

Architecture by Andrew Skurman, AIA  
Interior Design by Suzanne Tucker, ASID  
Text by Penelope Rowlands  
Before Photography by Jamie Hadley  
After Photography by Mark Darley

# NOB HILL RENEWAL

REPHRASING INTERIORS  
WITH A FRENCH ACCENT  
IN SAN FRANCISCO



BEFORE

A San Francisco apartment in a Beaux Arts building was given a classic French look. ABOVE: The living room's plaster walls were replaced by raised French paneling.

**T**he word *makeover* doesn't apply. When interior designer Suzanne Tucker and architect Andrew Skurman overhauled a vast apartment on San Francisco's Nob Hill, the pair left nothing of the original behind. "There's not one square inch of what was there before," Skurman notes. "We replaced everything. We took away all the existing walls. We even put new moldings around the exterior doors."

Located at the crest of the hill, the Neoclassical structure, built in 1914, holds its own among such venerable

RIGHT: Empire table, Sotheby's. Fauteuil, Christie's. Commode, Foster-Gwin. Low table, Michael Taylor Designs. Candlestick lamp, Kentshire. Sofa and pillow fabrics, Brunschwig & Fils; center pillow, Lotus. Ottoman fabric, Old World Weavers. Jim Thompson draperies.



AFTER







neighbors as the stately Pacific-Union Club and the more grandiose Mark Hopkins and Fairmont hotels. “The building is in a French style,” Skurman says. “It has wonderful curved bays and French doors looking onto wrought iron balconies.” But he and Tucker felt that the apartment, with its English-style crown moldings, didn’t live up to the grandeur of the façade. “The apartment was trying to be French, but it wasn’t doing a very good job,” he says. “The quality wasn’t there.”

Both designer and architect loved the building’s curved corners, and they resolved to continue that shape indoors. Ovals and circles became a recurring design theme, one that asserts itself right at the front door. Inspired by an eighteenth-century room in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, the once angular entrance hall is now perfectly round. Even the dark brown cabochons in its slab marble floor are boldly round instead of the usual diamond shape. To simplify the space, two columns flanking the front door were removed. “The idea was to make it more tailored, more French,” says Tucker.

The entrance “sets the tone for the shape of the other rooms,” Skurman adds. He and Tucker brought to several

spaces a circularity that they felt should have been there all along. Hallways that were once “short and choppy,” as Tucker puts it, became curvilinear; so did the living room, which had been partly squared off. While dramatic, a rounded room can be problematic when it comes to furniture placement. Tucker’s solution was to keep furniture to a minimum and “to leave a lot of open space,” she explains. “We didn’t want it to be all cluttered.”

Tucker and her client, who was new to San Francisco, were of one mind about the interior. “I wanted something very French, very European,” the client says. “Something in keeping with the building.” Both were enamored of Coco Chanel’s sumptuous Paris apartment on the rue Cambon (see *Architectural Digest*, September 1988), with its tawny palette, its ambers, blacks and golds—an interior Tucker calls “very rich and very inviting.” The client, a striking redhead with alabaster skin, also wanted to be surrounded by shades that would complement her own high-voltage coloring. She was after bold lines, with nothing too fussy or feminine.

If the client coveted wonderful antiques, ones that captured Chanel’s distinctive style, she also wanted a certain



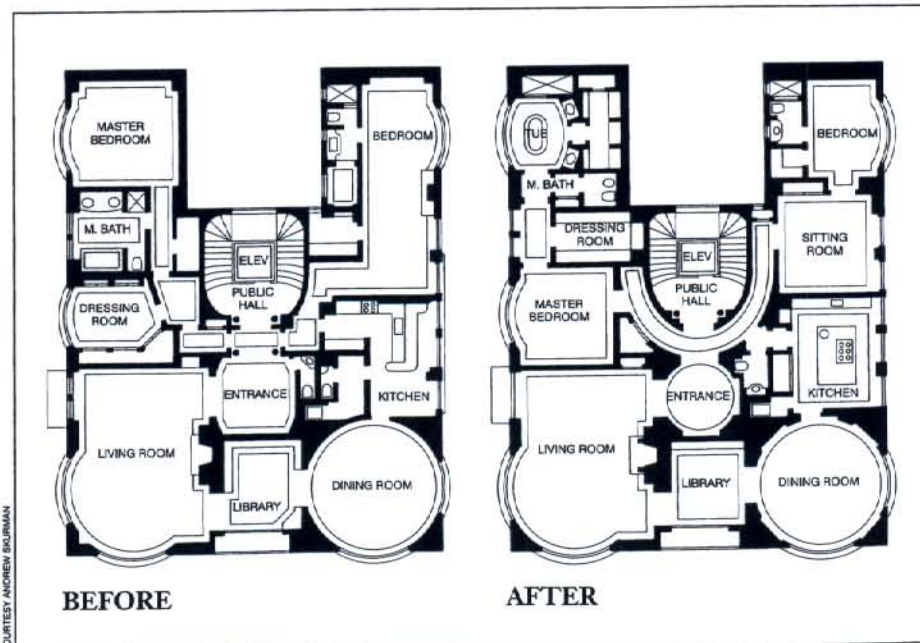
BEFORE

informality. “I didn’t want a showplace, I wanted a place to live. It’s okay with me if you kick off your shoes and put your feet up on the low table. It’s okay to eat pizza in the sitting room.”

She and Tucker shopped for furniture in San Francisco and Los Angeles, in Paris and New York. There’s an uncluttered feel to these rooms, a sense of luxuriating in space, that seems distinctly modern. And the roominess allows ample space for some of the ornate antiques, from the living room’s Italian Rococo bombe commode that once be-



“The palette came from the city’s colors at night—neutral, with flattering tones,” says interior designer Suzanne Tucker (above). ABOVE RIGHT: Architect Andrew Skurman redrafted the floor plan to make the apartment “become coherent in its curvilinear sensibility.”



BEFORE

AFTER

TOP: Skurman added flat recesses in the round dining room for the antiques. OPPOSITE: “I think of this as a night apartment,” says the client. Baroque consoles and a pair of Louis Philippe candelabra are from Christie’s. Bergamo chair fabric. Clarence House drapery fabric.





AFTER



longed to Albert Hadley to an ebony-lacquered Louis XV *bureau plat* in the neighboring library.

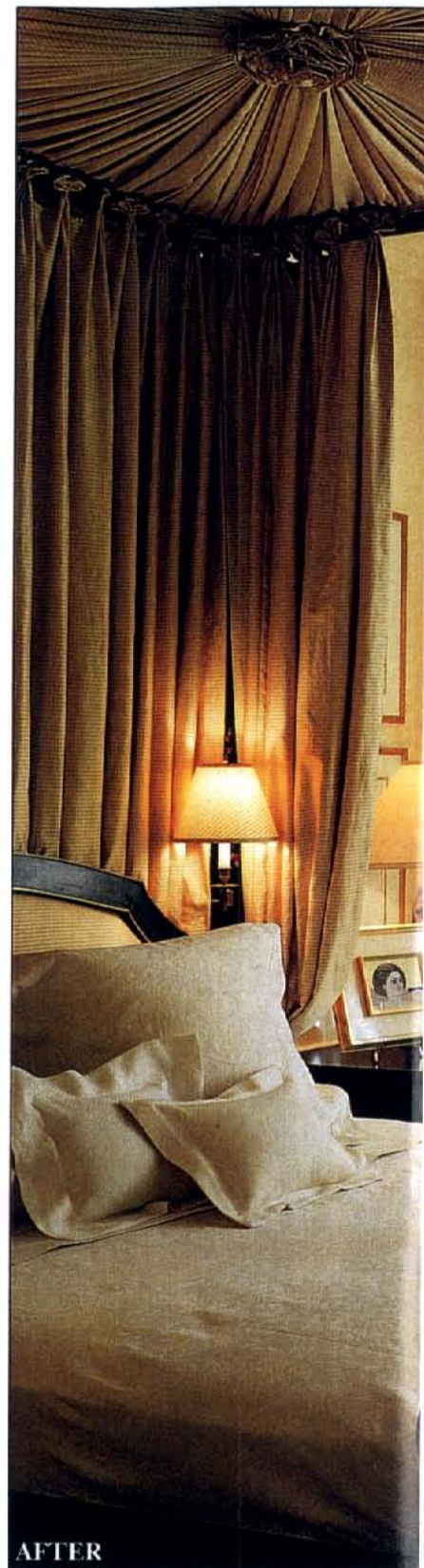
An artful simplicity reigns throughout. What the client calls an “awful old Victorian fireplace” in the living room was replaced by a chestnut Régence mantelpiece. The English-style moldings gave way to Rococo-inspired ones with more modern straight lines and fewer fanciful motifs. The brand-new parquetry floors, laboriously distressed, might have been in place for centuries. “I wanted the second grade of wood, not the first, to get some of the knots, the details of old boards,” Tucker says.



Window treatments were simplified in order to draw attention to the ever-changing cityscape.

“The client told us that the apartment would be used for entertaining,” Tucker says. As such, the round dining room was crucially important. Aiming for “a Coco Chanel feel,” client and designer envisioned dark lacquered walls. The exact shade, though, proved elusive until Tucker came across the perfect deep brown in the form of a bar of bittersweet Swiss chocolate. The gold ceiling (by local colorist Willem Racké) was created by distressing and glazing ind-

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ABOVE LEFT: A sitting room was carved out of a former long, narrow bedroom. LEFT: “New moldings helped make the apartment seem French,” says Skurman. Grasscloth wallcovering from Blumenthal. Khotan area rug, Beauvais Carpets. Bergamo drapery fabric.





“THE APARTMENT WAS TRYING TO BE FRENCH, BUT IT WASN’T DOING A VERY GOOD JOB. THE QUALITY WASN’T THERE.”

OPPOSITE TOP: The master bedroom had been an awkward bath and dressing room. ABOVE: Evans & Gerst chairs. Clarence House fabric for draperies and bed hanging; Lee Jofa lining and canopy. Bedside table, Rose Tarlow. Swing-arm lamp, Christopher Norman.



Concave mirrored vanities continue the theme of curves in the new master bath, which had been the master bedroom. The marble floor, by Fox Marble, has an inlaid Régence-inspired pattern. Chandelier and sconces from Marvin Alexander. Fixtures by P. E. Guerin.





## NOB HILL RENEWAL

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vidual sheets of white-gold leaf. Equal attention was given to the radial-herringbone-patterned floor; inlaid with ebony at the perimeter, it culminates in a star shape at its center. "The room is magical at night," the client says.

The cove lighting devised by Skurman combines with an ornate, Louis XV-style chandelier to create illumination as subtle as starlight. (An electric pulley system allows easy access to the fixture's two dozen candles.) Thanks to copious amounts of gilt—on the base of the Italian Baroque consoles, on the arms and legs of the contemporary chairs—the entire room seems to glow.

The most dramatic structural alterations took place in the master suite, which Skurman and Tucker turned on its head, designwise, to arrive at a more logical flow. "One of the problems was that first you entered the dressing room, then the bath, then the master bedroom," Skurman says. "It wasn't a good sequence. We were able to change that to a much better-functioning order." Now one moves from bedroom to dressing area to bath. Tucker and Skurman also reconfigured an oddly shaped

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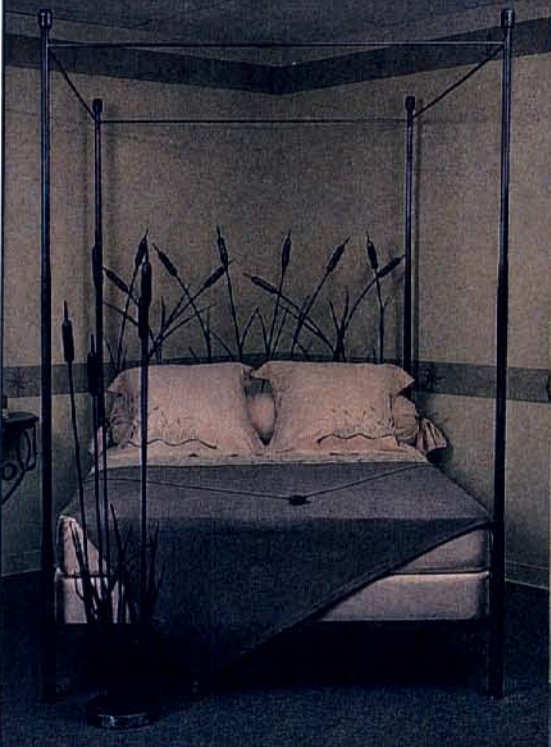
guest bedroom—"It was a bowling alley," Tucker says—into a sitting room and bedroom.

In both bedroom suites, the resulting view that opens from one room to another amply demonstrates Skurman's theory that "when Neoclassical work is done well, it just sits right; it doesn't grab your attention."


There's a sense of inevitability about the place, as though it has finally arrived where it was always meant to be. "It was a hodgepodge between English and French," says Skurman. "Now it looks like a great old French apartment." □

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