

Ipe update brings order to Oakland courtyard

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The oak tree is surrounded by circular deck of sustainable Ipe wood. Photo: J. Michael Tucker



When [Stephen Nelson](#) and his partner, [Brian Yoshida](#), bought their Oakland midcentury house more than 12 years ago, they acquired a hillside property with four aging redwood decks and a large oak tree that dominated the front.

"I think initially we felt it was a great tree, but I was unfamiliar with oaks," admits Yoshida. "It's a messy tree that requires maintenance, but we love the tree and wouldn't think of giving it up."

So when foundation and dry rot issues with the decks came up, they had the chance to give their front yard a face-lift. And instead of looking at the tree as a liability, they wanted to incorporate it into the new design and celebrate its beauty. Because the front of the house sets the tone for the rest of the property, it was important that the area reflect their love of clean, simple lines and modern elegance.

Having already done a major renovation to the interior of their home, they knew the project would require outside help. They turned to husband-and-wife architects and designers [Alan and Joy Ohashi](#), principals of Ohashi Design Studio of Emeryville, and general contractor [Steve Schliff](#), owner of On the Beam Remodeling Inc., of Richmond.

"Visually, we wanted something lasting," Yoshida says. "We picked the best materials and went with a good design that would go through the years and still look fresh and new."

Upgrade the fence

Nelson and Yoshida liked the stepped look of their previous redwood fence that followed the slanted road out front. Wanting to maintain privacy for the courtyard but also add visual interest, they decided on a new design that includes two layers of staggered horizontal ipe boards set an inch apart. The updated fence allows natural light in but also creates a barrier to the street outside.

"The ipe was Alan's suggestion," says Yoshida. "I was unfamiliar with the wood but it's a really beautiful wood that's so hard and durable - and it weathers nicely, too (see "Durable deck wood," Page L1).

The stepped top not only helps the fence meet code - it could not be higher than 6 feet - it also accommodates the limbs of the sprawling oak tree. A custom stainless steel support inside the courtyard was added for the heaviest limb to keep the tree from creating pressure on the top of the fence. A custom sandblasted and tempered glass gate in an ipe frame built by Schliff replaces a solid wood gate that almost disappeared into the design of the old fence.

"It gives them the privacy they wanted, but also allows in light," Schliff says.

"We knew we wanted to give a preview of the story that unfolds inside when you enter the gate," adds [Alan Ohashi](#). "The gate also gives off a beautiful glow at night."

Smooth the transitions

Once past the front gate, visitors enter the courtyard. The deck around the oak in the old courtyard was not only aging and fading, it was built a few inches higher than the surrounding concrete patio, creating a safety hazard - especially at night. To eliminate this problem, a circular deck of the same sustainable ipe used for the fence was installed flush with the surrounding slate patio.

"Building around a tree is always tricky because you don't know if it will live through the construction process," Ohashi says. "But it was pretty obvious the owners took great care of the tree and carefully pruned it, so it's like a piece of bonsai."

The deck was designed to not only highlight the tree but also provide a transition from the house to the adjoining slate patio.

A sandblasted glass fence separates the front courtyard from the property next door. Previously, a solid redwood fence with ivy growing on top made the courtyard seem dark.

"The glass fence is a beautiful, neutral and always-changing palette that gives a lot of light and transparency but also maintains privacy," Ohashi says.

Add accents

The gray, brown and blue tones of the slate patio complement the wood elements of the fence and deck. The slate curves around the wood deck, giving the homeowners space for a bistro table and chairs.

"We knew we wanted to use the area more when we did this remodel, to be able to eat and work out there," Yoshida says.

Slate was also used for the stairs that bring guests down from the street-level entry gate to the front door of the house. A steel cable railing system provides safety without ruining the clean lines used throughout the renovation. A steel-frame, laminated and tempered clear glass awning - held up by cables on both sides - was added above the front door to give the home a more visible entry.

"Stephen was adamant about the awning," Yoshida says. "It really turned out beautiful. Before, it was hard to see where the entrance existed."

The courtyard's fountain also got a fresh look and was refinished in slate to match the surrounding patio. Ohashi says the black rock fountain has a very Zen-like feel, with running water that helps mask the street noise.

Have a lighting plan

Because Nelson and Yoshida occasionally enjoy dinner outside, it was important to include a lighting design that would allow use of their courtyard during the evening.

"Our lighting goals were to have light sources that are glare-free and highlight what we want to see while not showing what we don't want to see," Ohashi says. A combination of low-voltage up lights along the front ipe wood fence, lights along the stairs and a fixture at the front door illuminate the courtyard area. The lights show off the landscaping and add a pleasing glow to the space.

"This is an outdoor room, and they treat it like an extension of their dining room," he adds, "so you can't just throw lights wherever you want. The lights we used were tailored to the nature of the space. Since we were creating an urban garden, the lighting has to be more controlled, elegant and refined to match the environment."

An additional up light placed by the house number on the front fence helps guests find the home quickly at night.

All decks on hand

While the front courtyard greets visitors, the side and rear decks are more private. Located off the back of the living and dining rooms about 30 feet off the ground, the large rear deck required major structural work and was finished in ipe to match the front courtyard. A Deneb table with Lucca chairs and chaise longues create different destinations on the updated deck. A low 3 1/2-foot guardrail offers safety but still allows the couple to enjoy the views.

The deck off the master bedroom - located directly below the rear deck - was also updated and extended to match the deck above. The side deck and connections between the decks were brought up to code. Yoshida says the entire project was more involved and costly than they originally planned (he declines to share the final cost of the remodel), but worth all the time and effort.

"We're definitely outside more," he says. "It's more enjoyable now."

Choosing a design that works for you

If you're considering changes to your outdoor living space, architect and designer Alan Ohashi suggests answering the following questions before settling on the design:

How will I use this space? Simple activities like reading outdoors require space for lounge chairs and maybe an umbrella or awning, while an outdoor kitchen can require electrical and plumbing upgrades. If you love fresh herbs and vegetables, you might want a kitchen garden in an area of your yard that enjoys lots of sun. Make a list of your favorite outdoor activities and discuss your needs with your design professional.

Any special features or safety issues? Children and pets present safety issues to consider, says Ohashi. "Having a continuous fenced or gated outdoor space is critical," he stresses. You might also want to incorporate built-in benches to give your pets a shady spot for an afternoon nap or a kid-friendly garden. When kids or pets are present, also make sure to include safety precautions for any water features.

Where are the property lines? Contact your local planning department before you design your project. This is a crucial step that helps avoid problems with neighbors and "surprise" costs down the line. "They dictate not only the design and location of fences, but the height of fences, too," Ohashi says. In addition to knowing your property lines, make sure to gather information on any setbacks, easements and underground utilities involved with your property.

Is there an irrigation plan? If you want to include plants and flowers in your upgraded patio or deck, think about your irrigation needs before construction begins. Water conservation is another issue. "We get into that more and more these days because homeowners want rain-catch systems," Ohashi says. Incorporating native and low-water plants into your design and using an irrigation system that reduces runoff and overspraying are a few ways you can make your outdoor living space eco-friendly.

How will the design relate to my house? Consider how your patio or deck relates to your house in terms of looks and materials. "I always like to use a material or design element of the house in the landscaping to create a resonance," Ohashi says. Some materials require more maintenance, so know how much time you're willing to devote to upkeep.

- Jeannie Matteucci

Durable deck wood

Nicknamed "ironwood," ipe (pronounced EE-pay) is a South American hardwood that's resistant to fire, insects, moisture and splintering, making it ideal for decks and outdoor furniture.

As with any wood product, ipe that has been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council comes from companies that adhere to environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and

economically viable practices, according to the council's Web site. Because it grows fast, ipe is also more abundant than mahogany and other exotic woods.

Because it's so hard, Ipe can be difficult to work with; it requires special saw blades and deck screws. It's also more expensive than other deck woods, although in the long run its durability saves money and resources.

When sealed, ipe retains its rich, warm tones; unsealed, it weathers to a silvery gray. Boards have a uniform appearance with no knots.

"It's a tough wood but it gives you a beautiful look," says architect Alan Ohashi.

"The ipe just gave the whole thing class," says general contractor Steve Schliff.

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Resources

Ohashi Design Studio, 5845 Doyle St., Suite 106, Emeryville, (510) 595-1300; ohashidesign.com.

OnTheBeam Remodeling Inc., 855 Marina Bay Parkway, Suite 28, Richmond, (510) 412-9964; www.onthebeamremodeling.com.