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A HILLTOP HOUSE DESIGNED FROM THE OUTSIDE IN. BY LAUREN MURROW

NARROW, CROWDED, DARK. When Jonathan Feldman of Feldman Architecture first saw this home—yes, this one—those were the descriptors that immediately came to mind. The owners, both physicians, were adamant that they wanted an ultra-modern, cleanly designed house. However, the Telegraph Hill townhouse they had bought was just 22 feet wide, and only the uppermost of its three floors received any natural light. “Considering the volume and the views, it was obvious that this place had incredible potential,” says Feldman. “But internally, it was a mess.”

The building’s landmark status restricted alterations to the exterior structure, confining the renovation to “an edit rather than a reinvention,” says Feldman. But he and his firm pushed that so-called edit to the extreme. They began by reconfiguring the stairwell and bisecting the floors with translucent glass panels to channel sunlight from the ample skylights. The second challenge was the home’s layout. The owners, both serious

1. The townhouse is on a historic block, so changes to the facade were restricted.
2. How to complement Coit Tower? How about a Bocci light fixture hanging above a custom-designed walnut and steel dining table.
3. A motorized wave sculpture by Reuben Margolin undulates at the top of the stairwell.
home cooks, wanted the kitchen to be central to the design. “But we didn’t want it to feel cluttered or object-driven,” says Feldman. So the firm designed a streamlined but roomy kitchen in the middle of the third floor, including extra-deep custom cabinets to hide cookware and tools. On one side are the living room and outdoor terrace; on the other, the dining room, with an adjacent grilling balcony and herb garden.

The serene—some would say austere—aesthetic was purposeful, so as not to compete with sweeping views of Alcatraz, Coit Tower, and downtown. Interior designer Lisa Lougee (Feldman’s wife) used textural surfaces to add dimension to the monochromatic space, from steel mesh screens wrapping the stairway and ceiling to hand-scraped white oak floors.

The true conversation piece, however, is the hypnotic Reuben Margolin sculpture at the top of the stairway. The aluminum and glass-beaded arms are motorized, producing a glistening ripple effect. “We wanted to draw you upward,” says Feldman, “to create a real moment when you come into this big, dramatic expanse.” From there, the unobstructed cityscape lures you, agape, toward the terrace—an open-air glass box warmed by a six-foot-long gas fireplace.