Everyone was in sync. They were the perfect clients, so willing to try new things. They did a lot of innovative stuff in this house that really hadn't been done before because Thompson had people who were willing to try new stuff."



*The guest bedroom, left, features a bed custom designed by Ted Boerner in vertical grain fir. Levinson made the silk bed cover and pillows from Henry Calvin fabrics.*

*Guests are greeted with a view through the home from the outside, above.*

Allowing the design experts to take over creatively freed Thompson to do her job: making sure the carpentry was absolutely perfect down to the last meticulous detail. "This house is 6,500 square feet and sometimes we had 50 people working on it at once," she says. The contemporary design of the home set up by Cheng made much of the craftsmanship "deceptively difficult," she says. All flooring is flush to the wall, requiring the reveal to be perfect. "There is no trim on any of the doors or windows, so all the details have to be executed perfectly. There's no way to hide anything if it's not level or perfect. Every single thing in the house is done like that, even the outside siding. It was a very, very difficult project."

Was it the classic doctor as patient scenario? "It gave me great insight into doing other people's houses. I learned how it feels from the inside and I try to be really sensitive to that with my clients."

One of the things that originally attracted Thompson to Cheng's work is his innovative use of integral color plaster.

Cheng, who comes from a background in art and strives to use everything from concrete to plaster in ways that aren't used prevalently, likes the medium for its natural quality. Cheng is the author of *Concrete Countertops*, a book highlighting many practical and innovative uses for concrete as artistic and design elements in the home. "Both plaster and cement are dug up from the earth. They're natural materials returning to their original forms, with the process sped up a bit," he says. Thompson, on the other hand, loves it for its durability. "Plaster is very forgiving. You can ding it and it still has a color underneath it, and it's sealed so stuff wipes off of it. It works very well," she adds. Plaster is used throughout the house in the living room, dining room, master bedroom, and kitchen in a variety of colors. Cheng even created a basket-weave pattern for the plaster on the living room ceiling.

For the sitting room fireplace, Cheng used a material called Rastra, made from recycled foam and cement for the wall. He then put green plaster over it, which pulled away to give the texture and look of a dry lake bed. In the living room, Cheng employed his signature medium, concrete, on the fireplace to resemble wood grains. To give it a multi-textured look, Cheng used boards with different grain rhythms and strand board as molds for the concrete surface. He poured it in different layers, stopping to add color and aggregation, and then another layer once it had firmed to create what's called a cold joint. "Hesitation between the layers of concrete gives it striations, much like layers of the earth settling over eons creates strata," he says. Cheng also embedded ammonite fossils into the concrete. "The designs that come out of those fossils are just incredible," he says. "Different things have settled in each cell, so when you cut into them it's like a terrazzo floor. Some turn into metals—the ones in this fireplace are iron pyrite fossils."

The floors on the lower level of the house are bamboo, a material Cheng is fond of. "Environmentally, it's a very correct thing to use," he says. "Bamboo forests can grow back in just three to five years, making it a genuine renewable resource. It's basically like harvesting grass, and it looks great."

Thompson herself came up with some of the most daring designs, furthering ideas she'd seen before. Garage doors as design elements is one of them. The dining room walls are actually large glass garage doors, allowing for outdoor dining in the summer, and a viewpoint from the calla lily garden in the front of the house all the way through to the back deck. According to Cheng, a garage door wall has been done before, but the idea of having two on either side to create a completely open space belongs entirely to Thompson.

Such pioneering attitudes by all involved have led to a beautiful home, as much fun to live in as to look at. Thompson and Brooks' four-year-old daughter and her friends can attest to that, as they leap from couch to ottoman, play in the garden, and hang out in the very green bedroom that is a youngster's paradise. "People come over all the time and say, 'This is the nicest house I've ever seen. It's so comfortable.' It's not formal, but it doesn't feel funky either," says Thompson. "It's a tranquil space." ■

