

Vilades, Pilar, "Park Place", T MAGAZINE, 29 March 2010.



Park Place

A lean, light-filled house in San Francisco provides a thoughtful backdrop for an art collection.



Inserting a new house into a once-industrial neighborhood isn't always an easy task. Designing something exponentially fancier than its surroundings makes no sense, but going the faux-former-factory route is just as bad. Luke Ogrydziak and Zoe Prillinger of Ogrydziak/Prillinger Architects, a 10-year-old San Francisco firm, navigated a graceful middle ground in their design for this 6,000 square-foot, three-story house and private art gallery in the city's South of Market

district. Its plain, rugged materials, elegant proportions and openness to its surroundings make it an asset to its setting -but a suitably unobtrusive one.

The house is located on South Park, an elliptical green space that was built in the 1850s as the private garden for a high-end residential neighborhood. In the years after the 1906 earthquake, the neighborhood evolved into one of light industrial buildings, and later became known as the epicenter of the dot-com boom in the 1990s. Today, South Park is ringed with a quirky mixture of apartment and low-rise commercial buildings, giving it a small-town feeling in the midst of a big city. And since planning ordinances encourage ground-floor commercial space in the neighborhood, the architects and the owners of the house - a virologist and a mathematician who collect contemporary work by women artists - decided to make the house's ground floor a private gallery. Because it is not open to walk-in traffic, the gallery's glass front is translucent rather than transparent; passers-by cannot see in, but they appear as ghostly silhouettes to those inside the space.

The gallery's clean, white interior is broken by the exterior of a massive blued-steel stairwell that leads to the two residential floors above. A dark, contained volume, the stairwell opens at the second floor into an airy, light-filled space that contains the house's living, dining and kitchen areas, which are located on either side of a service core that houses closets and a powder room. (The stairs, no longer enclosed, continue up to a

roof terrace and are illuminated by light monitors, or saw-toothed skylights, that provide indirect daylight.) The third floor is devoted to bedrooms and a study.

As in the gallery below, the living areas of the house were conceived to serve the display of the owners' art. "Height and light were really important," Prillinger noted. Ogrydziak added that whenever possible, things like closet doors were located on the back sides of the core structure to free up as much wall space as possible. The expansive feeling of these floors is enhanced by full-height sliding glass doors at each end; on the front, they open onto the park, and at the back they reveal a grittier urban view. At the second and third-floor levels, the street facade of the house is a delicate, geometric tracery of steel sections that form a screen for shallow balconies, and create a virtual zone of privacy, if not a literal one. Designed on the computer using an algorithm that was developed in the 1930s for terrain modeling, the screen is a 21st-century riff on the traditional bay window, a feature of San Francisco Victorian architecture that planning codes encourage even in new construction.

This gesture epitomizes a design approach that Prillinger called "mathematical organic," which results in proportions and details that add a welcome degree of warmth to the interiors. "People think it's going to be cold and uncomfortable with all the hard materials," she added, "and they're surprised to find that it's not."