Jonathan Feldman, AIA, began his career remodeling San Francisco’s lovely but troubled older houses. He and his firm, Feldman Architecture, have largely moved on to new custom homes, but occasionally, another opportunity to resuscitate a faded beauty arises. In this case, the opportunity came from his brother, who had just bought an 1860s Italianate row house in Pacific Heights—one in need of a complete overhaul.

The front façade of the house was protected by historic review, but Jonathan was free to alter the interior for better flow and functionality. “Our portfolio is very much a modernist one, but we love these old houses,” says Jonathan. “We like to make them livable for today, without erasing their charm and what makes them special.” Some of the heaviest interventions were behind the walls. “These houses weren’t watertight, they had no insulation, and nothing is level. They also had no earthquake framing. So you really have to rebuild the entire house within the envelope.”

And so he did. He also improved the relationships between the main floor living areas, and he added a new rear deck. The top floor gained a master suite scaled for modern tastes. And, because the site is sloped, he was able to carve out a new basement with a gym and a den that opens to a patio.

The main event, however, is a new stair with open treads and a mesh screen that brings natural light down through the “light-starved” building. Finally, the entire exterior was “dipped” in gray paint. Says the architect, “There’s so much frill on the outside that when you blend it into one tone, it makes it so much stronger.”

—S. Claire Conroy