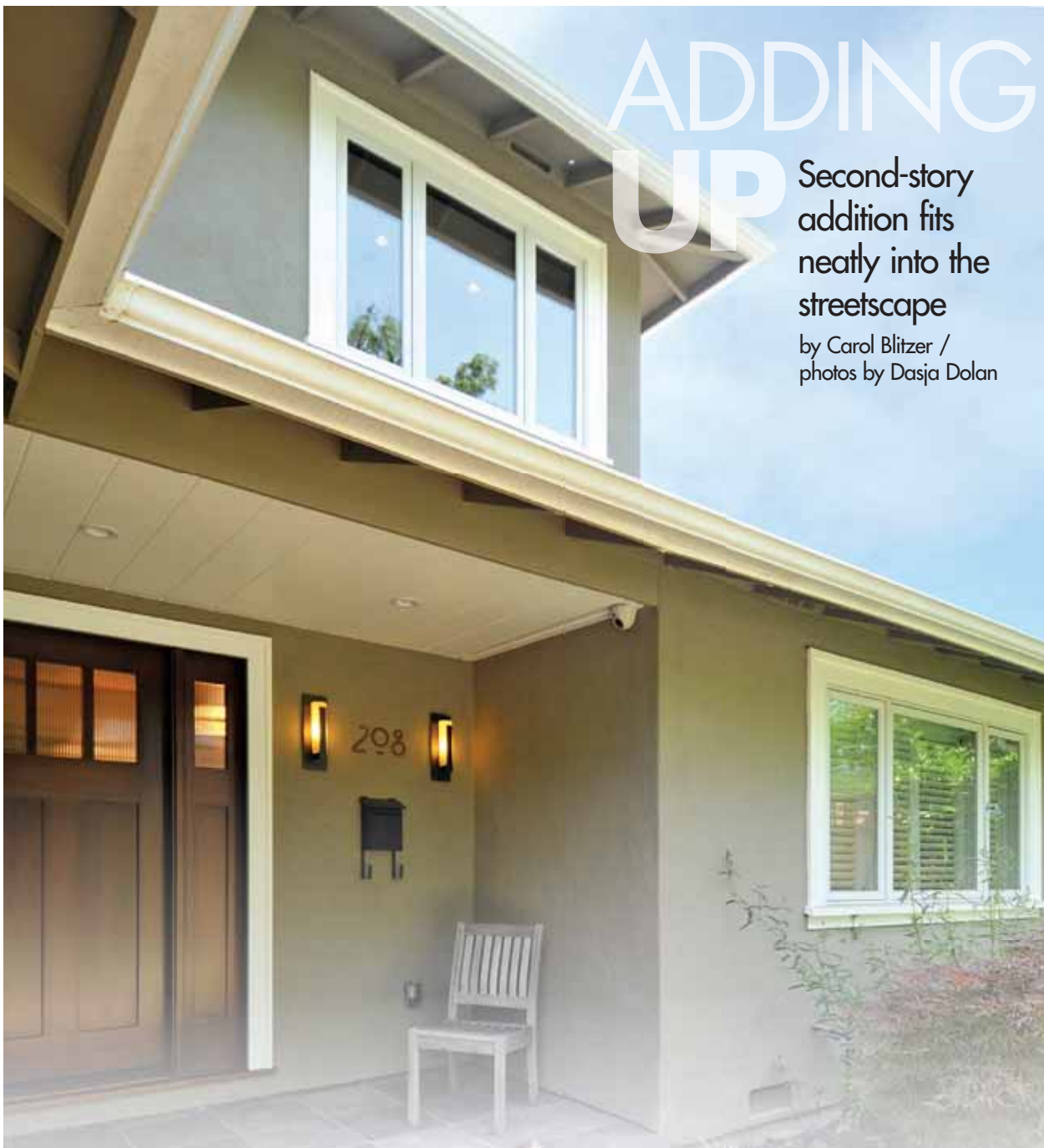


ADDING UP

Second-story addition fits neatly into the streetscape

by Carol Blitzer /
photos by Dasja Dolan



Laura Rennert and Barry Eisler lived in their 1950s rancher in The Willows in Menlo Park for nearly 10 years before they decided to add a second story. Much had changed since they bought it in 1997: They both worked at home (she's a literary agent; he's an author), they had a daughter and they even had a tiny Chihuahua named Lola.

So when they had an opportunity to move to Tokyo, Japan, for a year, they figured they could have their house completed while they were away, saving themselves a second move.

Just before leaving, they assembled what Rennert calls "our dream team": Robert Mayer, architect; Alyson Collins, designer; and John Merwin, the contractor who had worked on an earlier remodel of their

kitchen.

Mayer scoped out the mainly single-story street and quickly drew up plans for a second-story that wouldn't be too "top-heavy," he says. "Proportion is everything. ... I wanted to avoid the 'tower' effect," he adds, pointing to where the roof cuts under the second-story windows and how the visible walls appear shorter.

"My gut said it wouldn't be easy," says Mayer, who sits on the Planning Commission and Architectural Review Committee for the City of Santa Clara. His gut was right, as both the city and neighbors challenged the couple's plan to build up.

The original house was built on county land, covering 39.3 percent of the lot. A later Menlo Park ordinance amendment limited the footprint to 35 percent,

or 40 percent if any addition was single-story. The couple needed to apply for a variance, even though they weren't covering any more of the lot.

Mayer even completed a sun study to assure a neighbor that the house would not cast a long shadow on nearby property.

"I design a house as if I live next door. It's about the community, the neighborhood," Mayer says.

"Everyone ultimately came on board, even before the variance hearing," Rennert says.

Wowed by the first set of plans, the family set off for Tokyo, doing much of their communicating via e-mail, faxed digital images and a few visits home for face-to-face meetings during the year.

The idea was to work around the updated kitchen and downstairs bathrooms, which involved adding plywood to the back of the kitchen wall for seismic safety.

Downstairs changes include a replacement of the old brick Colonial fireplace with a contemporary Craftsman version, backed in slate and glass, as well as new doors and lighting. New baseboards and crown moldings, the same detailing as on the exterior, run throughout the house.

"We couldn't raise the ceiling, so we ran the

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Architect Robert Mayer designed the second story, left, to avoid a top-heavy look. Right, a contemporary Craftsman version replaced the old brick Colonial fireplace. Below, focal point of the master bathroom is a free-standing deep Zuma tub, which stands in front of a stacked-stone wall.





Window sills in the master bedroom are 5 feet tall, assuring privacy for the homeowners and neighbors.

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molding along the top. It gave the illusion of height,” Rennert says.

“I like uncluttered, clean and simple. Let the lines speak for themselves,” she says, adding that they’re influenced by Craftsman, Arts and Crafts and Asian design.

Today the ceramic-floored entryway features shoe storage and a bench, a nod to their year in Japan, as they ask visitors to remove shoes.

Turn the corner and one continues up the stairs, with mahogany railing and a shallow top-lit niche for future art.

Rennert’s favorite room in the house is the new master bathroom, with a free-standing, deep Zuma tub in front of a stacked-stone wall, heated floor, double square sinks and a separate shower. The tub controls are built into the wall — what Mayer calls “high design.”

“I do a ton of reading in my bathtub,” she says.

Because Rennert and Eisler work at different hours, it was impor-

tant to them to have the bathroom and closet soundproofed from the bedroom. The large walk-in closet separates bathroom and bedroom.

To ensure privacy — both for themselves and their neighbors — window sills in the bedroom are 5 feet tall.

Eisler’s office faces the street, overlooking a huge liquidambar tree, creating a comfortable writing space for his future spy novels. (His latest, “Inside Out,” was published in June 2010.)

Although they chose not to get their remodel green-certified, the couple did incorporate many “green” aspects: low VOC paint, a tankless water heater, no bad glues in the plywood. They considered solar panels on the roof but found them inefficient, given the siting of the house.

“The greenest thing they did is not tear the house down,” Mayer says.

Most important to the couple, though, was fitting into the neigh-

borhood. “We wanted it to look like it was always there,” Rennert says. **h+g**

Resources:

Architect: Robert Mayer, Santa Clara, 408-564-5943

Building contractor: John Merwin, Dimensional Construction, 650-261-1917

Interior designer: Alyson Collins, Spaces That Fit, 831-336-4452, www.spacesthatfit.com

Goal of project:

Add master bedroom suite and office in second story

Unexpected problems:

Needed a variance

Year house built:

1951

Size of home, lot:

Original: 1,552 sq ft (3 BD, 2 BA)
Now: 2,346 sq ft (4 BD, 3 BA plus office), on 5,347-sq-ft lot

Time to complete:

Planning: about 11 months
Construction: 4-5 months

Budget:

\$360,000 for core project; another \$40,000-50,000 for extras