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Reclaiming independence

Remodel makes home wheelchair-accessible

by Susan Golovin / photos Barak Yedidia

Perhaps the most compelling reason for the retired couple to remodel their 1959 Palo Alto Eichler, where they had lived since 1976, was to make it user-friendly for the wife. She is now confined to a wheelchair to help stem a degenerative disc problem.

However, the house had never been updated. "We wanted to bring in more light and open the place up," the husband says. "We also wanted to increase energy efficiency.

"We didn't change the footprint, but we took the house down to the studs," he says. The resulting floor plan consists of an open living room, dining room and kitchen, with the kitchen comprising the "foot" of the now L-shaped room. The bedrooms and office line one side of the home and are accessed off a wide corridor.

"I wanted an accessible kitchen that didn't look accessible," the wife says. This is accomplished by having the standard height (36-inch) custom-designed, curved, limestone-topped island take center stage. The lower (29-inch) work-space counter that runs along one wall is wheelchair compatible in that it features under-counter room (toe kicks) so the chair can be pulled in close to task.

The architect, Richard Morrison, designed the kitchen using Alno cabinetry from European Kitchen Design in Palo Alto. He alternated the multi-coated laminates of red, pale yellow and cherry to create a Mondrian-like pattern.

"The standard distance between counters is 3 feet, 9 inches to 4 feet," Morrison says. "I made it a hair more generous for turning radius."

Frequently used items are stored in easy pull drawers. A semi-circular Lazy Susan pulls out, as does a mini-pantry and garbage can. An above-counter appliance garage was fabricated with shortened height.

The sink sits in the 29-inch-high counter and the window is directly above it. The Fisher-Paykel dishwasher next to the sink is small, but was chosen because it is a drawer and thus eliminates bending.

Both the Thermador flush cook top and the low-positioned, side opening Gaggenau oven are easy to access. A strategically placed microwave is built into the taller island. The side-by-side refrigerator doors do not pose a problem.

"All of the light switches are at my height," the wife points out. The lighting, from Galaxy Lighting in San Jose, includes pendants and whimsical spots that resemble Murano glass.

A birch floor unites the public spaces and makes for easy traction. "We found out that there was no dampness so they could just glue the floor directly to the concrete," the husband says. This is an advantage in an Eichler, since a floating floor would create a gap between the floor and the radiant-heating pipes. "Notice that there are no rugs," the wife says.

A wall of double-paned windows now overlooks the back garden. Solar hot water and solar electric are similarly energy saving.

"I like the nice credit we get against our electricity," the husband says. The update included a retrofit for earthquakes.

"We bought all the living room and dining room furniture at the Design Mart of Silicon Valley in San Jose," says

the husband. The red and yellow theme is used throughout, and the retro-modern style recalls the original Eichler era.

"The couple was open to the idea of having fun and this lent itself to using a more interesting palette," Morrison says.

In the master bathroom there is a low, pedestal sink with a mirror overhead that tilts. "For years I couldn't look in the mirror," the wife says. The narrow tub has a wide shelf, which allows for easy transfer and also provides storage underneath. The roll-in shower is lip-less and ample, and the floors are not slippery.

"Smaller tiles are better," the wife says. Grab bars are strategically placed.

The toilet is within standard height. "You don't want it too low," the wife says, adding that that would actually impede access.

All doorways are wide enough to accommodate the wheelchair, and where not required for privacy or esthetics, doors are eliminated. A folding door in the laundry room is easy to open.

"It's sensational," the wife says. "Sometimes I forget how lucky I am."

Resources:

Architect/interior designer: Richard Morrison, Menlo Park, 650-321-3729

Building contractor: Chris Donatelli, Donatelli Castillo Builders, San Jose, 408-287-4886

Goal of project:

Update Eichler and make it user-friendly for wheelchair access

Unexpected problem:

Used more expensive laminate cabinetry to avoid delays

Year house built:

1959

Size of project:

2,160 sq ft (includes garage, which was converted into storage/extra sleeping area)

Time to complete:

7 months

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