



No, 83 Isn't Too Old to Renovate. Just Ask San Francisco Resident Roberta Gordon

After inheriting her family's hillside home, the retired teacher made adjustments that would support her lifestyle for the years to come.

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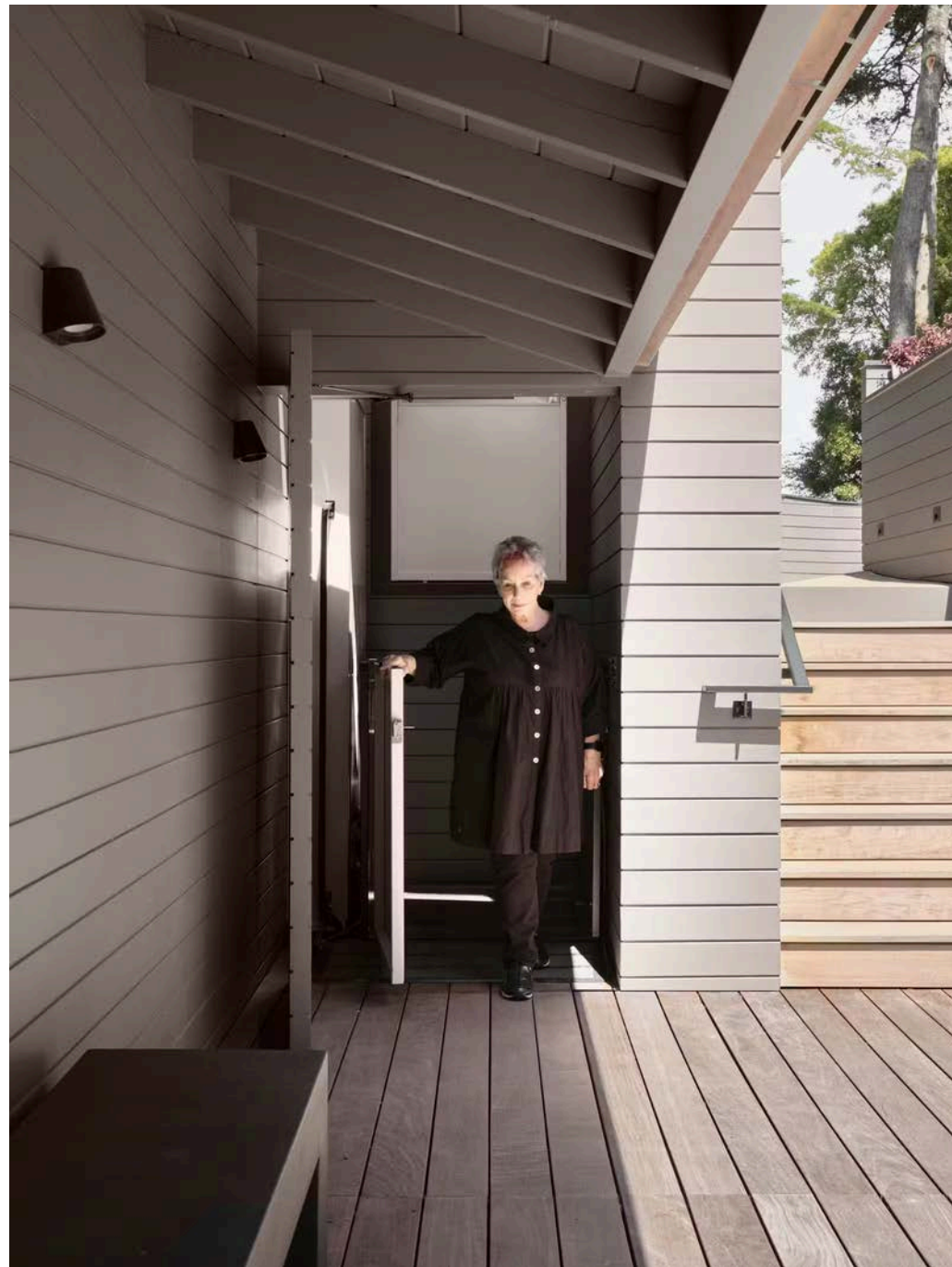
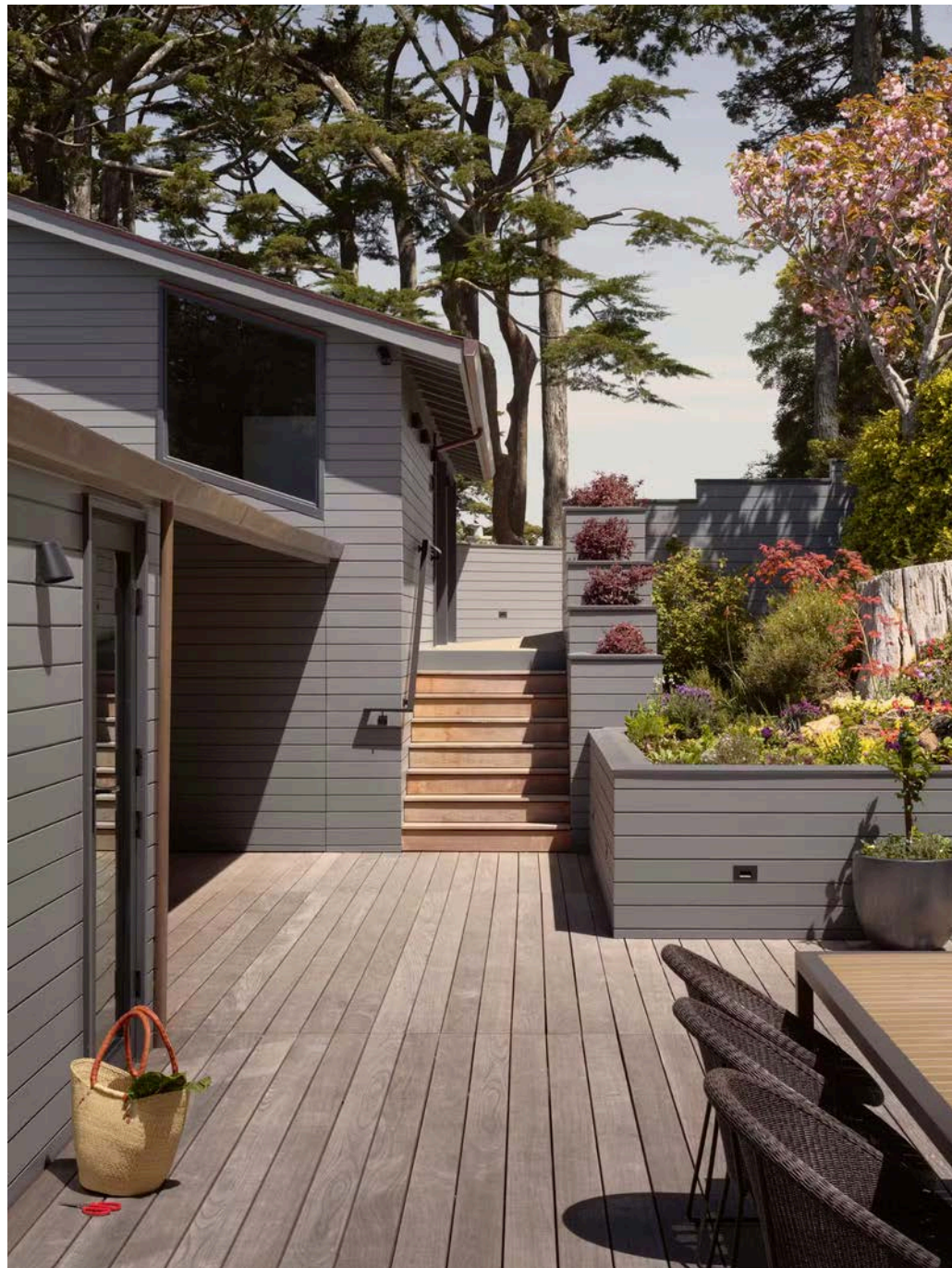
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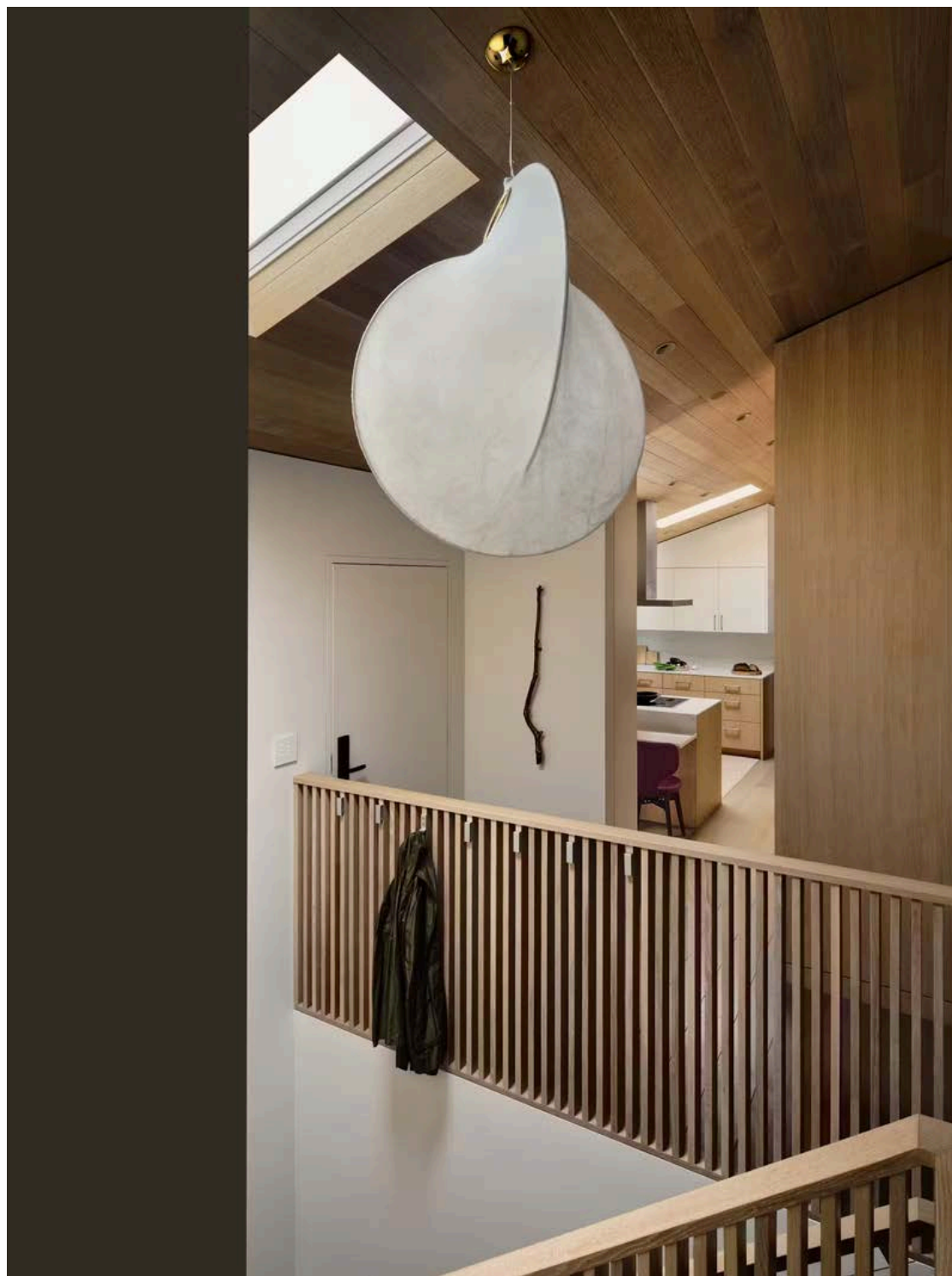
Roberta Gordon, 83 and widowed, realized during her early 20s that the ranch-style hillside home built by her father, an electrical contractor, was not accessible. She watched her aging parents struggle with the steep location and the home's many stairs. Even though "they had added weird ramps," Roberta recalls, "I saw how difficult it was for them get older there."



Like many homes in San Francisco's Westwood Highlands neighborhood, the shed-roofed 1960s house was built on a slope. Its two-car garage sat at the end of a steep driveway and, several steps down, the single-story, 2,000 square-foot residence sat atop a barely finished basement that had more stairs going down to it. There was no elevator.

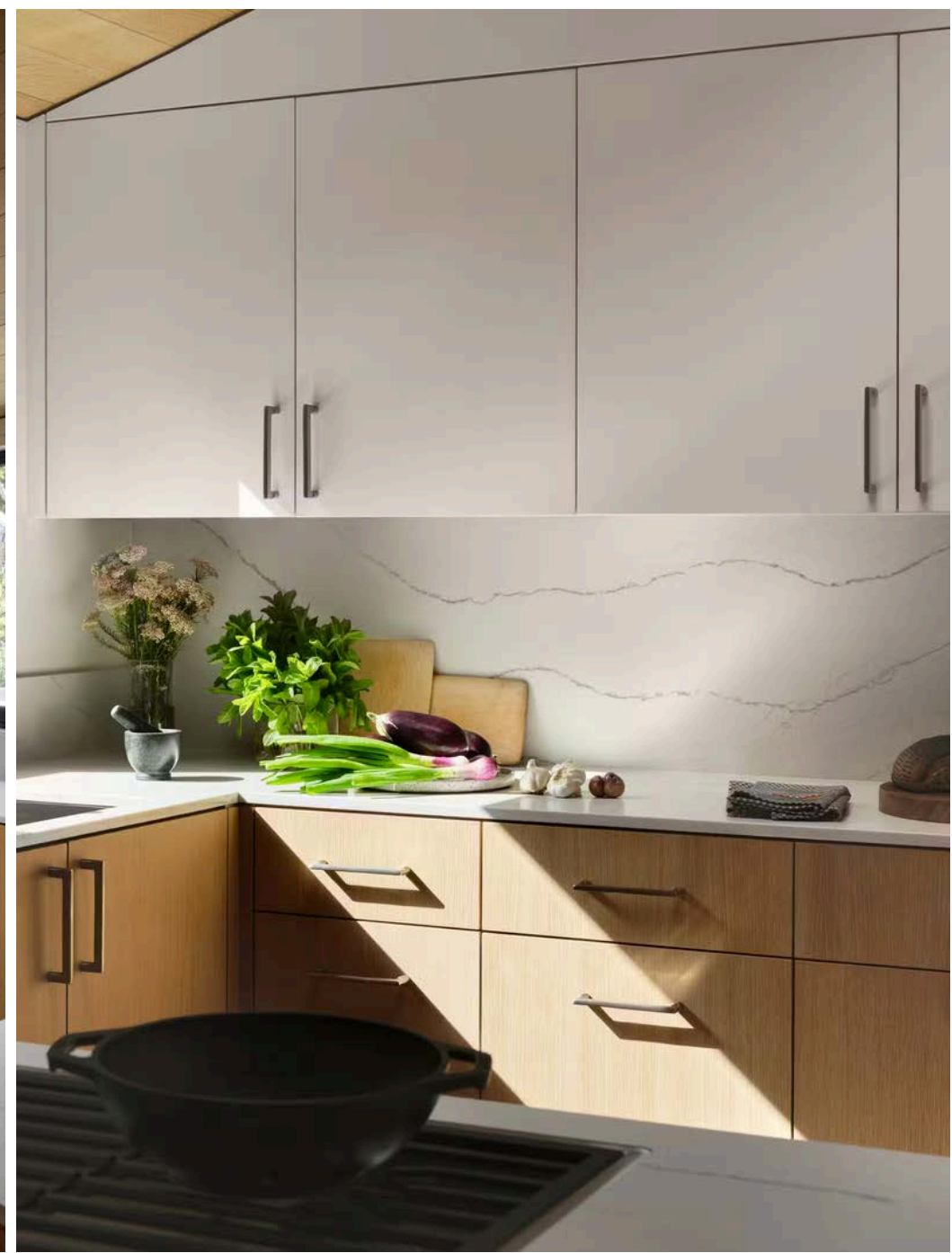
In 2015, Roberta inherited the house and decided to fix those problems so that she could enjoy it for the years to come. Retired from teaching, she sold her house in another part of the city where she raised her two boys before turning her attention to her parents' property. It had a south-facing garden and views of the Golden Gate Bridge to the north. And it was beloved by family. Her younger son, Aaron Gordon, a general contractor, has fond memories of his grandparents' workshop in the basement, where he'd play Ping-Pong and they'd host great parties. For a couple of years, Aaron used it as his office.





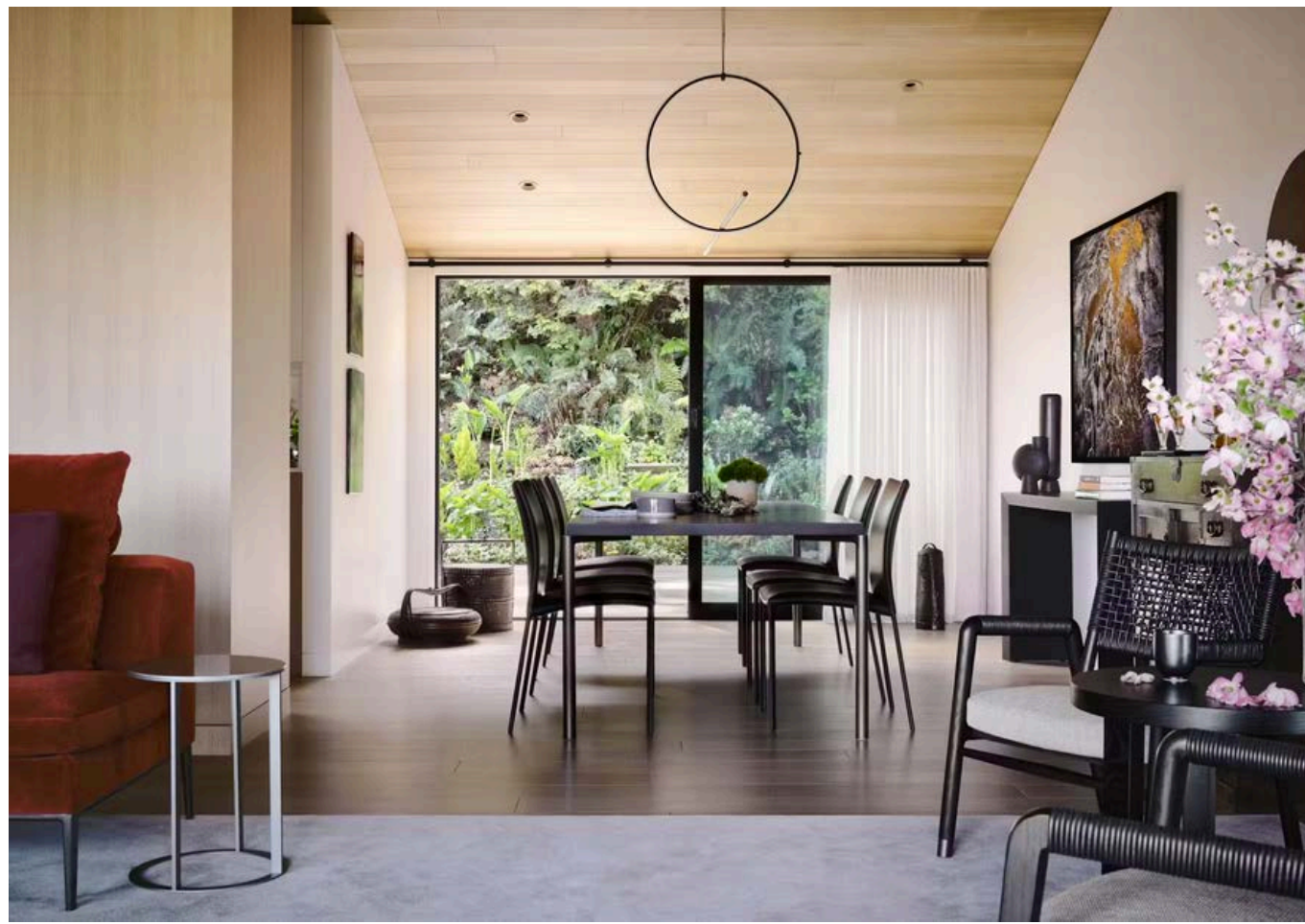
To keep costs down, Roberta evaluated several scenarios with her design team, which included Aaron, architect David Gast, and interior designer David Bjorngaard. For instance, because a single elevator linking the garage, main house, and basement—which they decided to convert into an ADU for a future caregiver—would have required pricey seismic bracing, she chose an elevator connecting the main floor and basement, and a separate lift from the garage to the front door for bringing down groceries in a wheelchair, if she were to need one in the future.

Today, the main floor still contains three bedrooms and two baths in the same configuration, but is more open to support mobility. The designers removed all unnecessary doors so that small discrete rooms, like a bedroom Roberta uses as an office, flow one into the other and feel larger. They also widened hallways on the main level so that a wheelchair can circumambulate it unencumbered. After a recent back surgery, Roberta took the renovation for a test run. "I walked around the house for exercise," she laughs.



She loves to cook and entertain, so the designers enlarged the dining space by extending the room a few feet outside the building envelope with a bay. They added glass doors that connect the dining room and adjacent kitchen to the garden. The doors also brighten the interior, as do new skylights and light wells. Pots and pans hang low from a ceiling rack so the chef doesn't have to reach or bend, whether standing or in a wheelchair. The kitchen counter is lowered at one end, serving as a desk where Roberta can work or read with her morning coffee.

A central wall separating the kitchen from the living room is a shared storage core for both rooms, keeping everything close at hand. It's clad with oak that matches the ceilings and floors, and, though more costly than wallboard and paint, it gives the interiors a more elegant feel and will age better, too.



Although Roberta initially envisioned gray floors and black and white accents, she had an overriding aesthetic code: that nothing should look institutional. Because San Francisco can be foggy, Bjorngaard took her edict further by evoking "the colors you see on a bright day," he says. "They are less cold." So, rust and saffron-colored furnishings and art (inspired by Roberta's favorite clothing) prevail. Even the front door is burgundy to match garden plantings, and the entryway is enlivened by a sculptural bronze branch-shaped grab bar Roberta uses to put on her shoes.



"I wanted a home where I would be able to walk out onto the deck and to my fabulous garden," Roberta says. "I can even look out at it from my kitchen." Looking through its new large windows "is like sitting in the view rather than looking through a peephole," she adds.

Roberta says aging is now an adventure she's feels ready for. A few technological tricks add to the fun. "My garbage cans open up with my knee. The cabinets open with a remote. I have stuff on my phone that opens the garage door," she says. "And it shows me when I have visitors at my front door."