



CLASS & COMFORT



Vast expanses of floor-to-ceiling windows eliminate need for artificial light during daylight hours. Sunlight paints the walls of the great room, dramatic with its high ceilings and yet comfortable with its generous sofa, soft wool carpet, and rustic coffee table.

LYDIA LEE PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK LUTHRINGER

A California designer creates a house where a blend of modern design, personal comfort, and environmental concerns prove ecologically sensitive choices don't mean compromising on architectural élan.



LEFT: Energy, space, and cost efficiency were the names of the game for interior designer Sandra Slater. Her house is a token to classy, sophisticated architectural and interior design.

BELOW: Sandra Slater's single-family home between the commercial and residential sections of Palo Alto, California. Cheryl Barton designed the sustainable landscape that capitalizes on graywater irrigation.

“Some people think that green building means having a sod roof,” says Sandra Slater, an interior designer based in Palo Alto, California, “but I wanted to show that you could make environmentally sensitive choices without compromising on architectural design.”

Together with her architect and builder, Sandra has created a house for herself and her children, Jason and Liana, where modern design, personal comfort, and environmental concerns come together beautifully. With twenty-five-foot-tall glass windows, steel railings, and exposed concrete floors, the house exudes industrial chic—closer in spirit to the loft-like eateries that populate downtown Palo Alto just a few blocks north than its immediate neighbors, wood-shingled Craftsman-style bungalows.



Sandra calls this her "Living Wall." She displays seasonal blooms in these gracefully sculpted and mounted vases positioned just adjacent to the bubbling serenity of her entryway fountain.

"I didn't want the 'Birkenstock-granola' look—you know, the earthy, funky house," says Sandra. However, her architectural choices do reveal a certain crunchiness. A panel in the kitchen wall lets her toss recyclables directly into the house's recycling center. Sandra's silver Infiniti is parked outside, and she uses the one-car "garage"—required by city building codes—as an art studio. "It seems like a waste of space in California, where you don't have to dig your car out of snow," says the former New York City resident. "It's ridiculous, this homage to the car." In fact, Sandra moved to downtown Palo Alto from a "spectacular property with incredible views" ten miles away, primarily so she wouldn't have to drive everywhere.

Softly modern

Sandra's home was designed by EHDD, the San Francisco-based firm established by the late notable Bay Area architect Joseph Esherick. Esherick, who designed the Monterey Bay Aquarium, had a low-key approach to modernism. His buildings tend to blend into their surroundings rather than aggressively dominate them. Sandra fell in love with his work after living in her last house, an Esherick from the 1970s.

Sandra's house was one of the last projects Esherick was involved with; he died in 1998 as the foundation was being poured. Cathy Schwabe, a senior associate who worked side-by-side with Esherick on the project, then took over



Cheng Designs created this water sculpture, an auditory component of the home's intricate sensory design, for the entryway.



Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood shapes the master bathroom's cabinets and sink basin. The recycled cedar shower floor—based on a Japanese bathhouse—resists moisture-driven decay and exudes a delicious woody aroma.

as the primary architect. She now has her own firm in Oakland.

The dwelling is a box that has been split in two, with a glass atrium containing a stairway between the two halves. The main wing is set at an angle to maximize the home's southern exposure. The torque of the wing also creates subtle visual interest. Where you'd expect to see a square, there's a much wider angle between the main living area and the entryway.

"I like having a balance between serene and dramatic," says Sandra. "I find that I achieve that quiet feeling by sticking to clean lines and soft colors, while different angles and unusual materials provide the tension."

The home's minimalism is softened by the muted hues of pale eggplant, celadon green, and honey yellow on the walls. The large expanses of glass look upon a lush, finely textured wall of live bamboo, which screens the house on all four sides.

Inside, the home's thoughtful layout encourages the family to mingle. The great room, which combines living room, dining room, kitchen, and Sandra's small home office, comprises about a third of the 3,000 square feet. "It fosters a sense of community," observes Sandra. "It becomes the center of the house—it's like network central."

Transparency and light

Two of Sandra's central objectives were a sense of transparency between the indoors and outdoors and lots of natural light. The house doesn't require any artificial lighting during the day because each room receives ample light and air from at least three sides. The tall, low-E windows are an Esherick trademark; they reach to the ceiling, allowing light to enter the room more deeply. To ensure that the light would be good throughout the year, Schwabe put a model of the home through its paces on the Pacific Energy Center's heliodon, an architectural device that shows how the sun will hit the house at different hours and seasons.

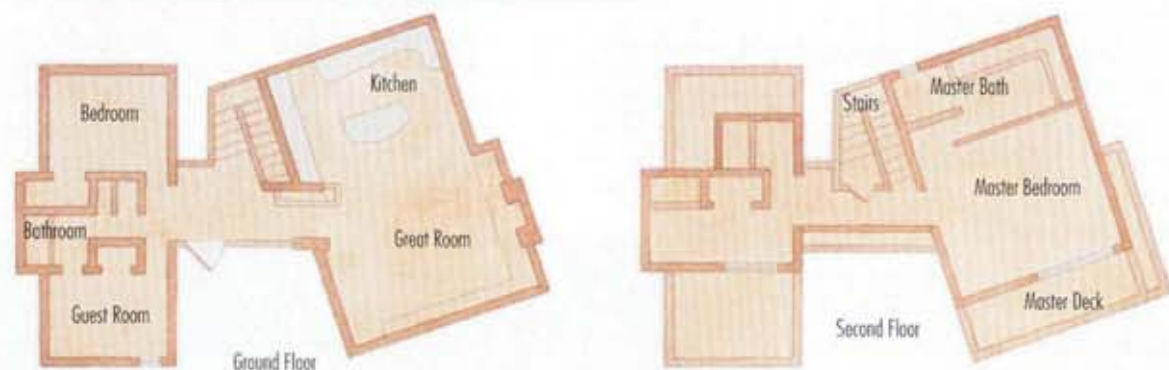


Commingle modern beauty and green design, Sandra's kitchen boasts Plyboo, a flooring material of sustainable bamboo grass; a concrete countertop with recycled and natural objects embedded into its surface; and a built-in recycling window. The kitchen retains a functional domain of its own yet merges naturally into the communal living area—making the area ideal for entertaining. The FSC-certified cherry shelves below are functional, green, and attractive pieces in the kitchen.



Sandra Slater's Sustainable Design Tips

- **Visualize your home design goals in advance.** Close your eyes and imagine how you want that space to feel when you're in it, Sandra says. Does it feel light, dark, cozy, or expansive? When you go places—a Japanese garden, a Victorian house—take time to register how it feels to you. Also, collect images of colors and styles that you like. "When you have a bunch of pictures, lay them all out, and something will percolate up to the top."
- **Experiment with different materials and textures.** Instead of paint, Sandra adds texture with integral-color plaster on the walls. Embedded bits of recycled cobalt glass in the concrete walkway add color, and they sparkle in the moonlight and the rain.
- **Figure out which green options make sense for you.** "If I were to do it over, I wouldn't put in a graywater system because we don't use enough water—we have a low-flow shower and water-saving laundry appliances," Sandra says. The expense of the separate plumbing system, she calculates, wasn't really worth it.
- **Find shapes that appeal to you and play with them.** Sandra came across an incense burner that became a kitchen cabinet handle. She also found steel stair treads at the salvage yard that became an unusual fireplace surround after being sprayed with salt water and allowed to weather until they developed a rusty patina.



High ceilings make radiant floor heating a particularly good option, as it's more efficient to heat the floor (and the people on it) than the large volume of air overhead. In summer, the house stays cool without air conditioning thanks to windows along the base of the floor and high along the ceiling that allow air to circulate. Solar panels, discreetly positioned on a roof facing away from the street, provide more than 80 percent of the home's electricity.

Building teamwork

From the very beginning of the design process, Sandra included her builder, Drew Maran, who has been integrating sustainable materials into his construction projects for more than ten years. "It's crucial, because the builder can develop systems that are easier and cost effective if they're involved from the beginning," she says. Many of the green alternatives didn't cost any more than the standard options;

the photovoltaic panels were the biggest additional expense. (A cost analysis is available in the FAQ section at Sandra's website, SandraSlater.com.)

The home's traditional wood framing—the most significant material by cost and volume—was done with sustainably harvested wood. The concrete slab foundation includes 15 percent fly ash, a recyclable waste product (see "Nuts and Bolts," page 102). Cellulose insulation, made from recycled newspaper, was used to insulate the walls and roof.

Another key part of Sandra's mission was to prove to others that sustainability is within reach for everyone. More than 2,500 people, from architects and builders to students from a local interior design program, have toured Sandra's house. "I wanted to make sure that people could get a sense for themselves," says Sandra. "You hear about green building, but there are few places to experience it." ❧

Resources

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LEFT: Sandra's bedroom is a serene mix of modern art and Asian influences.

ABOVE: Light dances on wood, stone, and plaster surfaces in the home. The wooden sink basin adds rich texture to the master bathroom.

BELOW LEFT: Tumbled river rocks at the base of the Living Wall reflect natural light. Sandra's home, an aesthetic integration of outside and inside, transforms natural materials into elegant art.

BELOW: Plaster walls create texture, warmth, and a light-absorbent surface. Muted blue and brown enhance the calming ambience.

