



Bold colors and subtle details  
bring out the best in a vintage home

# A Victorian Re-imagined

BY TOM CURTIS



**A NEW FACE** Undoing the damage of the “tin men” who clad the house in aluminum siding and fake stone in the 1950s (top photo) was one of Tom and Bill’s priorities. Beneath the metal, they found clues to the placement and shape of the house’s original shingles.

The first time I saw our house, I thought, “That is the ugliest house I’ve ever seen.” The exterior of the 1899 San Francisco Victorian was clad in faded aluminum siding, its foundation a kaleidoscope of pink, yellow, and gray PermaStone. What I saw inside, though, made me forget—or at least forgive—that first impression. There were high ceilings, fine details, cozy rooms, and an accessible, south-facing backyard. It was in a good neighborhood, and best yet, it needed no major work.

Shortly after moving in, I was sitting in the front parlor reading the Sunday paper when I heard the shuffle of feet outside. Peering from behind the curtains, I heard the guide of a neighborhood historical tour describing my house to his dozen followers. “This is a prime example of a pre-1906-earthquake Victorian that was ruined in the ‘50s by the tin men,” he said, referring to the aluminum-siding craze of 1950s. He then proceeded to point out the rusted siding, faux stone, and cheap metal windows, as all 12 glared at my new little house in disgust. I vowed right then to restore our house to its former beauty.

## Waiting for the right time—and approach

Six years later, we decided the time was right to remodel and restore the house, keeping the integrity of the period while opening up and modernizing the small

**AN OLDER HOME IN A NEW LIGHT** What was once an outdated kitchen in the back of the house became the breezy and inviting "green room," so named for the vibrant color of its walls.



## FROM TOO TIGHT TO JUST RIGHT

### The homeowners' opposing forces forced them to make

rooms so common to Victorian homes. We wanted to respect the original architecture but make the house more functional and comfortable.

We agreed to be open to the process and the possibilities and tried hard not to be set in our ways. I'm a traditionalist—a Connecticut Yankee transplanted to San Francisco, who loves family treasures, antiques, and the craftsmanship of old moldings, hardware, and floors. My partner, Bill Moore, on the other hand, is a true modernist. Raised in Los Angeles, he likes to marry the past to the present and use the result to shape the future.

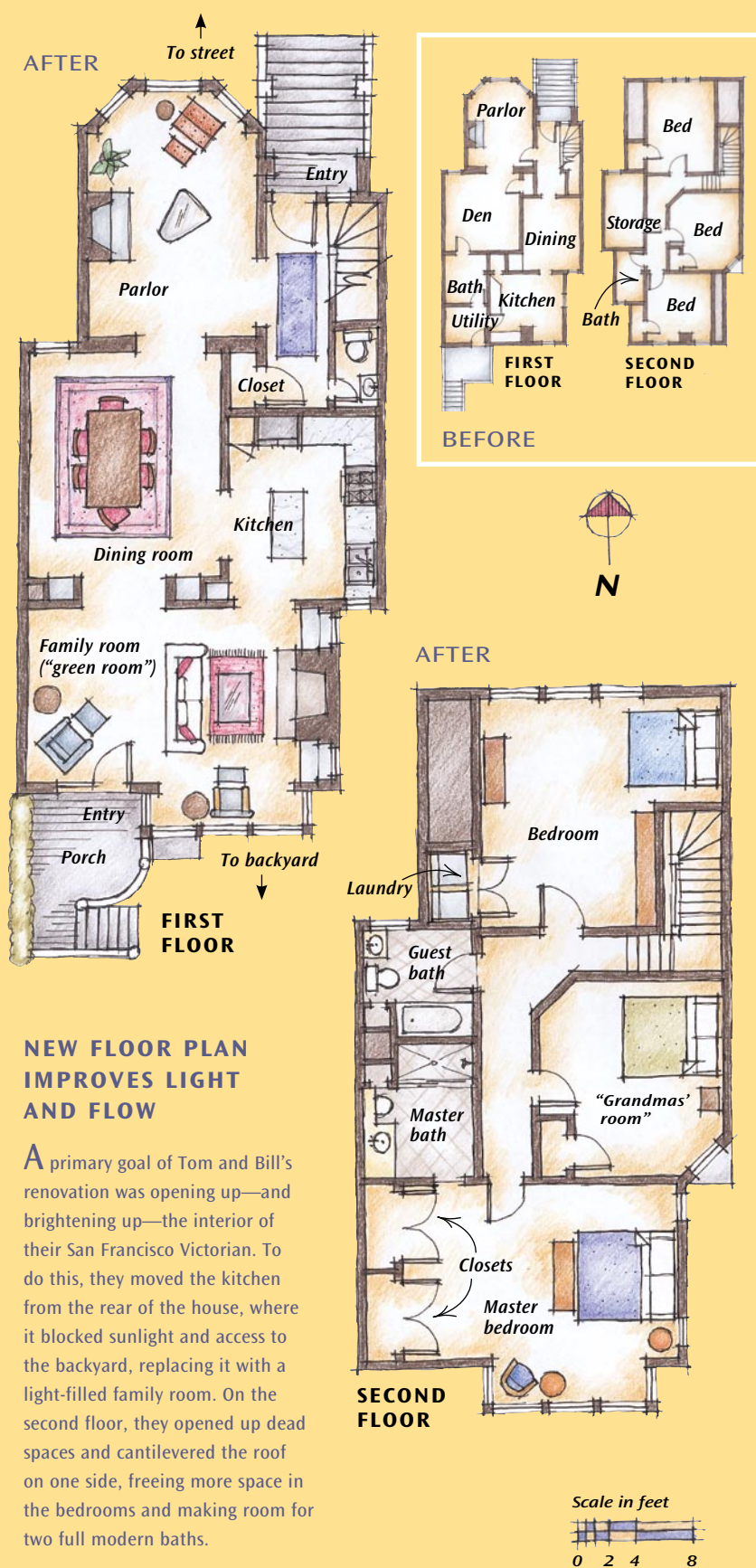
We spent many weekends driving around the city taking pictures of not only Victorians but of all types of houses. We soon found we shared a favorite house—one that had been remodeled in a way that masterfully married Victorian elements with modern details. When we met Philip Mathews, the architect on that house, we realized that he and his associate, Jonathan Feldman, understood what we wanted, so we signed them on. As it turned out, they were also able to reconcile our strong ideas and personalities.

Phil helped us find our contractor, Ken O'Sullivan of Narrowback Construction. On one of our weekend drives, we had noted another home we thought was amazing, which we later found out was remodeled by Ken's firm. Seeing Phil and Ken's previous work assured us we had just the right team in place for a creative renovation that would balance the artisanship of the past with the comforts of modern living—and one that would make the collaborative effort a lot of fun.

#### Big, bold moves bring the house up to date

On the first floor, our ultimate goal was to open up the house to the garden, letting the light from the south-facing backyard pour through to the front. To do this, we moved the kitchen from the rear of the house to the center, where the dining room had been (see floor plans, left). This was not as difficult as it sounds: Most of the plumbing and wiring were already exposed in the garage beneath, and both needed an upgrade.

In place of the old kitchen, bath, and utility room, we made a comfortable and light-filled family room, extending the house 3 feet and creating a bay of windows overlooking the garden. An 8-foot-wide French door that opens to a small back porch completed the connection.



#### NEW FLOOR PLAN IMPROVES LIGHT AND FLOW

A primary goal of Tom and Bill's renovation was opening up—and brightening up—the interior of their San Francisco Victorian. To do this, they moved the kitchen from the rear of the house, where it blocked sunlight and access to the backyard, replacing it with a light-filled family room. On the second floor, they opened up dead spaces and cantilevered the roof on one side, freeing more space in the bedrooms and making room for two full modern baths.

# sensibilities creative style choices.

Next, we opened up the wall between the old den and our new family room. The light pouring through from the now-open family room transformed what had been a dark interior space into a wonderful dining room (photo, p. 29). We then opened the wall between this new dining room and the new kitchen, creating a great flow between rooms that is especially terrific when we're entertaining.

The one room on the first floor that we left virtually untouched was the front parlor (photo, p. 30). A small room to the right of the entryway, it functioned well as a place for visitors to congregate. It had a lovely marble fireplace and beautiful moldings, which we used as our inspiration for moldings in the rest of the house.

The entry hall leading into the parlor was another matter. It needed opening up, and here, we got lucky. Demolition of the ceiling and walls in the entry revealed dead space that enabled us to raise the stairwell ceiling, making the space more airy and welcoming. Removal of the wall at the back of the entry allowed us to rebuild the second half of the stairway (bottom right photo, p. 30), which was dangerously steep. This required a second section of stair rail, so we had a woodworker replicate the original newel post and spindles. The completed railing runs all the way up the stairs, the new portion blending seamlessly with the old.

## Second-floor fixes install 21st-century comfort

On the second floor, our moves to modernize meant reclaiming wasted space, increasing light, and adding amenities we wouldn't think of living without today. The second floor originally had just one bathroom, outfit-



**HINTS OF THE PAST MINGLE CASUALLY WITH PRESENT-DAY CONVENIENCES** in the kitchen, where stainless-steel appliances share space with period details like this chandelier and ceiling medallion (left). The mix of traditional and contemporary elements suits the tastes of both Tom (pictured) and his partner, Bill, and creates a room that's difficult to date.

## COLOR CHOICES CHALLENGE TRADITION



to-late '60s. It's not about choosing one color but about how the entire scene comes together.

**The green room** The shade we chose for our family room is so striking that the room has come to be known as “the green room.” Green is my favorite color. But where others see vibrancy, I see green as a neutral. Look outside, and you'll see that green complements and coexists wonderfully with everything around it.

I wanted a color for the family room that would really bring the backyard into the house. We had opened up the back of the house structurally; now, by using color, I wanted to create an effect similar to that of living in a deluxe treehouse. With the heavy white molding, 11-foot ceilings, and new windows, a strong green was important. Inspired by the trumpet vine just outside, I chose Pampas (#1644) from Pratt & Lambert. It was the perfect choice—warm and inviting to us, maybe a bit of a shock to others. But that's part of the fun—we love the reaction we get.

**The dining room** When I was debating which shade to use in our dining room, our contractor, Ken, had just one concern. “Are you sure you want to paint it brown?” he asked. I just laughed and told him to trust me.

From the start, I knew I wanted the color of the dining room to be dark. Dark colors evoke an intimacy that encourages conversation and friendliness. We also did not want a color that was too brassy in a room already outfitted with an over-the-top glass chandelier and sparkling, Elizabeth-Taylor-inspired cabinet knobs. I also had to consider that this room was in the middle of the house: With the green room in the background, it was important not to have competition between the two.

It was in an old film, *Up the Sandbox*, that I saw the dining room color I had in mind. I found just the right shade in Pratt & Lambert's Dansbury Downs (#2285). It works because it's indistinct: Depending on the time of day, the color reads from gray to lavender to dark olive to just plain brown.



**W**hen our remodel was finally finished and it was time to choose colors for the rooms, I had this suggestion for Tom: Let's paint it all white. We burst out laughing, not only because we were so exhausted and desperate to get back in our house, but because neither of us could believe such a suggestion would come from me—a creative director for a cosmetics company, for whom color is all-consuming.

I started by doing some research. Not from history, but from what I had seen in magazines, films, and nature. Despite our respect for the period, Tom and I never aimed for a by-the-book historical renovation. We wanted the house to reflect a warm, modern, open feel, and we wanted the colors to be interesting and fun. So I drew my color inspirations from the world around me. I was especially influenced by the film comedies of the mid-

BY BILL MOORE



**BUMP OUT** *Extending the family room out with a windowed bay and adding a curved back porch helped connect the house to the backyard garden.*

ted with a claw-foot tub that was charming but not very functional. We opted to remove this vestige of Victoriana and cantilever the roof on that side of the house, creating enough headroom to accommodate two full baths.

We added skylights to the baths and hall, a welcome addition, since our house, like many in San Francisco, abuts its neighbors and has no side windows. In the master bedroom, we followed the cues of the family room below, with large windows and lots of light.

We replaced all of the windows with double-paned, UV-protected Marvin windows, in some cases using ones larger than the originals. Deviating

from the original window configurations wasn't something we took lightly. When debating whether to replace the arched window in the front with a bank of new rectangular windows, we first taped the outline of the new window shape on the wall to make sure the proportions were right.

In the front bedroom, as in the entryway, we found dead space behind the walls, which enabled us to widen the room. We used some of that dead space for a closet, freeing up another closet for our washer and dryer.

There was one room upstairs that I wouldn't change—a charming middle bedroom we call "the grandmas' room" because it's where our grandmothers stay when they visit. Its intriguing shape and its ceiling, which slopes in eight directions, made it strictly off limits, in my mind. But in a remodel, even doing nothing has its

Our choice was also influenced by the adjoining kitchen with its white cabinets, white marble with gray veins, and turquoise-tinted sea-glass backsplash. Brown, white, and turquoise always look great together, so our choice was sealed.

**Intimate spaces** I wanted the front parlor to be light and airy. It's a small room and one of only two that we left in their original states. I also wanted a color that reflected an urban environment. Pratt & Lambert's Brevity (#2295) is a soothing light-oyster color that allows the room to be a continuation of the street outside. Besides, I wanted the surprise to be left to the green room.

My choice for the master bedroom was inspired by the sky. Pratt & Lambert's Astrachan (#1279) is a great to wake up to and is peaceful at the end of the day. What's more, it matches the mini-view of the sky through the transom window.



## We found that the work the

challenges: Because of its location, my beloved little room was the most sensible one to break through to bring new heat ducts upstairs. Installing heat upstairs had been a priority of our renovation, but if it meant destroying this room, I told our architect I'd rather not have heat.

Fortunately, we discovered we could route the ducts through the downstairs hall closet, through the front bedroom, which was being remodeled anyway, and into the attic where it could fan out to all the rooms. The grandmas' room, along with the front parlor, would remain virtually intact.

### Given the choice, who wouldn't go modern?

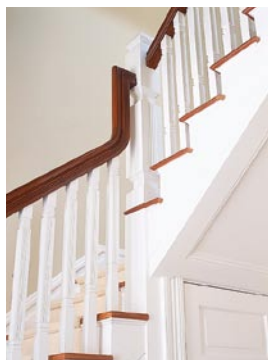
We knew from the start that we didn't intend our house to be a museum. In fact, we're quite convinced that our home's original owners, given the opportunity, would have chosen 21st-century kitchen and baths if they could have. The challenge we faced was introducing these comforts into our home without their appearing awkward or out of place.

In our new kitchen, we suggested the ambience of an older kitchen with raised-panel cabinets and white Carrara-marble counters, but we updated it with stainless-steel appliances and sea-glass-tile backsplashes. It feels contemporary but also fits with the house.

For all my traditional tendencies, I'm a firm believer that bathrooms shouldn't be old. We chose tile and limestone for the baths, making them wonderfully pleasant rooms. We raised the height of the counters in both the kitchen and the baths to 38 inches, which is better suited for an adult house.

#### **TIMELESS SPACE**

*While contemporary furnishings fill the front parlor, details elsewhere, including reproduction hardware and a copy of the original stair rail, maintain the period look.*



# small details in the house hardest to keep the Victorian flavor. —Tom Curtis

Nevertheless, in all the rooms, we tried to keep as much of the “good” original detail as possible. We covered the hardwood floors during construction to preserve them. We retained several of the home’s ceiling medallions and replaced those that had to be removed. In a few cases, we held onto original components that were taken out as part of the renovation. After struggling with our decision to replace the traditional, wood-and-window front door and transom with a modern 8-foot frosted-glass door, we couldn’t resist tucking the original in the back of the garage, where it still remains—just in case.

We found that the small details in the house work the hardest to keep the Victorian flavor. We located reproduction hardware which, when mixed with original pieces, became difficult to tell apart. We saved the original raised-panel doors during demolition and added new doors customized to match. The best example may be the molding we added throughout the new rooms, a simplified version of the original trim found in the parlor. The original, decorated with a medallion at each corner, would have looked too busy if used to frame all the windows we had added.

In some cases, our remodel was a mix of detective work and intuition. When the aluminum siding was applied, all the original exterior molding had been stripped away. But we had hints of what had been there when we found old molding in places the tin men could not reach, as well as paint shadows left where the old shingles had been. We also researched period photos of the neighborhood at the public library hoping to find an image of the house pre-metal. In the end, it was pieced back together—perhaps a bit more simply than the original—using all the clues we could find.

The result is a home we love, whose history is now fused with our own. With the help of our contractor and architect, we were part of its evolution as a house at home with its past and its present. **TH**

*Tom Curtis is a merchandise manager for a women’s clothing manufacturer.*

*For more information, see Resources, page 92.*



## INSPIRATION BEFORE RENOVATION

The transformation of our house started long before the first nail was ripped out and even before the first line was drawn on the plans. For many years, I had been compiling ideas for rooms from a multitude of sources.

As the head merchant for a division of a women’s fashion brand, I am used to pulling pages from magazines—we call them “swipes”—for ideas and direction. I’d started collecting swipes from home magazines years ago and kept them organized by room and by detail. This helped me immensely. As I deliberated between a dark-wood kitchen and a white-painted kitchen, I realized that the majority of my kitchen swipes were white and that I enjoyed the look and feel of a happy, clean, white kitchen.

Collecting ideas was not

limited to magazine swipes but was an on-going effort to preserve all the great ideas I stumbled on. I have photographed hotel bathrooms, details at open houses, exteriors I’ve seen here in San Francisco or on trips. The glass on the front door, for example, I found in Washington, D.C. One of the brownstones there had a large, modern glass door in which the primary part of the glass was frosted and the bevel was clear, balancing privacy and the ability to see out the door. The exterior color on our house, Pratt & Lambert’s Avocado #YG565A (discontinued), I saw on another house in the city, and stopped to ask the owners about it.

Having this collection of ideas on hand made remodeling much less stressful. I finished this project knowing I had done everything I wanted and had included ideas and details that I thought were wonderful and beautiful. —T.C.

**IDEA FILE** Tom gathered inspiration for the remodel everywhere—from hotel bathrooms (the master bath is pictured at left) to distant neighborhoods. He found the inspiration for the front door (right) on a street in Washington, D.C.

