

SFGate.com

Couple's love of adventure on display in SoMa home

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Sunday, March 1, 2009



Dr. Marilyn Rosenwein and her husband, Dr. Howard Cohen, who met in the emergency room at San Francisco General Hospital decades ago, both like adventure. How else to explain their vacation itineraries for the past two decades - diving in Borneo, visiting the Nature Conservancy in Dubai, bicycling in Vietnam and whitewater rafting on the Zambezi River?

Their latest adventure is a bit tamer, but no less an undertaking: The couple gave up their 9,000-square-foot home in Hillsborough, after living there for 25 years, to move into a 2,700-square-foot home at the St. Regis residences in 2006.

With two daughters grown and out of the house, there was nothing to keep them on the Peninsula, or from simplifying.

Rosenwein, a retired obstetrician, grew up in New York City and longed for the energy of a metropolis. Cohen, an orthopedic surgeon from the Midwest, was not thrilled with the idea of living amid concrete but agreed to give it a try.

When constructed, the residence units were finished with white walls and cherrywood floors. The couple asked San Francisco interior designer Jonathan Straley to change the colors, ceilings and flooring to generate the casual comfort of a suburban home with the sophistication of a city dwelling.

"I didn't want it to feel corporate," noted Rosenwein, "so I asked for warm colors."

Straley drew upon the couple's travels to Asia for a gold and terra cotta color scheme for the walls, furniture and window swags and used artwork they'd collected on their trips as accent pieces. The floors are a version of snap-fit hardwood in fumed oak, a shade of smoky brown.

"It's a strong color scheme for a place like this, but they wanted it to feel more like a residence than a unit in a high-rise," Straley said. At night, the warm tones contrast with the sky.

The designer's imagination was tested in developing solutions to structural obstacles and in maximizing the use of the space, as the unit is one-third the size of their previous home.

For example, the perimeter of each room is lined with a thigh-high steel beam that acts as a

structural support for the building. To hide it, as well as give the residence more storage space, Straley encased it in Japanese-style shelving or topped it with custom cushions to create window seats.

The couple wanted the ceiling to contain recessed spotlights with which they could highlight artworks on the walls. Unfortunately, the highest part of the ceiling is made of concrete. Straley determined that it could not be drilled into without creating structural damage, so he created a dropped ceiling in which to install lights. In the kitchen, where quarters are as tight as a ship's galley, Straley found space in the walls to create a slim, vertical sliding pantry door with shelves and install a trash compactor.

The residence had three bedrooms to begin with, but now has two. One guest room adjoining the master bedroom was turned into a study when Straley knocked down the connecting wall. Instead, there are now sliding Asian doors that divide the study from the bedroom, creating a spacious-feeling master suite.

The study features two desks built into custom-designed shelves that line the walls from top to bottom. It's where the couple spend most of their time, watching TV, working or reading. Best of all, the study can still act as a guest room if the sliding doors are closed and modular furniture pieces are moved together to form a bed.

The couple enjoy hosting dinner parties for friends, treating them to the nighttime views and occasional fireworks shows visible at AT&T Park. They are semi-vegetarians who eat seafood, and often serve sushi or California-Asian fusion cuisine, prepared by a private chef or catered by the hotel's restaurant, Ame, one of the city's finest.

Rosenwein thrives on city life. "There's always something to do," she said. "The suburbs were getting provincial."

They walk to museums, restaurants and movies, and can zip down to the hotel spa in their bathrobes anytime for massages, facials or a dunk in the pool.

When pressed to describe what he enjoys about living at the St. Regis, Cohen turned to his wife and admitted, "I like the same stuff you like. It's near everything."

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This article appeared on page **S - 6** of the San Francisco Chronicle