



# Contemporary family living in Noe Valley

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Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle



IMAGE 1 OF 11

The home of architects Robert Edmonds and Vivian Lee in Noe Valley.

After designing many houses in the Bay Area over the last decade, architects Robert Edmonds and

Vivian Lee were excited to construct a home for themselves and their two young boys. Their Noe Valley site was a mixed blessing: They had the rare opportunity to build from scratch, but also had to stick to a tight construction timeline and a limited budget.

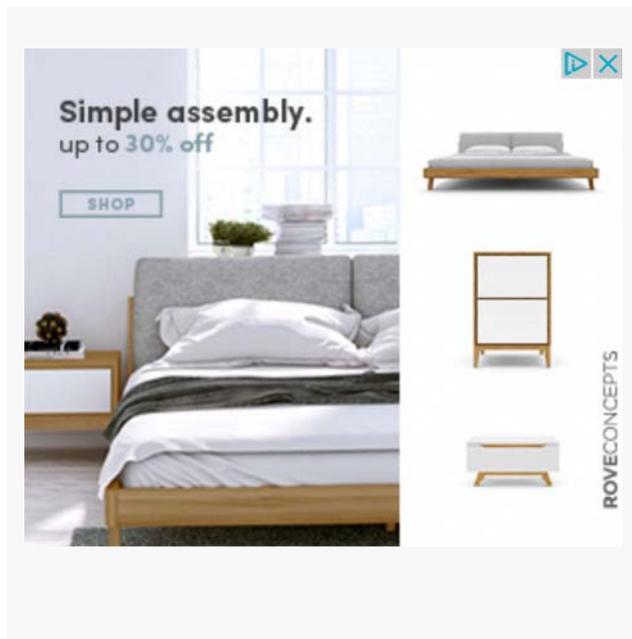
Despite the constraints, their recently completed home is highly customized and finely detailed, thanks to strategic design decisions. “It’s an architect’s DIY project,” says Edmonds, who, together with Lee, runs a residential architecture firm in the Mission.

Their house saga proved to be more intense than most. In 2006, when Edmonds and Lee first moved to San Francisco from New York City to launch their own firm and start a family, they lived in Twin Peaks. After getting to know the city and its microclimates, they triangulated on Noe Valley, enticed by its sunny weather as well as its proximity to schools and public transportation.

After unsuccessfully bidding on several properties, in 2012 they found one that had repelled other takers: a 750-square-foot, one-bedroom dwelling from the 1950s that qualified for demolition, which would require braving the city’s arduous permitting process. Undaunted, they sold their previous home, moved into the rickety cottage and started designing something that could be approved and built as quickly as possible — while still holding true to their design ambitions. “It’s like architectural Twister, where your arm is dealing with one thing while your body is dealing with another,” Edmonds says. “We tried to make it all coalesce into a unified project.”

In the end, the process would take four years, including 2½ years in permitting. The architects built a duplex: The top two levels, which total 2,800 square feet, comprise their home, while the ground floor is a 1,000-square-foot rental unit that could be inhabited by their parents down the line.

The main house feels like a SoMa loft, with a double-height entry — you can look down from the



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kitchen to the front door. The lower level contains the master suite, a shared bedroom for their two sons and a media room/guest room. Above, the kitchen, dining area and living room make up one large space that opens almost entirely to terraces in the front and back. Keeping this level as concise as possible, the powder room is hidden within a wall of kitchen cabinetry.



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle



The bedroom opens onto the deck in the Lee-Edmonds home.

To start off on the right foot with their neighbors and the planning department, Edmonds and Lee were careful to design the home so that it was in proportion to the surrounding buildings, even if it had a different aesthetic. The structure doesn't jut above its neighbors and has a sloped roof, which helps it blend in. "We wanted to interpret a modern home in the context of this neighborhood, so that it could be creative and accessible at the same time," says Lee. Because the building further up the hill is split into two structures from front to back, the architects matched the terracing on their end, creating a slight split level on the main floor.

An example of how creativity flourishes under constraints, the dining area steps down to the living room, providing additional seating for large gatherings. "A lot of tech offices have stadium seating, and it is a very communal experience," Lee says. "Since we had a natural drop of 30 inches, it was an

opportunity to integrate seating into the architecture.”

To minimize time spent under construction, the architects used prefabricated components wherever possible. For example, the walls of built-in cabinetry in the bedrooms are actually Ikea Pax closets; Edmonds and Lee just had to make sure that they designed the spaces in multiples of 39.5 inches — the standard width of the Pax system. (However, the kitchen cabinetry is custom, by Sozo Studio.)

The result is a pure architectural vision that readily accommodates day-to-day chaos and the occasional smudge. While most people wouldn't equate “urban loft living” with family life, the architects extoll the sense of connection that it brings. “We want to be close to our kids, so we wanted a fluid house with very little boundaries,” Lee says, “and this house achieves that for us.”

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## Material secrets

In modern architecture, the more functional something is, the more beautiful it is. Here are some ideas from Vivian Lee and Robert Edmonds that you can use to bring functional beauty into your home.

**Island living:** For their kitchen island, the couple selected a high-tech engineered material called Fenix, which is incredibly durable and doesn't retain fingerprints. “We use a lot of precious materials for our clients, which we love, but since this is our own house and we have two boys, we wanted to have sleek interiors that are also low maintenance,” Lee says.

**Kitchen cabinet:** The kitchen features one of the latest innovations in modern cabinetry: doors that open and then slide perpendicularly into the wall. (This style of cabinet has different names depending on the manufacturer: Sozo Studio calls it the “Bento Box,” Boffi calls it the “Hide.”)

**No-fuss facade:** The contemporary facade is made



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle



Entry of the Noe Valley home of architects Vivian Lee and Robert Edmonds.

of Azek window trim, which comes in different widths. The white material is integrally colored and never has to be repainted.

**Finished floors:** For floors that feel more organic, Edmonds and Lee selected engineered white oak from Admonter, which has a brushed finish that brings out the texture of the wood. “Most engineered wood flooring has that plastic feel to it,” Lee says.

— *L.L.*

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