



Garage-door walls in the dining area (FAR LEFT) were one of the many ideas Judith Thompson (BELOW, AT RIGHT) brought to the new Tiburon home she shares with partner Cindy Brooks and their daughter, Zoe. The doors open onto a garden of magnolias created by landscape architect Topher Delaney. In the den (BOTTOM), textured plaster walls contrast with modern custom furnishings by San Francisco's Ted Boerner.



## A HANDCRAFTED PARADISE

When a top contractor redesigned her own home, she turned to some very talented friends. The results: earthy, modern, beautiful.

**BY MARTIN HOLDEN**  
**PHOTOGRAPHS BY CESAR RUBIO**

With scores of high-end homes—for the likes of Michael Tilson Thomas and various Silicon Valley bigwigs—already under her tool belt, Judith Thompson of contracting giant Thompson Brooks Inc. knows the value of having a solid plan, a strict schedule, and a firm budget for a remodeling project. But even for a building business insider, the best-laid plans are subject to unexpected challenges. →



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: In the living area, Cheng Design embedded a concrete mantel with ammonite fossils. The summery breakfast nook features a table and benches designed by Ted Boerner and Paul Levinson. A custom-made stainless tub in the master bath is insulated, like a Thermos. Designer Cathleen Quandt warmed it up more with natural wood: "I try to get a bench into every bathroom I do," she says. In the kitchen, a wall of crackle-glazed tiles was custom-made by Berkeley potter Gary Holt.



On a spectacular piece of land in Tiburon with views of the bay and Mount Tam, Thompson and her partner, Cindy Brooks (and their daughter, Zoe), found a 1950s ranch house that had been remodeled several times before, but never successfully. Initially, they were content to restrict their work to designing a new kitchen and remodeling the garage. But in the process, "a lot of stuff came up," says Thompson. "The garage needed a new foundation, and when that was done, we asked, 'Why not add a second story?'" It snowballed from there.

About a year—and four architects and designers—later, the work was finished, a surprisingly fast pace considering that in that time, the house was essentially demolished and rebuilt. Fu-Tung Cheng and Cathleen Quandt were brought in to create the interiors, which hum with interesting materials, custom furniture, and unusual fixtures.

Though Thompson and Brooks have seen everything a demanding client could possibly want, Cheng says, they were excited about trying new things. One experimental technique he used in the den was to spread plaster over a wall of Rastra block—a recycled concrete-and-polystyrene material that is not meant to be plastered. The result is a geometric pattern of tiny cracks, like the bed of a dry lake or a pottery glaze. "They were surprised to be surprised," Cheng notes with pleasure.

Elsewhere, Thompson's usual subcontractors applied more traditional plaster treatments, consulting with Quandt and



San Francisco-based interior designer Paul Levinson to achieve a rich and varied palette of well-chosen, earthy colors inspired by the rural setting. "If you can afford plaster, go for it," says Brooks. "It looks better longer than paint."

In the kitchen, Cheng and his crew installed a steely gray concrete counter imbedded with nodules of apple-green semiprecious chrysoprase. The living room fireplace is framed by a concrete monolith, its surface dotted with ammonite fossils. "By imbedding things in concrete and revealing them," says Cheng, "I try to echo nature but not imitate it."

Levinson, an old friend of the owners, was charged with finding modern fur-

nishings for the home, but not the classic midcentury style that has seen a revival in recent years. "They wanted something they hadn't seen a million times before," he says. The solution was to commission new pieces from contemporary local designers, including San Francisco-based Ted Boerner. In the kitchen, he replaced a heavy, padded banquette with a trestle table of light wood surrounded by cantilevered seats and simple benches, creating an almost outdoorsy feel. And the long oval Berman Rosetti dining room table allows guests at Thompson and Brooks' frequent parties to converse more easily.

While the interior is refreshingly



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Fu-Tung Cheng created this animated staircase of walnut, maple, and steel.

**HOME** → simple, the out-of-doors is surprisingly complex—thanks to San Francisco landscape architect Topher Delaney. Approaching the front door, for example, visitors tread a gravel path set with an eccentric pattern of granite paving stones. Even the most observant guests probably won't notice that the stones form a cipher, spelling out a poem by Christopher Marlowe—"Come live with me and be my love..."—in Braille. "My interest is in coded information," says Delaney, "and how you understand the codes of nature, of culture, when you're walking in their patterns." Not everything she

**Sometimes the project looked like a barn raising, with 50-plus craftspeople swarming all over the house.**

does is this heavy: A collection of flowering magnolias Delaney planted along the walk expresses nothing but the simple joys of spring.

With all the creative minds at work on this home, and all the experience and resources that Thompson's firm could bring to bear, it's impressive that the house doesn't feel overdone. Sometimes the project did look like a barn raising, with 50-plus craftspeople swarming all over the house. But each one was focused on details that would make the finished product simpler, cleaner, and leaner in the end. "They had the same problems anyone would have," says Cheng. "But it came out pretty damn good." ●