

WHO SAYS THAT A MODERN DESIGN HAS TO BE STERILE AND TROUBLE FOR A FAMILY? A SLO DESIGNER REMADE HER RANCH HOUSE INTO A PLACE BOTH OPEN AND INVITING

Written by Rebecca Juretic

If you are to believe most design magazines, modern homes are sterile, unapproachable and not at all kid-friendly.

Heather Stevenson set out to prove otherwise when she took on the remodel of the 1977 San Luis Obispo ranch house that she shares with her two daughters, ages 11 and 7, and their poodle, Celia.

The family has lived there since 2000. For three years, they put off plans to renovate, mostly because the house lacked the typical ranch home drawbacks like cottage cheese acoustic ceilings and undersized windows.

But Stevenson, who is an interior designer, couldn't help but see greater potential. For one thing, the house didn't suit her modern sensibilities. "It had black shutters and this eagle over the door. The house was sort of trying to be colonial," she said. Also, like most homes of its era, it was segmented into many small rooms--a feature not conducive to this family, which likes to stay connected at home. With the help of Bay Area architect Bruce Tomb, Stevenson devised a version of modern that is simple but not overly slick, stylish but not pretentious.

Key to the new look was an open floor plan. Achieving this meant knocking out walls separating the dining room, living room, family room and kitchen. Besides contributing a sense of light and openness, removing walls provided the opportunity to add industrial elements to the house. Stevenson and Tomb opted to install steel strips running along the ceiling where the walls used to be. "Bruce Tomb likes to allude to the history of the house as he shapes its future," she explained.

When steel poles were installed to stand in for load-bearing walls, Stevenson chose to leave them exposed. "I thought they looked cool," she said.

The industrial concept was carried to other features of the house, including the front door. She chose a glass pivot door, which is similar to those used in office buildings and storefronts. In the Stevenson house, it extends the large front window, helping to flood the house with light. Space efficiency was critical in maximizing all of the home's 2,200 square feet. The small, narrow kitchen became a galley-style space, improving flow through the area. A counter provides the ideal spot for eating casual meals.

Built-in furniture throughout the house also makes the best use of space. This includes built-in seating and shelving in the living room and window seats with storage in the girls' rooms. Built-in brushed stainless steel shelving in the kitchen and living room do double duty as both room dividers and storage space.

Having so much built-in furniture means not having to have much in the way of freestanding pieces. Stevenson chose a mix of family heirlooms and sturdy new pieces in a variety of styles, from traditional to contemporary. "I like modern architecture, but I don't like ultramodern furniture," she said. "I think you can do one without doing the other."

To balance out the abundance of steel and glass, Stevenson used a large palette of warm, natural materials, many of them eco-friendly. Wood cabinetry and paneling are Douglas fir. She opted to keep woodwork simple and free of ornamentation -- in her opinion, it lets the natural character of the wood speak for itself and provides fewer places for dust to settle.

Floors are made of cork that was smoked to produce a dark color with subtle variegations. "The dark floors make the ceiling seem higher," noted Stevenson, who also appreciates cork for its soft, yielding quality. Soapstone countertops in the kitchen are not only natural but low-maintenance. "The first year you have to oil it, but once the soapstone gets a patina, you don't have to do it that often," she said. "It's not a real splashy material, and it doesn't show dirt."

Because Stevenson is a color consultant, paint was a priority. "I'm not afraid to throw something strong up on the walls," she said. So she chose gold accented with turquoise for most of the house. Her extensive collection of work by local artists creates other potent punches of color.

The recently completed remodel has transformed the house, both inside and out. Thoughtfully planned, it suits the family's style as well as well as lifestyle. It is also proof that modern design isn't just eye-candy -- it's a style that almost anyone can live with.

RESOURCES:

Architect: [Bruce Tomb](#), San Francisco
Contractor: Semmes and Co. Builders Inc., Atascadero
Cabinetry: Artisan Woodworks, Rob Strom, Los Osos
Window treatments and upholstery: Ann Berry-Gallegos,
Interior Designer, Atascadero
Concrete counters in baths: [Concast](#), Grover Beach
Tile in baths: [Greengoods](#), San Luis Obispo
Cork floors: Phillips Floor-to-Ceiling, San Luis Obispo

DESIGN TIPS FROM HEATHER STEVENSON'S HOME:

TONE IT DOWN - Ultra-polished materials may look sleek, but they also show dirt and fingerprints. Materials like brushed stainless steel and honed stone are still modern but are also more forgiving.

CORK IT - Cork floors make a durable and environmentally friendly alternative to wood. Cork is easy on the feet, absorbs sound and can even be used in kitchens and bathrooms when sealed with polyurethane.

CREATE STORAGE - Keep clutter at bay by incorporating storage into every room. If you need a room divider, use a shelving unit instead of a table or screen. Choose benches and ottomans that offer compartments for storage. In tight spaces, consider installing built-in shelving or cabinetry.