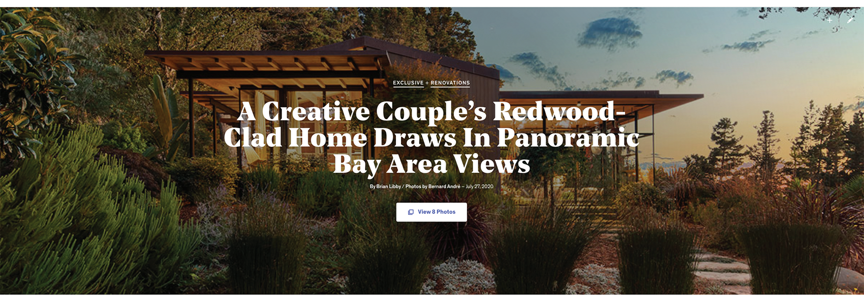

EXCLUSIVE + RENOVATIONS

A Creative Couple’s Redwood-Clad Home Draws In Panoramic Bay Area Views

By Brian Libby / Photos by Bernard André – July 27, 2020

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Elizabeth Paige Smith and Christopher Stringer’s hilltop retreat is a lucent gem on an impressive perch.

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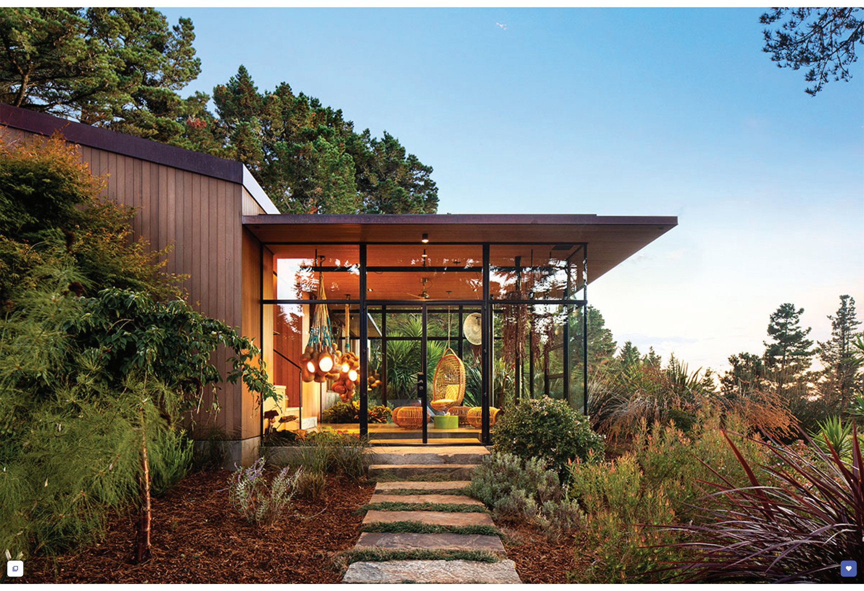
Although the Seeds residence is a delicate fusion of glass and reclaimed redwood—a place where every detail has been thoughtfully considered—owners Elizabeth Paige Smith and Christopher Stringer would be the first to tell you that the story starts with the picturesque site.

At this crest of a forested hill near Woodside, California, beyond the sprawling Silicon Valley megalopolis, it’s possible to see both the Pacific Ocean to the west and San Francisco Bay to the north. Yet the view somehow becomes even more beautiful as visibility decreases.



The home’s glass addition was conceived as a place to be both indoors and outdoors at the same time.

Photo Categories: outdoor, gardens, garden, grass, side yard, trees, walkways, shrubs, hardscapes - Add

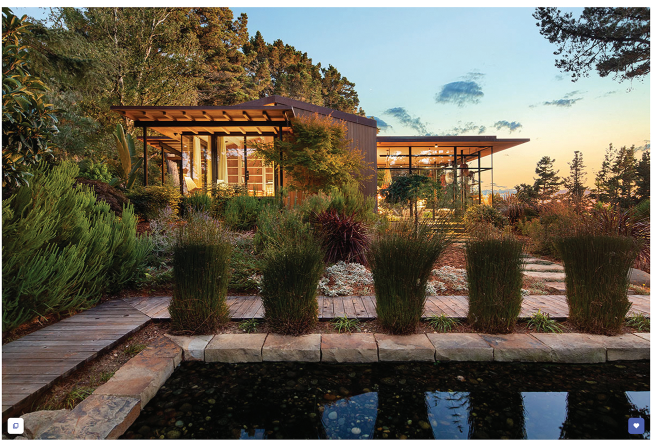
"When the fog comes up from the ocean, you really experience some incredible drama," says Elizabeth, a visual artist specializing in sculpture, tapestries, and film. "They’re some of the most killer sunsets I’ve experienced." Long before the project was completed, the couple got married at the site in 2013, she adds, "because it’s so special there."

Elizabeth and Christopher liked the property so much that they held their 2013 wedding there, long before the project broke ground.

Add Categories

The couple conceived the weekend retreat and studio in collaboration with Albany, California–based architect James Gwise. The project entailed the renovation and expansion of a ranch house that had fallen into gentle disrepair. The original owners were avid gardeners, but as they aged the property became overrun with blackberry brambles and poison oak, and a cluster of non-native pine trees grew to block the view to the west.

Clearing away the overgrowth was so transformative that it impacted the couple’s plans. "Once we opened up the view, we felt that we couldn’t possibly just renovate the existing building," Elizabeth recalls. "We had the revelation that the original house was built in the wrong place. You couldn’t see the whole view. We needed to feel the sea and experience the ocean energy."



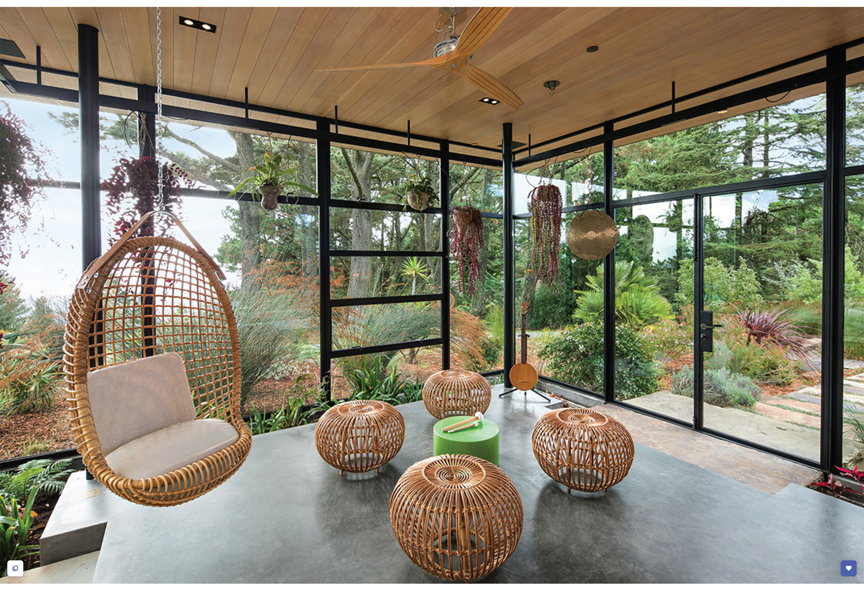
Just beyond the northern edge of the home is a small koi goldfish pond, extending the notion of a California oasis.

Bernard André

Photo Categories: outdoor, trees, gardens, grass, hardscapes, shrubs, walkways - Add

Although they explored the possibility of demolishing the existing ranch house and starting fresh, Elizabeth and Christopher decided to retain the original rectangular form while expanding it with a new studio at the home’s northwest corner, offering floor-to-ceiling glass on three sides to take in views toward the Pacific.

"We needed to break out of that geometry," explains Elizabeth, who was raised in the Cayman Islands. She says the light-filled room helped create an indoor/outdoor lifestyle that has always felt second-nature to her. "This room was really going to make a great space into a spectacular space," she adds. "It sort of brought the poetry into the project."



The glass addition includes a custom-designed mechanism for the hanging plants to be watered.

Bernard André

Photo Categories: shed & studio, living space room type - Add

A late addition to the design is the expanded entry, which forms a glass corner to provide a first glimpse into the house while extending a canopy and trellis outward. "That, I think, was a pivotal movement," says Gwise. "It took their concept of the glass box and brought it around to the front to give the house a sense of symmetry."

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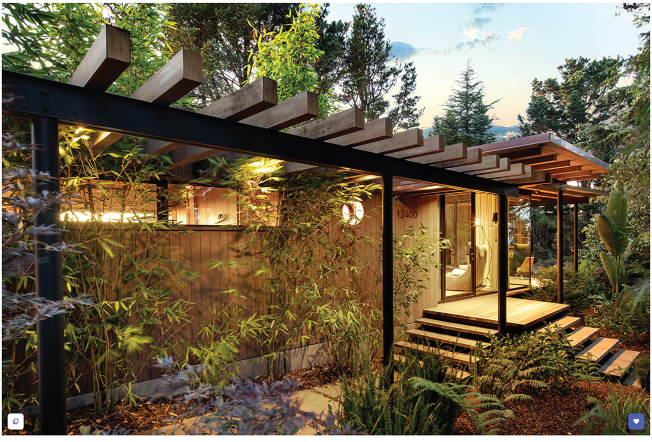


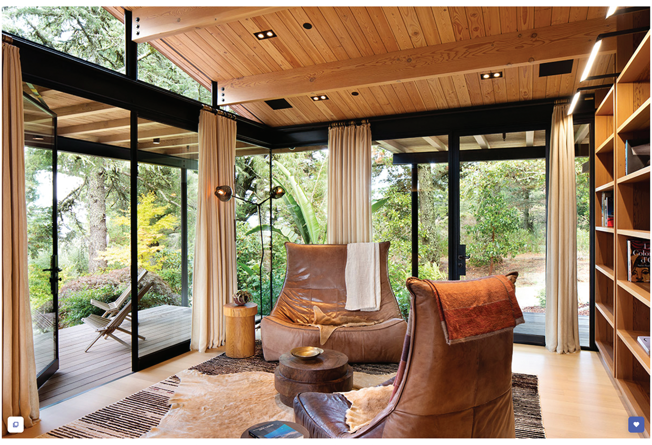
The home was designed by James Gwise in collaboration with the homeowners. A long trellis and cantilevered awning serve as a new entrance.

Bernard André

Photo Categories: exterior, wood siding material, house building type, flat roofline - Add

Juxtaposed against the glass is the home's other material signature: the use of reclaimed and naturally-stained redwood, which the project's builder, Louis Ptak, sourced from an airplane hangar being deconstructed at nearby Moffet Field.

"When we got the first batch, we knew it wasn't meant to be just an exterior experience," Elizabeth recalls. "We were like, 'It has to wrap and come inside. The redwood really played a major role in bringing the outdoors in."



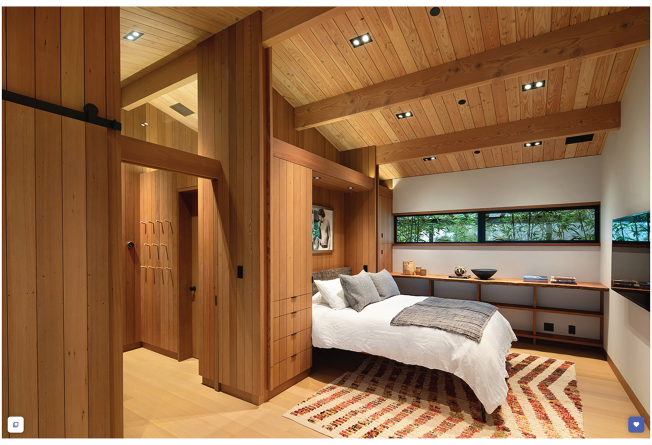
The home's interior is a fusion of glass and reclaimed redwood, the latter sourced from a nearby decommissioned airplane hangar.

Bernard André

Photo Categories: living room, ottomans, coffee tables, rug floors, recessed lighting, chair, shelves, light hardwood floors, ceiling lighting, end tables - Add

If Elizabeth's artful eye helped shape the house and site's renovation, so too did her husband, who spent over two decades as a designer for Apple. That's how Christopher met first met James Gwise, who spent most of the 2000s at architecture firm Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, designer of many Apple stores. "Chris looks for the simplicity in complicated things," Elizabeth says. "We also connect over the emotional impact of bringing materials together."

Take how the redwood panels line up inside. Even as a door closes, or a Murphy bed in one studio folds into the wall, the pattern remains uninterrupted, as if the bed or door simply disappear. Or consider how the wood walls float above the concrete floors in the new addition. "Everything had to be on module, on rhythm," Gwise says. "Not much was left to chance in this house."



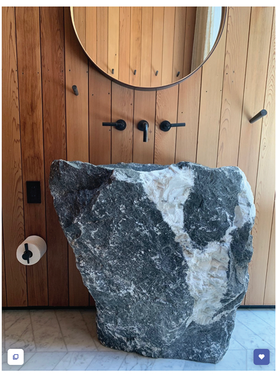
A Murphy bed in one bedroom folds seamlessly into the wall, leaving the rhythm of redwood panels uninterrupted.

Bernard André

Photo Categories: bedroom, storage, medium hardwood floors, ceiling lighting, recessed lighting, rug floors, bed, shelves - Add

There are many artful details inside, such as a bathroom sink carved into a massive boulder, for which added structural support had to be built underneath the floor, or a white marble step used as the final transition from the wood stairway to the concrete floor. Which is to say nothing of the bold marble kitchen countertops.

And indeed, the Seeds residence has proven to be inspiring. Elizabeth has created several outdoor sculptures there, using an outdoor area beside the house as a kind of testing ground.



Homeowner and artist Elizabeth Paige Smith selected a large boulder to be made into the bathroom sink.

Bernard André

Photo Categories: bath room, porcelain tile floors, pedestal sinks - Add

"When making art, I like to go by feel and slowly find my way forward," she says, noting that the Seeds house turned out the same way: a series of continuing conversations that led to a simple concept, exquisitely executed. "It's a really tight ship," Elizabeth adds. "The spaces and how they flow together really harmonize."

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Project Credits:

Architect of Record: James Gwise, Studio Gwise

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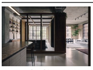

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