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Emma Whistler checks in on the nesting hawk behind her parents' remodeled home, p. 92.

napa

# MAKE IT WORK

Two artists leave their SoHo loft behind  
to make a modern house in Napa.

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The Whisler-Reckewell family loves the connection between the indoors and outdoors in their remodeled home. In fact, it was the landscape, which features dramatic views and large oak trees, that sold the couple on the house.

The house is still long and low, but it has a new skin of Ceraclad, a cement-based panel siding from Japan. The dramatic pop-up entryway hints at the modern interior renovations behind the door.



**A**rtist Sabine Reckewell had a revelation most economists missed in 2007. "I felt like the real estate market was going to crash," she says. "I had this sense that we had to sell quickly." In short order she and her husband, sculptor and furniture designer Stephen Whisler, sold their SoHo loft in New York City (population 8,008,278) and purchased a ranch house on a hill overlooking the city of Napa (population 72,585). It's a dramatic move by any estimation, but the couple softened the transition by bringing the feeling of their urban loft to the country.

At first, the house seemed like an unlikely candidate for a new life as a modern dwelling. Previous owners had tried to make the long, low home something it wasn't by giving it classic paneling, elaborate dentil molding and

traditional wallpaper. More egregious was the layout: All the public rooms were gathered at the front overlooking the driveway and all of the private rooms were at the rear, their tiny windows offering only peeks of the dramatic views of oak-studded golden hills, the Napa River and the city itself. "We must have looked at this house three or four times during our search," says Whisler. "We kept going back and forth. We'd say, 'Oh, it's just too much work.' But then we'd speculate, 'Well, if we could get it for the right price.' But then we'd agree, 'It's just the wrong style.'"

In the end, the stunning view countered every argument, and the couple purchased the house and started to search for an architect to make it fit their lifestyle. A contractor friend suggested they check out the work of Holly Hulburd in



Prior to the remodel, the house was uninspiring, and the floorplan ignored the view in back. The poor layout and small spaces almost kept the owners from buying it.



San Francisco. "Looking at her website, we immediately saw that we shared the same taste," says Whisler. "Her preference for white walls, the way she displayed artwork and her use of color appealed to us. We called her, and she invited us to stay at her house in Napa. We didn't interview anyone else."

The resulting client-architect collaboration was unlike any the involved parties had experienced before. "After earning my architecture degree, I studied textile art and design," says Hulburd. "Although I never met Sabine before this, our journeys were very similar. I understood what they wanted."

The couple was more involved in the process than most clients. Whisler, who had worked with top East Coast architects on home remodels, acted as the general contractor, and the couple did much of the hands-on selecting and installing of everything from tile to cabinets. "To be honest, I was a little nervous about them doing it themselves

ABOVE: The couple wanted their home to be loft-like, so the architect designed a very large, vaulted central space that encompasses the dining and living room and is open to the kitchen. RIGHT: The new roofline is 15 feet at its highest point, allowing for a wall of glass.



Whisler put his spin on cabinets from Ikea by adding a custom light valance and changing drawer and door layouts to work better with the appliances. Iridescent Heath tiles make up the backsplash.



**RIGHT:** The renovation ignited a game of musical spaces, with the architect shifting the rooms to take advantage of the amazing view. Before the remodel, the kitchen was small, dark and located at the back of the house, with rows of brown cabinets where there are now walls of windows. **FAR RIGHT:** The fussy living room was transformed into a sleek master bedroom.





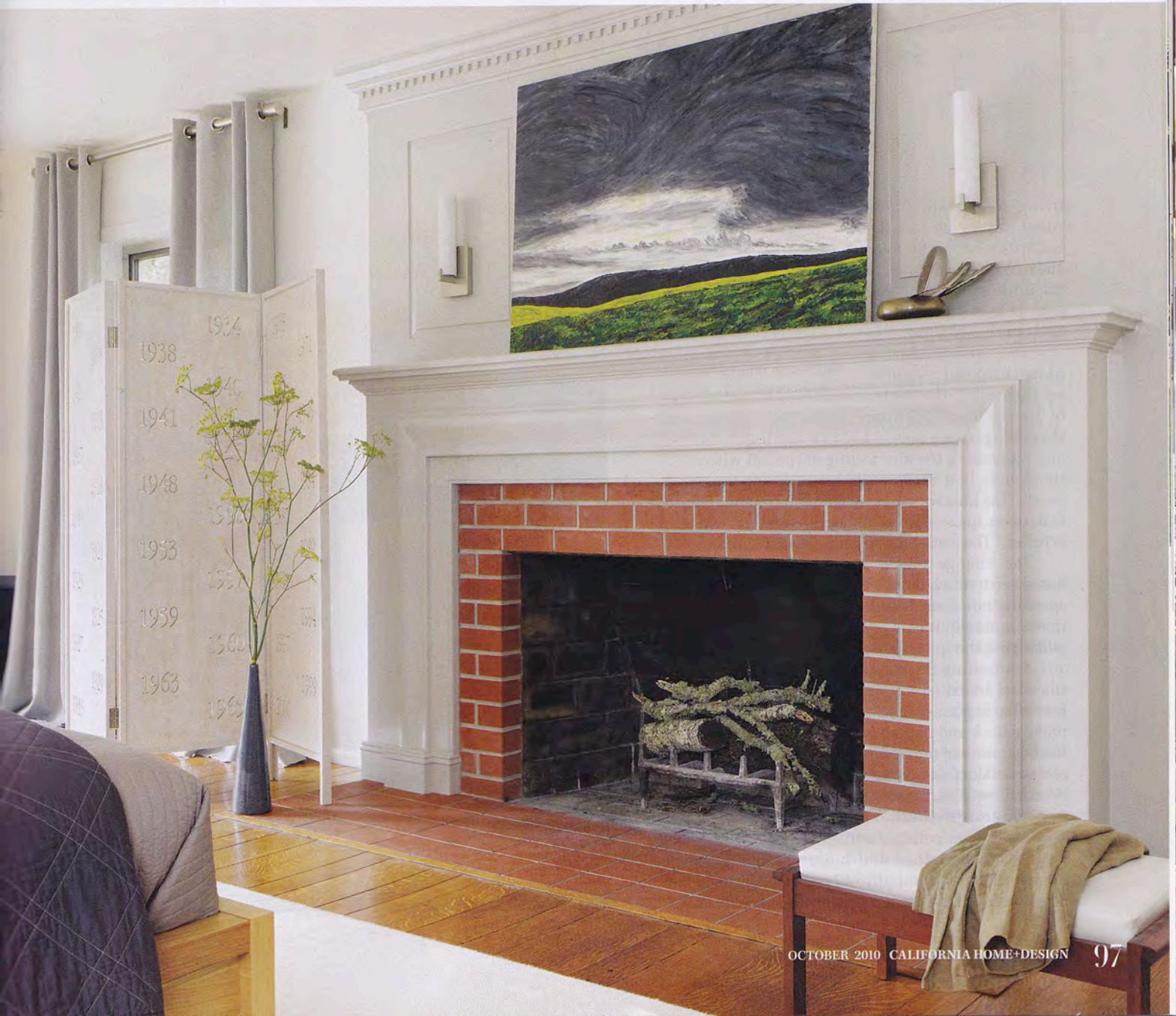
because they hadn't done seismic work and weren't accustomed to working in the heat of Napa Valley," says Hulburd. "But their open-mindedness and discerning tastes made the process an easy one."

Hulburd's team took a look at the house ("I think they were appalled," notes Reckewell) and then put together a plan that would open it up. But before construction could begin, demolition had to occur. "Stephen and Sabine had a brilliant idea for getting rid of the cabinets and fixtures in the house," says Hulburd. "Rather than

just ripping everything out and dumping it, they sold it all on Craigslist. They didn't have to pay a crew to demo it. Instead, buyers came and took the items. Not only did they make some money, but they also recycled."

LEFT: Whisler used pearl buttons he found at a New York City flea market as inlays in his kitchen table. BELOW: The only remnant of the old living room is the fireplace surround, which was painted gray and given an updated pair of sconces.

With the old house stripped bare, the new house was ready to be born. "The main problem was that the rooms where you would spend all your time had a view of the driveway, while the bedrooms were facing the scenery," says Hulburd. "We reorganized everything so that the



**“Although we had some tough times with this remodel, we forged ahead and made it work.”**

living room and dining room are located at the back to take in the view. The new kitchen is open to the dining room, and you can look straight across and out the window.”

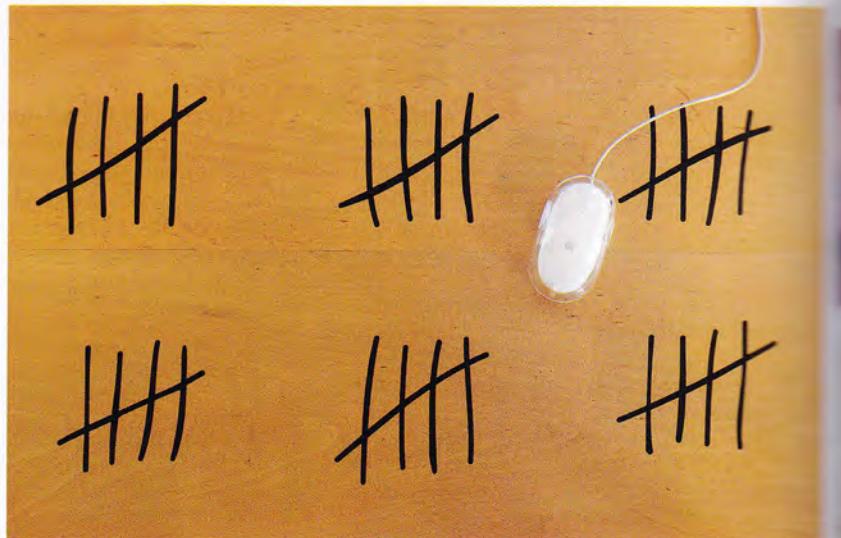
The most daring move involved popping up the roof in the center of the structure, lifting the ceiling from a mere 8 feet to a soaring 15 feet and replicating the airy feeling of the loft where the couple had made their home for so many years. “The idea was that we would have one central, open space with really high ceilings,” says Whisler. “The rest of the rooms open off of that.”

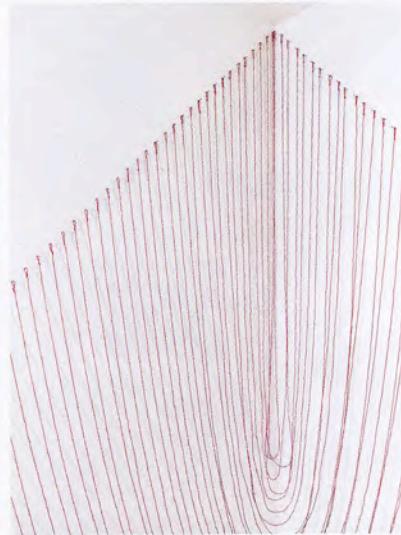
The change makes the 2,500-square-foot home seem much larger. “Everything feels more spacious now,” says Reckewell. “We didn’t add much square footage (just 250 square feet were added) but the spaces are much more functional.”

Connecting the outdoor areas with the interior also added to the expansive feeling of the home. Large glass doors on both sides of the house make a deck and patio a mere step away. “One of the best parts of the new house is how easily you can go outside,” says Whisler. “For the 25 years we lived in New York, we didn’t have that.”

As artists (Reckewell currently paints and assembles collage, while Whisler creates large-scale sculpture and builds high-design furniture for his company, Whisler Design), the couple added deft design touches. For instance,

ABOVE: Hash-mark inlays decorate the surface of the desk in Whisler’s study. RIGHT: Whisler maintains a studio on the property, where he crafts large pieces of symbolic sculpture, such as a red wagon reimagined as an oversize coffin.





after discovering Heath tile in Sausalito, they frequented the factory, looking for samples and seconds (either overstock of made-to-order tiles or pieces that didn't quite measure up to first-quality standards). Working with their daughter Emma (an art history major), they arranged the small lots of seemingly mismatched tiles in elegant compositions. "It was a real savings," says Reckewell. "For our guest bathroom, we paid \$25 a box for sample tiles."

The home also serves as an ever-rotating gallery for their art. Reckewell's ink-on-paper works line the entryway, and her collage art hangs above the dining room table. The high ceilings in the living room make way for Whisler's large-scale sculptures, and several of the furniture pieces are his artistic, sometimes whimsical, designs.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: In her new office designed to open to the front patio, Reckewell cuts up magazines to later assemble into collage art; the home was purposely designed with stark-white, gallery-like walls that showcase the couple's work, including two of her early textile pieces hanging on the far wall.

"A lot of my projects are gallery-like," says Hulburd. "And in those projects it's important that everything be well-lit. In addition to having white walls, it's also crucial to have space to stand back and view the art. For Stephen and Sabine, there needed to be fluidity to the space, so they could display and change their art around."

When asked about her favorite part of the remodeled house, Reckewell pauses a moment before answering: "The whole thing is my favorite part," she says. "I love that, together with the architect, we have touched and created everything in this house." Whisler agrees: "In the art world, you always talk about whether a piece works and, if not, how to make it work," he says. "Although we had some tough times with this remodel, we forged ahead and made it work." ■