

San Francisco Project Spotlight

Clipping Away at Red Tape, Alison Pickart Slowly Crafts Her Marin County Dream House

Several rounds of redesigns and negotiations with the city later, the designer ended up with the perfect blank canvas in Ross, California

By Miranda Agee

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The living room of Alison Pickart's cozy California cottage.

Photo: Aaron Leitz Photography

For some designers, a gut renovation of a home is the ideal project. Alison Pickart certainly felt that way about clients' homes in the past, but when it came to her own 1930s Bernard Maybeck-inspired cottage in Marin County, California, restrictions mandated by the city led to multiple last-minute redesigns. "It was kind of like building my dream house, but it wasn't exactly what I had imagined in my head," she says. Through multiple trials and late-night decision-making sessions with her husband, Pickart and her trusted team created a space that not only honors the history of the home, but also caters to her family's needs. AD PRO asked her to walk us through the planning process and the decisions she made along the way.

AD PRO: What makes this home unique?

Alison Pickart: We bought the 1932 house with the intentions of a full gut. The town makes it difficult, though. There are a lot of building guidelines to make sure we kept the character of the home, like the original millwork and exterior gingerbread molding. This project took almost four years to get approved.

AD PRO: After years of [working with clients](#), what was it like when you were your own client?

AP: At first, I thought, 'This is my chance!' I maxed the original [design](#) plan out with what I would do to my dream home. Then my husband [Ken Pickart, who, along with his wife, owns AP-BUILD, INC.] said to me, 'Don't try to make this house something that it's not.' Just like that, he shut the whole thing down, and he was right. I was trying to make this some grand home, and in reality, it's a simple California cottage that I wanted to make into a cozy home for my little family. I learned rather quickly that I wasn't my client, the house was my client. In the end, everything is exactly how I like it, and it became that way because I was being true to the house.



The double-height ceilings in the kitchen presented a unique challenge.

Photo: Aaron Leitz Photography

AD PRO: What was a major design challenge you came across during the process?

AP: The kitchen was the surprise of the project. Originally, it was supposed to have a bedroom and an ensuite bathroom above it. The town had an issue with that because we exceeded our floor area ratio to the lot size. So, they approved the footprint of the house and all of the volume of the house, but they told us we had to remove the 300-square-foot second-floor bedroom and they would approve our project. However, because they approved the volume, the kitchen became two stories. I was beside myself. I thought it would look like an elevator shaft. But then I started designing the windows and how the cabinets would fit in, and it really started to come together. I learned that really good design comes out of being challenged: to look at something in a way that you absolutely didn't want to look at it, or think about it in a way that you have never thought about something before.

Project Details

Project Name: 33

Design Team: Alison Pickart and Ken Pickart, AP-BUILD, INC.

Size: 2,800 square feet

Location: Ross, California