

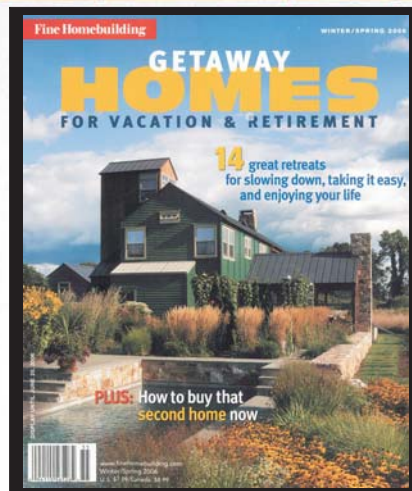
# GETAWAY HOMIES

FOR VACATION & RETIREMENT



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Cover photo by Charles Miller

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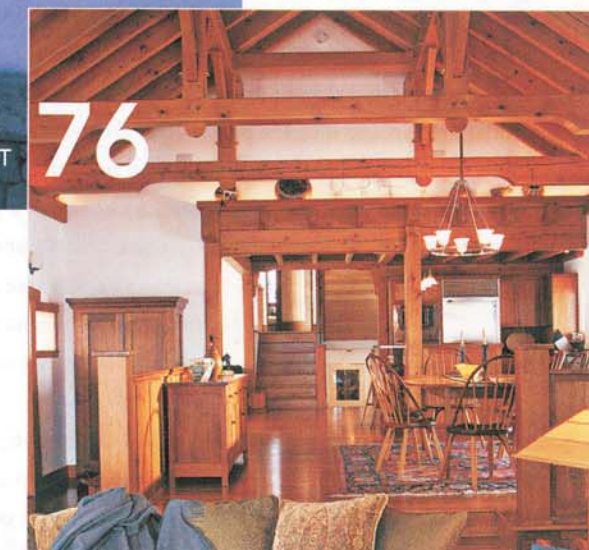
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WEEKEND PARADISE

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# A Hip Retirement Haven

An apartment's modern aesthetic banishes the blahs and brings sizzle to a California retirement community

BY TODD LAWSON AND TOM CONNOR

**A**partments in a typical retirement community often have standardized floor plans, materials, and color palettes. But John and Polly, a retired teacher and an artist who moved to California's University Retirement Community, discovered they could have the security they desired while living in a distinctive, well-designed apartment that differed from the stock floor plan and design package. All it took was a little ingenuity and some innovative interior designs to gain the approval of the complex's building developers.

After years of rambling around in a six-story contemporary house, John and Polly decided they needed fewer levels to live comfortably. They bought a 1200-sq.-ft. apartment in the Davis, Calif., retirement community before ground was broken. They knew that each of the 400 apartment units would have window trellises, quaint balconies, white railings, and small, tidy, nearly identical interior layouts.

Although the apartment's standard floor plan would have sufficed, John and Polly were concerned that the layout and materials would not reflect their personalities nor their aesthetic sensibilities. For a couple whose lives have been devoted to learning and art, self-expression in their home mattered a great deal to them, and they wanted

the apartment to feel more like an artist's loft than like a cookie-cutter retirement unit.

Luckily, the community's developers—a board of former university academics—were happy to improve the floor plan with the couple's design input. John and Polly hired Fu-Tung Cheng and Cathleen Quandt of Cheng Design, a Berkeley, Calif., architecture and design firm, to help them assert their individual tastes and needs by customizing the apartment's floor plan and upgrading the materials.

## Flexing fixed space

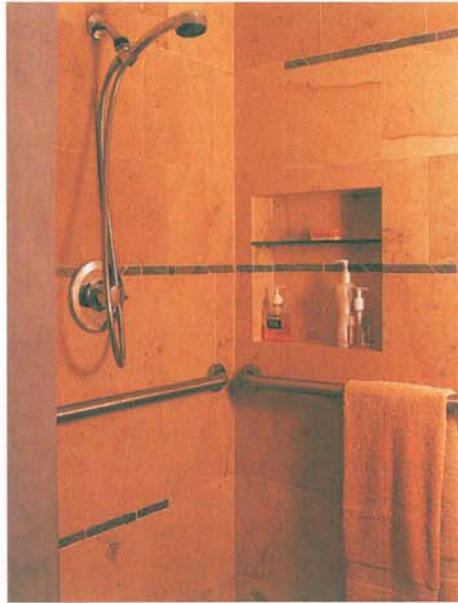
The apartment's original floor plan consisted of four rooms—a narrow, open kitchen and a combined dining- and living-room area in the middle of the layout, flanked by a den/guest room on one side, and a master bedroom and master bath on the other—each separated by walls and joined by a rear hallway. The designers rearranged the floor plan so that the kitchen, dining, and living areas would take up the left side of the apartment, yielding more room for the bedroom suites (floor plan, p. 57). The back hallway from the original floor plan remains intact, but different materials brighten its nearly hidden location.

Although the kitchen in the original plan was somewhat open to the adjoining spaces,

**Barn doors open up the space.** The rolling doors of steel and sandblasted glass allow the study to become part of the living room when the doors are open. When the doors are closed, the study serves as a guest room. Photo at left taken at A on floor plan.

**A successful design improves the development plan.** The University Retirement Community is a village of 400 units housed in two apartment buildings. Each unit's facade is identical. The developers allowed one couple to alter the standard floor plan and then adopted those changes for other units.





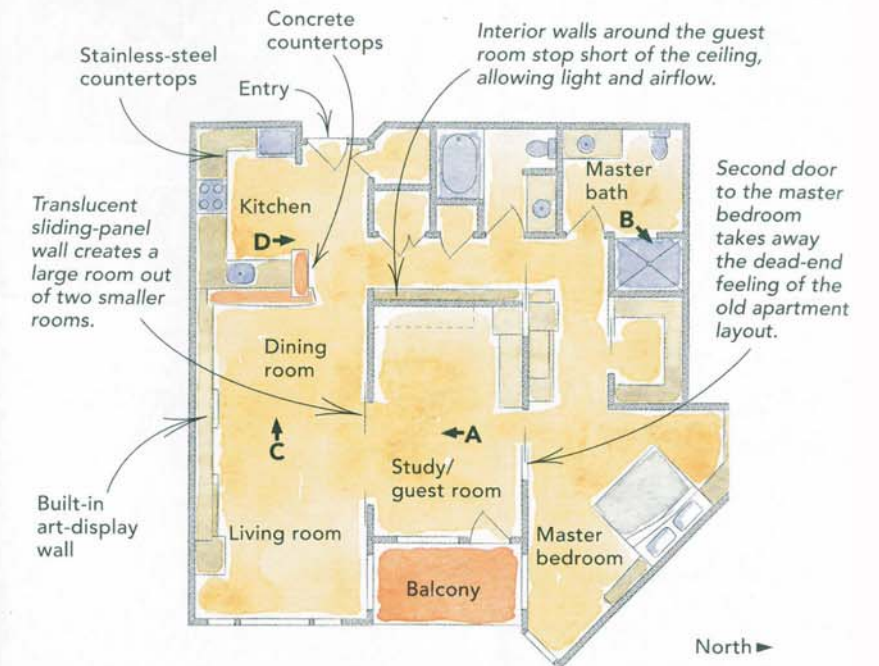
**Wide enough to double as towel racks.** The long, stainless-steel grab bars integrate well with the rest of the stainless-steel design elements found around the apartment. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

**Concrete comes indoors for a cool look.** For storage and display space with a modern feel, the 7-ft.-long precast concrete sideboard ties into the cherry and stainless-steel kitchen counter. Cheng Design created the upright concrete raised counter on the right and the stainless-steel oven hood in the background. Photo taken at C on floor plan.



## A MODEL BLUEPRINT

Working together, the designers and owners adapted the retirement community's standard floor plan to combine a youthful, contemporary aesthetic with a pragmatic accessibility plan for the future.



## SPECS

**Bedrooms:** 1, plus study  
**Bathrooms:** 2  
**Size:** 1200 sq. ft.  
**Cost:** N/A

**Completed:** 2001  
**Location:** Davis, Calif.  
**Designers:** Fu-Tung Cheng and Cathleen Quandt

0 3 6 12 ft.

Photos taken at lettered positions.

## “They wanted the apartment to feel more like an artist’s loft than like a cookie-cutter retirement unit.”

high upper cabinets made the room feel cramped and claustrophobic. The couple's number-one priority in the new floor plan was to redesign the kitchen.

Because Polly and John planned to have all but one dinner a week in the community dining room, their kitchen was designed to look like part of the apartment's dining and living rooms as a way of creating a sociable atmosphere. To connect the spaces, cherry-veneer cabinets, which look like built-in furniture, were installed partway up the corner wall of the kitchen. The exposed dry-wall above the cabinets helps to make the kitchen look more like the living areas as well. Additional storage is housed in drawers below the stainless-steel counters, keeping

the space above open and barrier free to the apartment's social areas.

### Getting the most from the space

Structural changes helped to open the original floor plan and make it flexible. Rolling barn-style doors made of sandblasted glass replaced a section of wall that separated the living and dining rooms from an enclosed den. When open, the doors double the living- and dining-room space. When closed, the adjoining area reverts to a study and guest room.

A flexible floor plan also meant something else to Polly and John. The couple needed adequate space to fit a number of pieces of furniture they had acquired over the years. To make sure their furniture would fit into

the redesigned floor plan, the couple took photos and exact measurements of each piece and gave the figures to the designers. Their challenge was to make sure the furniture would not block the flow of space. Cheng and Quandt integrated the furniture specifications into the floor-plan drawings, with fractions of an inch to spare.

### Accessibility with style

The couple wanted to ensure that the floor plan would remain open and spacious in anticipation of their future needs. As a result, the apartment is designed with 3-ft.-wide doors and hallways, which meet the code set by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Each counter and vanity top in the apartment

**A passageway-cum-library.** Replacing a solid wall with a bookcase that stops short of the ceiling transformed the back hall into an airy library. The floor-to-ceiling pocket door, inset with sandblasted glass, lets light into the darker end of the master suite. Photo right taken at D on floor plan.

remains open underneath for wheelchair access. Cheng also reconfigured the master bathroom to create room for a limestone and slate roll-in shower he designed.

The measure of the apartment's success is that the developers implemented the redesigned floor plan for 32 units in their retirement complex. □

This article is adapted from *The House to Ourselves: Reinventing Home Once the Kids Are Grown* (The Taunton Press, 2005) by Todd Lawson and Tom Connor. Photos by Rob Karosis.

Floor-plan drawing: Christine Erikson

