

homescape

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A roof deck reached via a spiral staircase includes comfortable seating, a firepit and outdoor sink. The Büchlers love to relax there, taking in ocean views and sunsets.

CARDIFF CREATION



Remodeling a ramshackle beach cottage was a 'love of labor' for a creative couple and their talented colleagues



A soaring fireplace of two kinds of slate was crafted by homeowner and master builder Bruno Büchler as part of the remodel of what was a rundown Cardiff cottage. *Dan Trevan / Union-Tribune photos*

By Nan Sterman

On a warm summer evening, Bruno and Dawn Büchler climb a spiral staircase to the third-story roof deck of their Cardiff home. As the sun turns the sky pink, orange and purple over the ocean, the couple sip wine by a crackling fire and savor their good fortune.

It is a moment of leisure for two otherwise very busy people. Dawn manages inventory for the western division of Home Depot, and Bruno is a master builder of custom homes, including his own.

The Büchlers' island-style home with metal corrugated roof, natural building materials, tropical landscaping and emphasis on indoor-outdoor living is a collaboration among a pair of architects, a garden designer and the two very talented owners.

Like the Büchlers, their home is straightforward, casual, nontraditional and generous — but not intimidating. And it bears little resemblance to the rundown beach cottage it once was.

Purchased by the Büchlers in 1993, the cottage was like a million others built in Southern California's beach communities early in the 20th century as "summer places." Decades later, it was little more



Custom stonework marks the entrance to the multilevel home. Similar details can be found throughout the island-style residence.

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Husband was the home's main builder

than a wreck waiting for a bulldozer. Because the couple knew it would be several years before they had the funds to rebuild, they gutted the cottage interior to make it livable — and waited.

In the interim, Bruno, who was trained in his native Switzerland, worked on numerous homes throughout coastal North County designed by his good friend, architect Kevin Farrell. Eventually the men and Dawn began to discuss the home that would replace the cottage.

In many beach communities, tiny, aging homes on double-wide lots like the Büchlers are replaced by boxy duplexes, designed to maximize ocean views and profits at the expense of style and the surrounding neighborhood. They fail to address the twin challenges of scale and balanced landscaping.

The Büchlers and their team succeeded in tackling these issues — and many others. The effort took more than four years.

Building in phases

Inspired by Farrell-designed homes, the Büchlers compiled a wish list. Dawn, who was in charge of the color palette and other decorative aspects of the home, wanted “as many windows as I could get,” she says. “I also wanted a big, cool kitchen.”

Bruno, of course, would be the builder. He, too, wanted a home that blurred the line between indoors and outdoors. He also wanted room for off-street parking for himself and visitors, a garage large enough to house his classic cars and a workshop.

Both wanted an ocean view, but it wasn't clear if that would be possible.

Farrell had goals, too, one of which was to design a house that showed off Bruno's skills. “I wanted to design the house around a masonry fireplace, since that is Bruno's forte,” he says.

Farrell worked on concept drawings in collaboration with the Büchlers and colleague Dan Martorana, a principal of MKA Inc. Architecture and Planning who would be in charge of final design drawings and construction management.

As time went on, the collaborators refined the design until it included a two-story main living space with four bedrooms and four-and-a-half bathrooms. A one-bedroom granny flat was designed with a wall that

opened so the space could be used as an additional bedroom and bath.

Work on the structure got under way in 1997 and proceeded in phases over the four years, with Bruno doing most of the work himself. First, he built the rear section of the home — the garage and the granny flat — several feet away from the cottage where he and Dawn still lived. After the couple moved into the granny flat, Bruno began transforming part of the cottage into the front of the new home. Eventually, he connected the sections.

Thinking back on all the work, he jokes, “It was a love of labor, not a labor of love.”

Subtle and sophisticated

The home's handsome exterior profile is due in part to the style, materials and color palette. The exterior finish is smooth khaki-green stucco with mahogany wood details and copper fixtures that hint at a Craftsman influence. Neutral colors and natural materials, Farrell says, help the home fit into its environment.

Visitors enter the property through a gate in a pre-existing ivy- and bougainvillea-covered fence that screens neighboring homes. On one side of the pigmented concrete walkway is a planting bed the length of the fence. Palms that Bruno planted long ago are tall now. Beneath them is a sophisticated

combination of foliage plants created by Cardiff garden designer Debora Carl.

Landscaping such a small space can be a challenge, so Carl relied on texture and color rather than flowers. She used plants such as magenta-and-wine-leaved bloodleaf (*Iresine herbstii*), split-leaved philodendron (*Monstera deliciosa*), black-leaved mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus*), lacy tree ferns, bronze-leaved canna, bright green *Blechnum* ferns and lots of red, green and yellow variegated coleus.

A small ledgestone waterfall built by Bruno and nestled against the vine-covered wall sends water into a koi pond elegantly edged in black Mexican beach pebbles.

To soften the hard edges where the walkway abuts the structure, Carl brought in earth-toned pots and filled them with plants such as taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), whose broad black leaves look like baby elephant ears, and the tall, strawlike horsetail (*Equisetum*).

The entry is lush and colorful, as befits a tropical setting, but completely in tune with the subtle and sophisticated mood of the home.

The roof of the entry portico and much of the main house is galvanized metal. The shiny, corrugated metal plays off the tall palm trees and other tropical-looking plants to enhance the earthy island style Farrell wanted.

That feeling continues inside. On the first floor, for ex-



Tropical foliage lines a curved walkway at the entry to the Büchler home in Cardiff. Landscape design is by Debora Carl.

Dan Trevan / Union-Tribune

ample, the floors are a warm, pigmented cement called “Spanish Gold.” Adding pigment to the cement, Martorana says, produces a more natural effect than that obtained with surface stains. “We buffed it to give it a shiny finish and then

scored it so it has a clean, sleek, island appearance,” he adds.

As Farrell intended, a massive two-story fireplace is the home's nucleus. Integrated into an exterior wall, it warms the

► **CARDIFF**

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Dawn takes credit for idea of the roof deck

living room and the outdoor dining patio.

Indoors and out, vertical surfaces of the fireplace are finished with two kinds of stone, picked for their red tones that accent the mahogany-hued woodwork. While the colors are similar, the stones were applied differently for contrasting texture. Raja Multi slate is set as flat pavers, while Apache Cloud ledgerstone is stacked rough-side out.

The Büchlers got their wish for indoor/outdoor living in a big way. The living room wall adjacent to the fireplace is mostly an oversized glass door that rolls back into wall pockets, uniting the living room and a south-facing patio.

The massive door required some sophisticated engineer-

ing, Martorana says. "You can't just go out and buy hardware that stands up to that kind of force," he says. "We had to create our own."

The 24-by-34-foot concrete patio is surrounded to the north, east and west by the home's structure, an orientation that helps mitigate persistent onshore breezes that can put a chill on outdoor living. When planting the few slivers of remaining dirt, Carl focused on vertical layering to create a sense of depth. She used sun-loving plants with a spare hand so the patio feels sunny and open.

Carl worked with Bruno to create the fountain that stands against the fence opposite the fireplace. "The left side is modern and slick Raja red slate so the water falls with sheer descent," Carl says. "The other side is Apache Cloud (ledge), and the water there falls with a gurgle. At night, the pond is lit up from below, so it is very dramatic."

Past the fountain is an outdoor kitchen that the Büchlers use year-round. Its green stuc-

co sides and slate countertops are consistent with the other materials used throughout the home.

Next to a dining table is what has become a favorite spot of family and friends alike. The Bahama Bar, as the Büchlers refer to it, is a chest-high bar surrounded by stools and topped by a pair of wall-length, wood-framed accordion windows built by Bruno. With the windows open, the bar becomes part of the outdoor kitchen.

On chillier evenings, the Büchlers turn on an overhead patio heater Bruno installed over the Bahama Bar. "If we have the fire going and the heater on, we are cozy all night," he says.

The color scheme set by the stucco and Bahama Bar carry into Dawn's "big cool kitchen," where she selected black and green tone Ubatuba Verde granite for the countertops. The gold veins in this granite tie it to maple cabinets made by Bajek Woodworking in Vista. Stainless appliances complement the clean lines and simple materials used throughout.

Furniture in the main living space is spare, as is the Büchlers' tastes. Bruno leaves the interior decor to Dawn partly because he says he could live with no furniture. "I like a house stark, with nothing in it," he says.

When it comes to choosing furniture, Dawn says she goes "for things that blend well with the house. I just like pieces that make us feel relaxed and comfortable."

In one seating area, for example, a sisal area rug sits beneath a neutral toned sofa and

chair. The furniture's softness is perfect for a home that emphasizes no hard lines. Even the corners of the walls are bull-nosed.

In this setting, the few, carefully chosen decorative elements really stand out. Most distinctive is Dawn's collection of classic radios.

"My dad has always been into antiques and collectibles," Dawn says. "One year, he sent me a radio for my birthday. Every year, he'd send me another radio for my birthday, and then I started looking for them in flea markets. I love the way they look, even if they don't work."

The upstairs master bedroom suite takes maximum advantage of a modest space.

The bed is set in an alcove with built-in shelves, a design that eliminated the need for a headboard or end tables. The closet is outfitted with drawers and rods, eliminating the need for dressers. All reflect the Büchlers' "less is more" philosophy.

The bedroom feels especially cozy when the Büchlers light a fire in their wall-mounted glass fireplace, which also can be viewed from the bathroom — or more specifically, from the bathtub, which abuts it.

The ocean-facing wall of the master suite is lined with glass doors that open onto a long balcony. In one corner, a spiral staircase leads to that third-floor roof deck where the couple watches the sun go down.

Dawn takes credit for the idea of the roof deck, though it took some time for Bruno to warm up to the concept.

"It's the only place we have a



Bruno Büchler, a master builder, made the accordion windows that open the kitchen to the "Bahama Bar," a favorite gathering spot when the couple entertains. Dan Trevan / Union-Tribune

view of the ocean," she says. "I figured this house could be the house we stay in the rest of our lives, so let's make it the best it can be."

Bruno carved out the 16-by-12-foot space and plumbed it for gas, water and electricity. A small refrigerator, two teak benches and lounge, a copper fireplace, and one of Carl's pots of mixed succulents and flax

complete the space.

Today, when asked if the roof deck was worth the cost, Bruno answers without hesitating: "Yep!" Dawn echoes his sentiments. "When we go up there to watch the sunset, it is awesome. It is simply an awesome space."

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RESOURCES

Builder: Bruno Büchler, Büchler Construction; (760) 473-8039

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Design drawings and construction management: Dan Martorana, MKA Architecture and Planning, 7918 Convoy Court, San Diego; (858) 268-8176

Garden Design: Debora Carl, Debora Carl Garden Design; (760) 212-8819

Cabinetry: Kaz Bajek, Bajek Woodwork, 2244 South Santa Fe Ave., Suite A-5, Vista; (760) 727-8480; www.bajekwoodwork.com

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