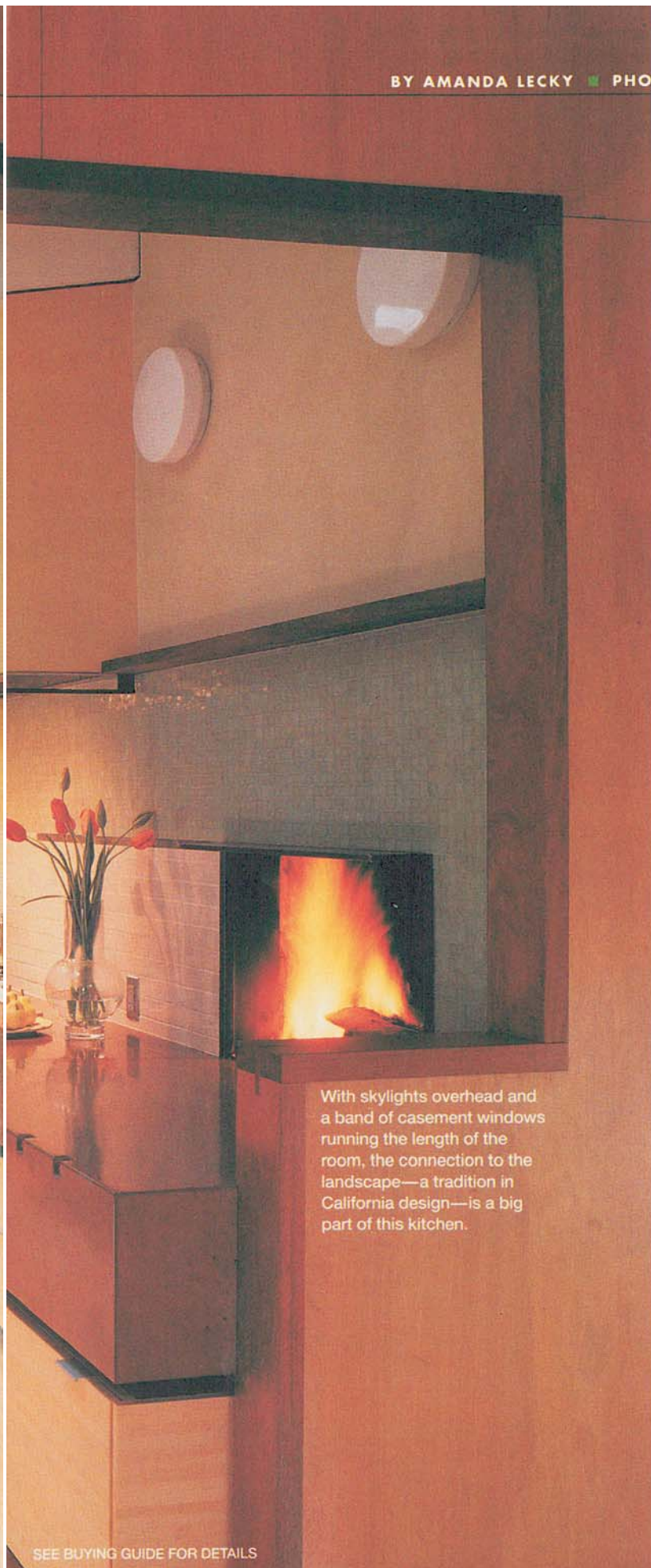




# EARTH ELEMENTS



With skylights overhead and a band of casement windows running the length of the room, the connection to the landscape—a tradition in California design—is a big part of this kitchen.

## A rich mix of materials and light gives this California kitchen organic appeal

**EVEN AT FIRST GLANCE,** there's something different about the kitchen in Birgitta and Mitch Durrell's Berkeley, California, house, and it's not just the bold mix of stainless steel and orange concrete. No, there's something more personal, more organic. Perhaps it's the way the high-ceilinged space seems to breathe freely, or its close connection to nature.

The room didn't start out that way. When the Durrells bought their home, a typical 1960s California post-and-beam, the kitchen was dark and out-of-date, dominated by cabinetry and awkwardly cut off from an adjoining breakfast nook. After five years of living with a space that Birgitta calls "impossible to work in," they were ready for a change. Enter Fu-Tung Cheng, the principal of Cheng Design in Berkeley, a designer with a particular expertise in the use of concrete surfaces. "I'd read about him in the *San Francisco Chronicle*," says Birgitta.

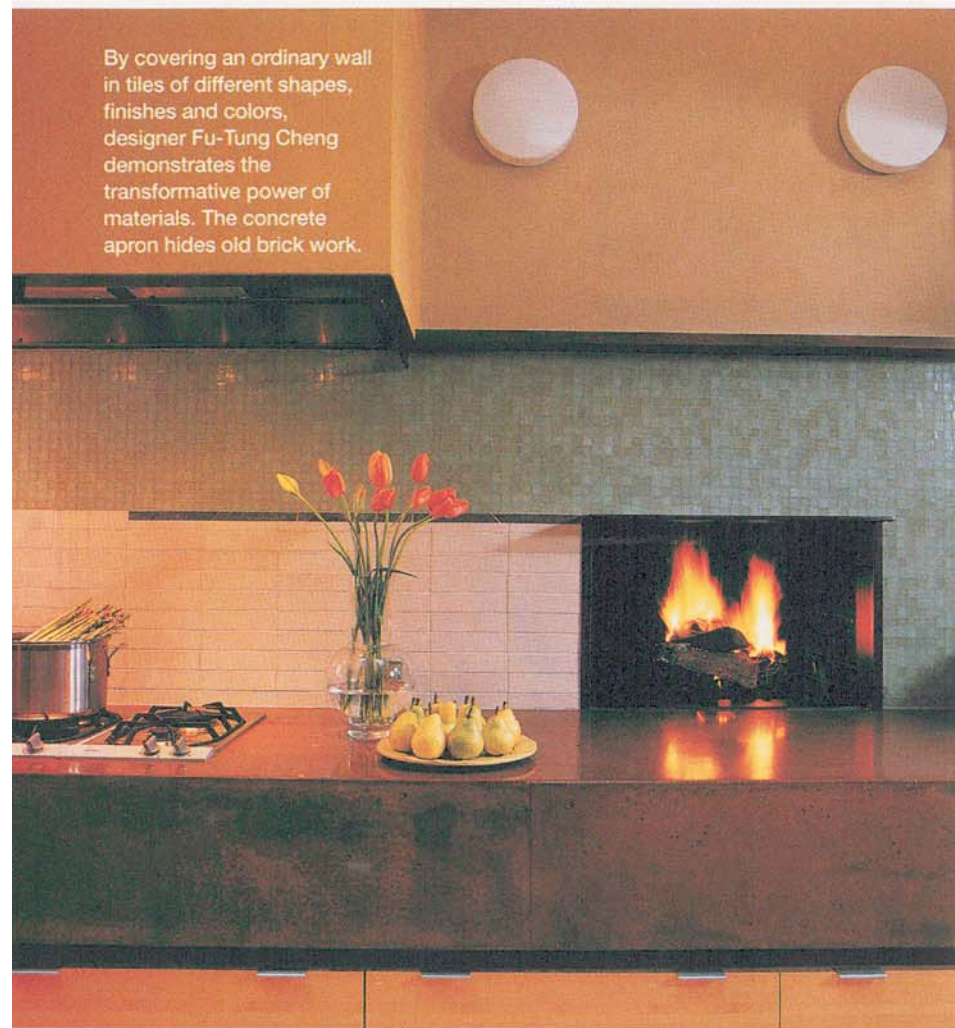
To achieve his clients' goals—a bright, efficient workspace with an open layout and a visual link to outdoor living spaces—Cheng reconfigured



**DESIGNER**  
Fu-Tung Cheng  
Cheng Design  
Berkeley, California

**NATURAL SELECTION**

By covering an ordinary wall in tiles of different shapes, finishes and colors, designer Fu-Tung Cheng demonstrates the transformative power of materials. The concrete apron hides old brick work.



the plan, dramatically widening the small doorway between the original kitchen and breakfast nook, moving appliances around, removing a small closet, and adding windows and skylights throughout.

The concrete countertop that spans most of the fireplace wall began as Cheng's solution for covering the fireplace's existing brick hearth. With its deep apron and integral sandy orange color, it makes a bold impression, balancing the line of windows on the opposite wall and reinforcing the cozy impact of the hearth.

"I use concrete for its mass appeal," says Cheng, wryly. "Its density really substantiates a kitchen and it has a timeless earthiness that lends itself to cooking. People have an emotional response to it—a kind of primal response." In Birgitta's case, this emotional connection also has a physical aspect: Bits of amber collected by her parents on the beach near their home in Sweden fleck the charcoal-colored concrete baking center opposite the double ovens.



Intelligently positioned across from the ovens, a baking center has a marble work board set into the concrete counter. It's perfect for rolling out dough. The lower counter height makes kneading more comfortable.

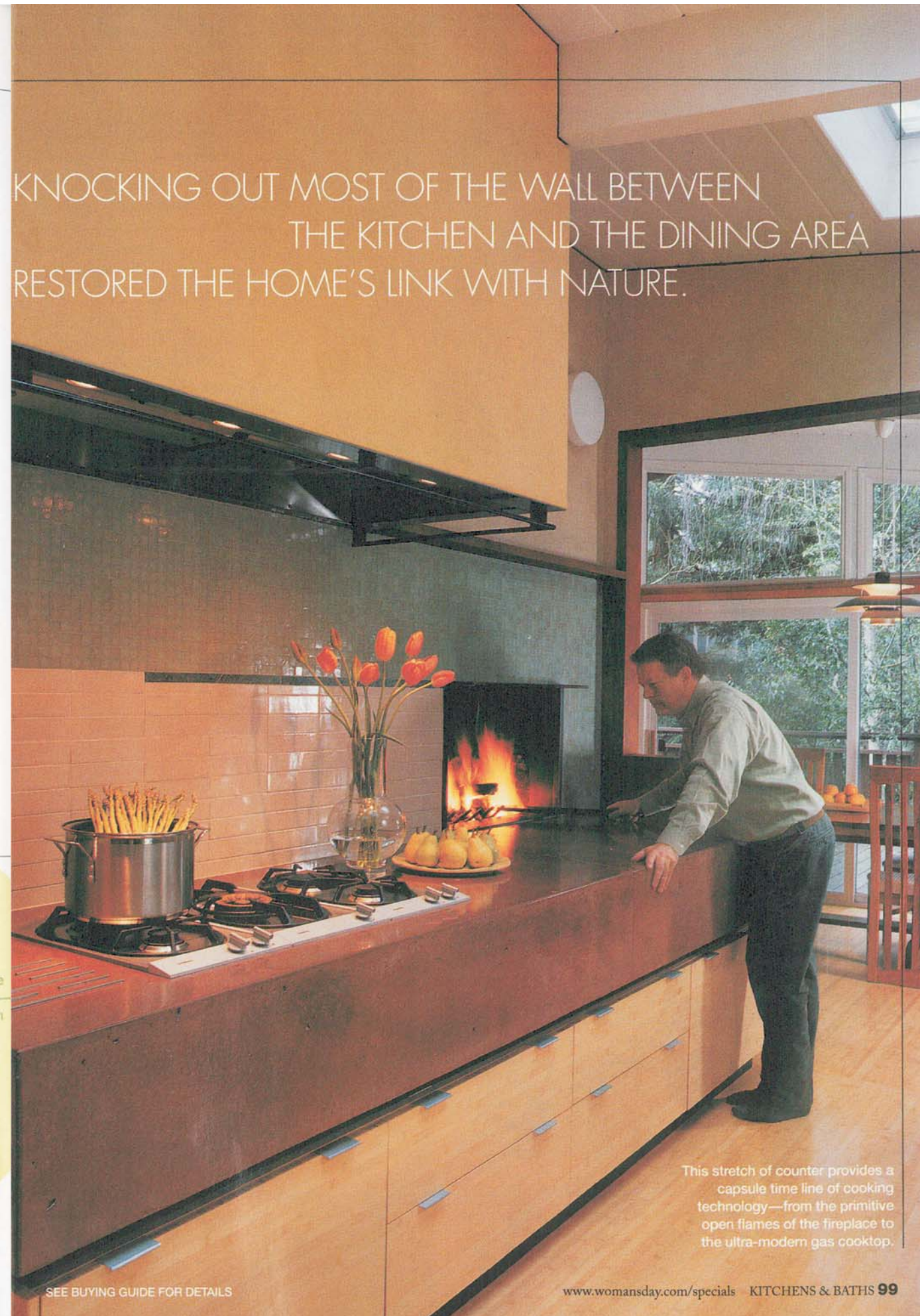
**Floor Plan**



All the tall appliances in the kitchen—the refrigerator and the double wall ovens—are kept away from the windows and openings to other rooms so light can flood the space.

FLOOR PLAN: STEVEN STANKIEWICZ

KNOCKING OUT MOST OF THE WALL BETWEEN THE KITCHEN AND THE DINING AREA RESTORED THE HOME'S LINK WITH NATURE.



This stretch of counter provides a capsule time line of cooking technology—from the primitive open flames of the fireplace to the ultra-modern gas cooktop.



Birgitta also worked closely with Cheng to determine just how much storage they would require—the final design eliminated any light-blocking above-counter cabinets—and to choose the right combination of appliances, including a convection oven, speed-cooking oven and warming drawer. Now, a year after beginning the remodel, the Durrells are as happy with their new kitchen as they imagined they'd be. And soon they'll be even happier when they share it with the newest member of their family—a daughter. ■

LEFT: Sliding the cutting board over the sink basin extends the useable area of the counter.

BELOW: In the hands of an expert like Cheng, concrete becomes an artist's canvas. Inlaid steel rods make a resting pad for hot pots; a fossil adds unusual beauty.

## Nature Made

Designer Fu-Tung Cheng specified a blend of natural materials to give this kitchen its uniquely organic flavor.

The counters are concrete, one of Cheng's signature materials. Concrete is itself a combination of natural elements: water, a sand or gravel aggregate, and a Portland cement binder.

Flooring and cabinets are crafted from sleek, sustainably harvested bamboo. Keep them clean by sweeping or vacuuming; damp-mopping isn't good for the wood.

A trio of tiles—shimmering green glass mosaics, a thin line of slate, and a base of handmade cream-colored ceramic tiles—surrounds the hearth. The three make an easy-care material collage.

On the walls, a Venetian plaster finish has a delightfully tactile surface that subtly changes color in the sun.



The kitchen is sensibly free of hanging cabinets, which are limited to the wall that houses the built-in refrigerator and the ovens. A pair of small cantilevered shelves pick up on the dark wood trim of the windows and door.