



Just south of San Francisco's famed gay enclave, the Castro, is Noe Valley. The once working-class neighborhood turned upper-middle-class Mecca is dotted with artsy boutiques and organic bistros, simultaneously populated by young families pushing strollers and urban professionals nursing lattes. Punctuated by dramatic hills and classic Victorian homes, it's San Francisco to the core.

One of those picturesque Victorians belongs to Jorge Morales and his partner of 26 years, Jim Dilley, executive director of the AIDS Health Project. Avid entertainers, the couple decided in 2001 to remodel their kitchen. It was no ordinary remodel, though. There was a problem.

"In Europe, when you remodel a house that is 200, 300 or 400 years old, it's not only very costly, but it's impossible because the plans are not there," says Morales, who is originally from Argentina. He said the same situation often rears its head in San Francisco, much of which was destroyed by a massive earthquake and fire in 1906. "Our house is from before 1906," he says. "The plans were destroyed by the fire."

So, Morales developed a European solution to a very European problem. "What they do is they bring the total opposite in," he says. "You can have this beautiful, brilliant house, and then suddenly bring in some steel, iron or some concrete or something that will be such contrast that it will bring clash."

Whether you're talking about clothing or construction, clashing is risky business. So Morales sought out an architect skilled in making "clash" complementary. He found that expert in local architect and entrepreneur Mark Brand.



The Making of an Architect

Mark Brand didn't always want to heal buildings. There was a time—long before he began mending structural wounds—he wanted to heal people. "It's so absurd and small-townish, but I was very influenced by television," says Brand, who grew up west of San Francisco in Lodi, Calif., a conservative town by California standards. One of his favorite shows was *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, and the show is part of what inspired him to pursue medicine.

"I started out as pre-med at the University of California at Berkeley, thinking I was going to practice general medicine in my hometown," Brand says. Ultimately, however, Brand emulated not the fictional Welby, but his own older brother, Brian, a Seattle-based architect. By Brand's sophomore year, Brian was already a practicing architect and gave him the impetus he needed to change course. "When I went to visit him, it was always, 'Mark, do you want to see some of my work?' The style of architecture in Seattle—the Pacific Northwest style—is really inspiring; the sites for which his buildings were designed were usually filled with redwood and evergreen trees. It was amazing that my brother was the author of all this stuff."

Wanting to author his own buildings, Brand enrolled in a handful of architecture courses at Berkeley and "fell in love" with them, he says. He took a year off from school in 1974 to travel through Europe, further cementing his newfound love for buildings. When he returned, he set aside his microscope once and for all to finish his bachelor's degree in architecture.

The Heart of the House: Its Spine

When Morales met Brand, he liked him instantly. "He's almost naïve in his purity as a man," he says of Brand. "He's an incredibly polite person and absolutely open-minded, which is very hard to find in someone who has been that long in the profession." Morales insisted on interviewing Brand for the first time, not at his office, but over lunch. "It was one of those restaurants where the tablecloth was paper and right away we started drawing on the tablecloth." What emerged beneath their place settings was a concept that intrigued Morales: the creation of a tall wall—what Brand calls the project's "spine"—to connect the old, Victorian house to the more contemporary addition. Off that wall would hang Morales' new, modernist kitchen, a new powder room, a combination library/dining room and a series of decks—one of which Brand calls the "catwalk"—overlooking Noe Valley.



"Ultimately that became what we call the parti of the project, or the organizing principle,"

Brand says. That parti gave birth to a 344-square-foot space filled with three sets of 8-ft. French doors, stainless steel appliances, slate flooring, cherry cabinets, granite countertops and lots and lots of glass. "It's a very clean expression of modernism, and modernism is pretty timeless," Brand says. "It doesn't use a lot of stylistic devices that you're going to later say are 'so 2002.'"



Formal dining room and library



Existing living room and parlor

Humble Beginnings

Upon graduating from Berkeley in 1977, Brand moved to San Francisco and went to work designing hospitals for a local architecture firm. He stayed for five years before seeking out more creative pastures. "I found that to be sort of a stultifying experience," he says. Brand, 52, still carries the idealism and naïveté of a 22-year-old. "I'm one of those determined people and no matter how tough the going is, I think I'm going to persevere. And even though I didn't love that job right from the start, and we weren't designing the types of buildings that I like—designing hospitals is one of the most conservative areas of architecture—I actually thought I would influence this 180-person firm to be more like me."

He was wrong, of course, and lost his job in 1983, the result of corporate downsizing. Unemployed and surviving on proceeds from profit sharing, Brand—a man of eclectic interests, including music, gardening, history and even tropical fish breeding—was considering recording a rock album when he was asked to interview for a position designing restaurants and small shops. "I got a phone call from someone who was interested in hiring me—I think he caught me in my bathrobe watching *Leave It To Beaver* reruns," he says. "I thought, 'You know, I don't think this album is going to happen; I'd better go for this job interview.'"

He went and he was hired. A few years later, however, Brand again fell victim to corporate downsizing. "When that happened," he says, "I decided pretty quickly to start my own firm."

Money Talks

The largest obstacle for architects in San Francisco, according to Brand, is not designing buildings to be earthquake-friendly, as those who live east of The Golden State might expect, but rather designing them to be budget-friendly. Morales' and Dille's kitchen remodel was no exception.

"Any architect who works in San Francisco can deal with the earthquake stuff relatively easily," Brand says. "But just like San Francisco is one of the most expensive places to buy, it's one of the most expensive places to build."

According to Brand, people experience sticker shock when they move from more rural areas, where a six-bedroom house might cost only \$200,000, to San Francisco, where a remodeling project alone can total \$500,000. Good architects, he says, understand the sting of that sticker shock—and the best can soothe it.

"A good architect can get competitive bids from qualified contractors and help to value engineer the project if it ends up costing more than the client can afford," Brand says. That means making cuts and finding substitutions, resulting in a project that is both attractive and affordable.

Building a Business

Brand started his own business, Mark Brand Architecture, in 1986 with a business card and no clients. He worked out of his apartment in the Castro—the same one he still lives in 20 years

later—with just a few employees, and started by doing decks and small one-room additions. “The growth of my firm was sort of a history of going from a small, not-feeling-like-it-was-legitimate business,” he says, “to incrementally hiring a staff, getting a real office, getting a secretary, getting health insurance, getting a payroll service—all the little things that you do to go from feeling like you’re just a hole-in-the-wall, barely-hanging-on-by-your-fingernails operation to becoming a bigger and bigger, more successful company.”

Today, Mark Brand Architecture is a five-person operation with an impressively eclectic portfolio that includes every variety of rehab, renovation and new home construction. Brand does traditional and he does modern, and he tackles each with equal gusto. “I’m becoming more and more of a centrist,” he says. “I like to do things that I think will be timeless, but I still want to play with what’s contemporary. You can’t help it; it’s just no fun if you don’t.”

The business side wasn’t always fun for Brand, though. When he first started working, he kept his sexual orientation under wraps. “With a lot of clients it’s an obvious thing,” he says, “but it holds you back somehow psychologically.” Somewhere along the way he came out of the closet. “Being a gay architect, I feel, in certain ways has been a struggle, like it probably is for many gay people succeeding in business,” he says. “Certain networking things, for instance, would be so easy if I were married and had a wife and kids.”

He overcame his hesitation by changing his perception of himself and his industry. “People aren’t going to hire someone just because they are or aren’t gay,” he says. “You’ve got to be competitive in terms of quality and style.”

A Home of His Own

Brand completed construction supervision on Morales’ and Dilley’s Noe Valley kitchen in 2005, four years after they’d begun designing it. And when he finished, the couple had not only a new space in which to cook, but new friends to cook for: Brand and his partner of seven years, also named Mark. “The chemistry was there to start with,” Morales says of his relationship with Brand. “[It was clear] we were going to become friends.”

Today, the couples often share the fruits of Brand’s labor together over dinner and conversation. “In the future, if we decide to buy something in the country, for sure Mark will be the architect who will build it,” Morales says.

For now though, Brand is focused on a project of his own: a Ranch-style home in Oakland, Calif., that he recently purchased with his partner. “Our plans for the new house are to work on it over a period of years,” Brand says. “The genius in the project, if I am successful, will be balancing the existing architecture with the edgier, more modern elements I plan to introduce.” Those elements include a new kitchen and a remodeled “rumpus” room downstairs that Brand says will increase the flow from the interior of the home to the exterior. The new yard will house modern landscaping, including contemporary fencing, zinc planters, water features and tall grasses.

The first project, however, will be the master bathroom. Brand plans to enlarge and redesign it with a combination of exotic hardwood veneers, Italian glass mosaic tile and natural stone—either limestone or marble. “A wall-hung toilet is a must,” he says, “and beautiful lighting, which still will need to comply with California’s strict energy codes.” He’ll add a designer bathtub, courtesy of French designer Philippe Starck, a shower with a frameless glass door and, at the vanity, a wall-mounted faucet with a large, top-mounted porcelain sink.

“A lot of my most inspired thoughts come to me in the shower in the morning,” Brand says. With a new bathroom as his muse, the world can look forward to some truly awesome architecture.

For more information, visit <http://www.markbrandarchitecture.com>

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