

A woman with long brown hair in a ponytail, wearing a dark blue baseball cap, sunglasses, and a dark blue t-shirt with white sleeves, is standing on a ladder and harvesting lemons from a tree. The tree is full of bright yellow lemons and green leaves. The background shows a clear blue sky and other trees.

HOME+GARDEN
DESIGN

SPRING 2023

*Sharing
the bounty*

Volunteers help homeowners harvest their backyard fruit to feed those in need

PAGE 6

Under construction for 16 years? See how this house turned out.

PAGE 19

How to flip your house to all-electric

PAGE 14

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AlmanacNews.com, MountainViewOnline.com, PaloAltoOnline.com
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ON THE COVER

Harvest Village volunteer Jen Petroff collects lemons from a ladder in Los Altos in February. Photo by Devin Roberts.



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Old Becomes New

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Sharing the bounty

When the citrus trees in Sharon Hudak's backyard in Palo Alto's Palo Verde neighborhood begin to bow under the weight of ripening fruit, she doesn't fret about what to do with the abundance of lemons, grapefruits and tangerines that is far too much for her to consume by herself.

At 76, she doesn't feel comfortable climbing ladders, so Hudak said she calls Village Harvest, a nonprofit volunteer organization that connects people who have fruit trees with volunteers who can harvest the fruit and deliver it to local food banks. The program is a welcome relief for fruit tree owners tired of tossing out apples, plums, lemons, apricots and an over-abundance of other fruits from their yards.

"It's just an amazing thing," Hudak said. "What a good way

to use up the excess fruit — it's a much better use to give it to someone who can actually use it."

Volunteers have come several times to Hudak's yard to harvest fruit. Now that she's signed up for the program, the organization reaches out to her each season, and they choose a harvest date together.

Hudak is one of many local residents who rely on the program. Through the organization, volunteers are dispatched to harvest fruit from non-commercial orchards as well as smaller backyards up and

Volunteers lend a hand harvesting unwanted backyard fruit that's donated to those in need

BY GRACE DOERFLER | PHOTOS BY DEVIN ROBERTS

down the Peninsula. Priority is given to residents ages 70 over, those who are physically unable to harvest, and properties with large quantities of fruit.

Craig Diserens, co-founder and executive director of Village Harvest, who launched the program in 2001 with a community picking event in Palo Alto, said volunteers conduct as many as 200 harvests every year.

The region's year-round mild weather makes it an especially fruitful place for fresh produce, he said.

Diserens said prior to launching the nonprofit, he never thought about just how much food was going uneaten in neighborhoods up and down the Peninsula.

"It turns out in neighborhoods all over Silicon Valley and the Bay Area — it was there all along, but I just didn't notice it — an amazing abundance of fruit trees, just sort of hidden all over," he said. "It became very, very obvious, very quickly, that there was a nearly infinite amount of fruit."

When volunteers conducted their first community harvest in April 2001, collecting citrus from nine Palo Alto homes, Diserens was impressed by the yield: 1,200 pounds of fresh fruit in one morning. That number pales in comparison with what Village Harvest gathers now. In 2022, the organization donated more than a quarter million pounds

of fruit to local food banks.

Palo Alto resident Christel Casjens has been volunteering with Village Harvest since the organization's start.

"Food causes are just very near and dear to my heart," she said. "So it's a perfect blend for me of getting outside, getting active, and getting people involved."

She's traveled up and down the Peninsula helping to harvest fruit from orchards with other volunteers, and she's also helped out with small neighborhood events.

"You meet just amazing people with big hearts," Casjens said. "People are so happy to give, to share."

For Casjens, there's nothing quite like spending a morning out volunteering at a harvest.

"The smell of an orchard when the fruit is ripe is just surreal, sublime," she said.

She's seen firsthand the impact that Village Harvest has on the community, too. Casjens said she had always understood that food security is an important issue, but when she started bringing produce donations to local food banks, she gained a whole new perspective on the impact that produce sharing can have in local communities.

"You get really inspired," she said. "I walk away and it's like, I don't feel quite so hopeless."

During the pandemic, interest in volunteering with Village Harvest soared. The outdoor work meant that Village Harvest could continue its mission with minimal health risks.



Left: Harvest Village volunteers gather oranges from a residence in Los Altos in February. Above: Harvest Village volunteers fill a van with freshly picked oranges and lemons. Below: Harvest Village event leader Karen Hurst checks for lemons at the top of a tree.

"In that peak time, people often had to wait three to four months between harvests depending on the location," Diserens said.

But even as more people wanted to volunteer, partner organizations were closing their doors in response to the pandemic, especially small, local food assistance programs. That meant Village Harvest had fewer places to send fruit donations. Diserens said the impact of COVID-19 shutdowns is still apparent today.

"Some of the food agencies have never restored their operations in the same way, and we can't deliver to them," he said.

Volunteer interest is still significantly higher than it was prior to the pandemic. Because harvest sign-ups still fill quickly, Diserens said he encourages people to harvest and donate fruit directly from their backyards to local food agencies.

Village Harvest maintains a map on its website of partner organizations where residents can donate fruit from their backyard trees. Diserens said many people don't realize that they can share their excess produce, but Village Harvest's website has instructions for how and where to get involved, so more people can reduce food waste and share their abundance of backyard produce with their neighbors.

"It's great for your tree, and it's good for your own spirits," he said.

Hudak said she would recommend the home harvest program to other homeowners with fruit trees. The volunteers are cheerful, kind and efficient, she said.

"The beauty of it is that it helps everyone involved," she said. ■

Grace Doerfler is a former editorial intern for Embarcadero Media.

HOW TO SHARE YOUR BACKYARD BOUNTY

Fruit Sharing DIY: Tree owners interested in harvesting and donating fruit themselves can find community fruit drop-off locations at villageharvest.org/dropoff.

Harvest assistance: Tree owners who are physically unable to harvest their own trees because of age or disability and need assistance can call 888-378-4841.

Our Neighborhood Harvest: Neighborhood groups interested in organizing fruit tree harvests of entire blocks and neighborhoods can call 888-378-4841 or fill out a contact form at villageharvest.org/contact.

Volunteer opportunities: For information about various volunteer opportunities go to villageharvest.org/volunteer-opportunities.



Remodeling in a flood zone

Rather than go up 6 feet, Palo Alto couple opts to expand house in phases

BY CAROL BLITZER

Laurence and Anantha Kancherla wanted to expand their Palo Alto midcentury home to accommodate their growing family. With two teenage boys, they needed more space, and they wanted to go all-electric. Seemed like a fairly easy project — until they got started.

With the home situated in a flood zone, the duo discovered that they'd need to do their remodel in phases, or else be required to raise the home 6 feet. Following Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) guidelines, Palo Alto requires that a home be raised above the floodplain for remodels that cost 50% or more of the value of an existing home. Proceeding with smaller projects in phases would let them stay below that threshold, even though the total remodel would end up costing about 4% more.

And that was just the beginning of their challenges. The pandemic hit right as they planned to start construction, adding delays to the project.

Laurence Kancherla said they considered just selling at one point. After looking around, however, they concluded that it made more sense to stay put and transform the Midtown neighborhood house they'd lived in since 2014.

Working with architect Tali Hardonag, they were set to begin Phase I in April 2020 — and had even rented a nearby house for a year so they could move out during construction. The pandemic shutdown forced them to halt the project and cancel their plans to move into the rental. After a three-month delay (waiting for building permits from the city, lining up workers, etc.), the project got back on track. They found



Both the counter and backsplash in the family's renovated kitchen, above, are made of quartzite, with cabinets and LVP SKEMA flooring by European Cabinets and Design Studio. The Thermador refrigerator and freezer columns are hidden behind wood panels. At right, large sliding doors give easy access from the kitchen to the courtyard. Photos courtesy Creative Shot Photography.

another rental, moved out and began their remodel.

"We didn't want to do a tear-down," Kancherla explained. They wanted to add space and improve the house by getting rid of gas, adding insulation and improving the flow.

In Phase I, they expanded the living room by pushing it out 6 feet and removing the fireplace. The slope of the roofline was transformed from a gable to a shed roof, Hardonag said, which then enabled them to add clerestory



windows to bring in more light.

A brand-new kitchen was added between the living room and the old garage, and the original kitchen became the fourth bedroom. A tiny office wedged

between bedrooms now contains the laundry room, with a deep sink and IKEA cabinets. The former laundry closet is now part of a bedroom.

Mechanical infrastructure for



One enters the home through a custom-made, glass-and-steel front door that opens onto the breezeway connecting the new office and the family room.

Goal of project: Improve space and flow, add a bedroom and powder room, new kitchen, go all-electric

Unanticipated issues: Pandemic shutdown caused delays in permitting, construction, materials; need to level floors because of sinking slabs

Year house built: 1955

Size of home, lot: Before 1,400 sf, plus 340 sf garage, 3 BR, 2 BA; After 2,325 sf, plus 220 sf garage, 4 BR, 2.5 BA; on 6,500 sf lot

Time to complete: About two years: Phase I — 9 months; Phase II — 10 months

Budget: More than \$1M

RESOURCES:

Architect: Tali Hardonag, Palo Alto, 650-678-5941

Building contractor: Humberto Barrios, BWB Builders, Inc., San Jose, 408-287-4886, bnwbuild.com/contact/

Cabinets, flooring: European Cabinets and Design Studio, Palo Alto, 650-843-0901, europeancabinets.com

Interior design: Lucile Glessner, Saratoga, 408-462-9987, lucileglessnerdesign.com

Landscaping: Jared Vermeil Landscape Design, San Francisco, 415-522-1673

Lighting: Coast Lighting, Redwood City, 877-264-7089, coastlighting.com

Tile and countertops: Porcelanosa, San Jose, 408-467-9400, porcelanosa-usa.com; Bedrosians Tile and Stone, San Jose, 800-760-8453, bedrosians.com

The renovated bathroom features a heat-resistant Krion counter and a black towel warmer, above, as well as a curbless shower, left, with both rain and hand shower heads. The front of the home, below, is sided with Kebony, a durable, sustainable wood. The new entrance features a glass-and-steel door that opens to the breezeway and courtyard. Photos courtesy Creative Shot Photography.

heating water and the furnace, formerly near the dining room, was replaced with a heat pump air handler partly in the attic and outside (screened by walls of wood) and two tankless water heaters. That left space for an entry closet, as well as a wine closet facing the dining room. The original radiant floor heating system had long ago aged out of functionality, Hardonag added.

The new all-electric kitchen features a Bosch induction cooktop and dishwasher, Miele “speed oven” (microwave, convection, bake, broil) and a steam-combo oven, plus Thermador refrigerator and freezer columns. The counters and backsplash are quartzite.

(continued on page 10)

(continued from previous page)

Kancherla is especially happy with her new pullout tray from a usually inaccessible corner, and with the large island topped by black, honed granite where she can easily place a hot pot.

After about nine months, the family was able to move back in. They waited about six months to tackle Phase II, which involved converting the old garage to a media/family room, refining the primary bedroom suite to include a much larger bathroom, walk-in closet, skylights and replacement of a small window with a huge patio sliding door. A single-car garage and an office were added to the front of the house, and a breezeway connects that wing to the new family room.

With Phase II nearly complete, the family found themselves facing yet another delay: The final city permit sign-off was postponed for weeks because the Porcelanosa black tile wall



By changing the slope of the living-room roofline, the homeowners were able to incorporate clerestory windows for additional light. Photo courtesy Creative Shot Photography.

behind the bathtub couldn't be installed. Due to pandemic-related labor issues, the tile sat at the Port of Oakland waiting to be unloaded. The city finally gave the Kancherlas a Temporary Certificate of Occupancy that let them use the rest of the house, except the bathroom.

Today, one enters the home

through a custom-made, glass-and-steel front door that opens onto the breezeway connecting the new office and the family room. The central courtyard offers a space for morning coffee on Adirondack chairs, just outside the new kitchen.

"The landscaper did an amazing job tying everything

The backyard features artificial grass, along with drought-tolerant plantings, including fruitless olive trees.

together," Hardonag said.

Once the remodel was complete, that landscaper created a front space with a steel planter box and a screened area to hide the trash cans. Along the side is a row of lemon, mandarin and lime trees, ending with a bird-of-paradise. The backyard features artificial grass, along with drought-tolerant plantings, including fruitless olive trees. The patio offers plenty of space for a barbecue, table and benches and a seating area. ■

Freelance Writer Carol Blitzer can be emailed at carolblitzer@gmail.com.

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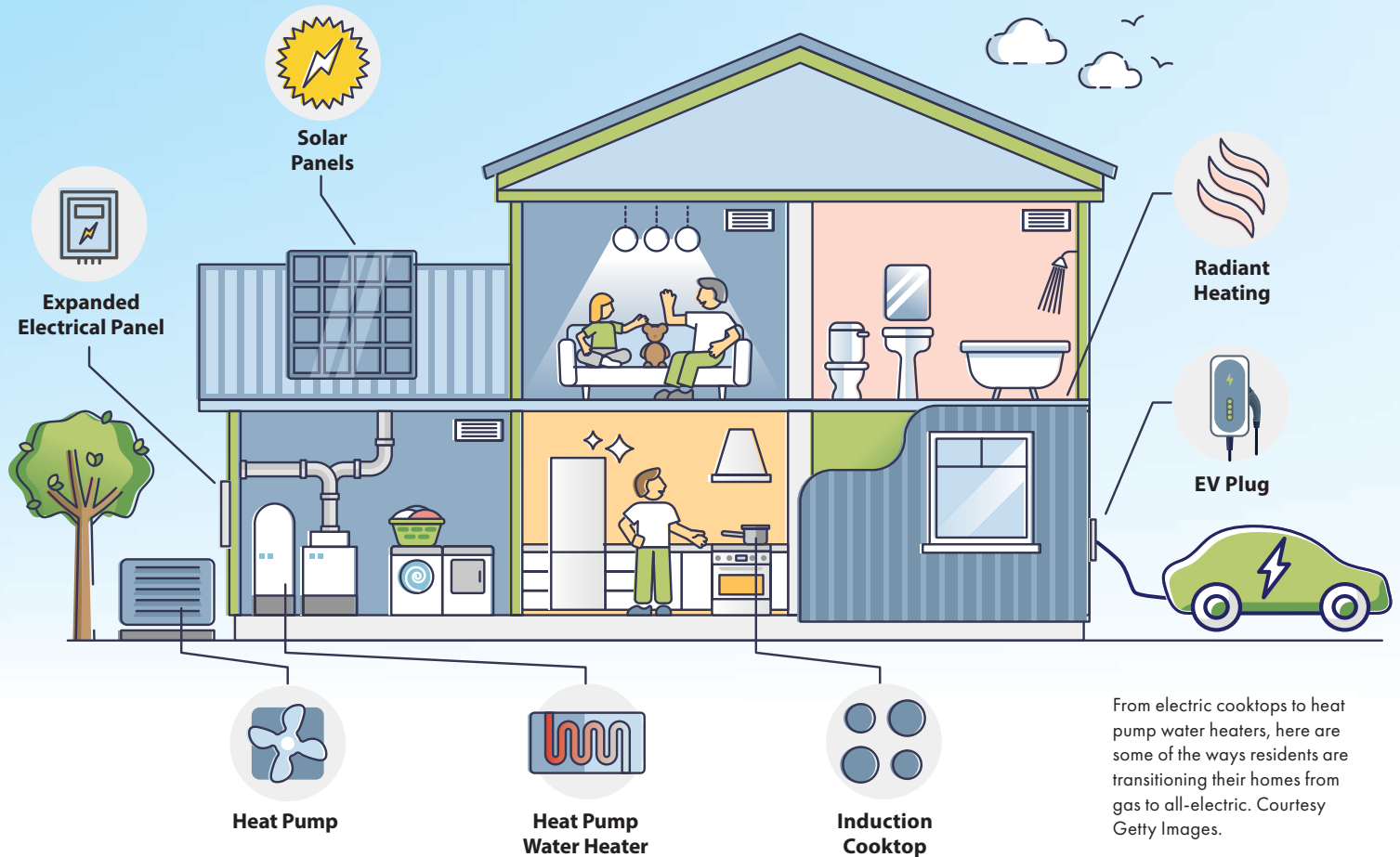
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From electric cooktops to heat pump water heaters, here are some of the ways residents are transitioning their homes from gas to all-electric. Courtesy Getty Images.

How to flip your house to all-electric

From a full-blown conversion to gradual changes, Peninsula residents share how they ditched their gas appliances

BY ALICIA MIES

After three major leaks from her gas-powered water heater and one too many furnace malfunctions, Amy Sung decided to take the leap and electrify her Palo Alto home. In the year-long process of remodeling her house, she went all out, replacing her old utilities with a radiant heating system, a heat pump water heater and electric appliances. Now, she can't stress the comfort and convenience of her all-electric home enough.

"My house is so much more comfortable than it was before and my overall utility bills are pretty much the same, if not less," she said. "Before, during the winter months, my utility bill easily went up to \$500 a month, and the heat went straight out the window. Now, with my radiant heat, it's so toasty to have a warm floor and the whole house warm."

While a full-blown renovation is nowhere near necessary, new laws aimed at phasing out gas appliances are already in effect in several Bay Area communities.

In March, the Bay Area Air Quality

Management District adopted new regulations that will make the region the first in the nation to ban sales and installation of new gas appliances in the district's jurisdictions, which includes Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara and Napa counties as well as portions of southwestern Solano and southern Sonoma counties.

Menlo Park already requires electric space heaters and hot water heaters in new construction, a law that took effect in January 2020. To date, however, the council has not mandated electrification in existing buildings, opting to instead rely on outreach, education and financial assistance for low-income residents.

Palo Alto also has an electric-only requirement for water and space heating in new developments. The city also launched another program this year to persuade residents to switch to heat pump water heaters, which use electricity to move heat from one place to another instead of generating

heat directly. The program aims to convert 1,000 customers to heat pump water heaters before 2024 through a streamlined approval process and on-bill financing that allows them to spread out payments for the new appliance. The program is off to a promising start, with 421 customers opting into it as of March 21, according to city staff.

For those interested in converting their homes, the mere prospect of electrification may still seem daunting. PG&E, The Switch Is On (a collaborative campaign to support clean energy in California) and Gold State Rebates, all provide tools, resources and incentives to go all-electric.

As part of its effort to wean residents off natural gas, Palo Alto offers the Home Efficiency Genie, a free electric energy consultation service. Paul Koepke, an adviser with the Genie program, said the first step to a green home is simply taking a look at your electrical panel.

'I think the gradual way is the best way for people who don't have the deep pockets or wads of cash they're willing to spend all at once.'

—Jim Barbera, Palo Alto resident

“There’s going to be additional electricity that your house may or may not be able to provide, so we recommend having an electrician look at the amperage and see if there is breaker space,” he said. “If the whole thing is full, there’s a really good chance that you’re going to need to upgrade your electrical panel.”

Once your amperage needs are met, you can start switching out gas appliances, Koepke said. After pulling permits and hiring a contractor, a relatively easy next step is to swap out a gas stove with an all-electric range or induction cooktop — an undertaking that Sung can’t promote enough.

“I can make a huge mess in my cooking, and cleaning an induction top is so much easier,” Sung, an active home cook, said. “It actually adds to the pleasure of cooking because there’s no mess to clean, and the top turns itself off, so I don’t have to worry about forgetting if the stove is on or if there is a gas leak.”

With electric cooking, you also don’t need to worry about a potential fire or burning yourself on the stove, Koepke said. Plus, there are major health benefits of doing away with gas, especially for children and the elderly.

“With any gas stove, even if you have a range hood, you are literally standing right over where

that exhaust is. So, as you cook, you’re breathing that in,” he said.

Putting in a heat pump water heater, which pulls heat from the surrounding air to warm up water in a storage tank, can also be a simple “plug-and-play,” Koepke said.

Sung suggests that prospective converters consider first replacing their water heater because her tap is now more consistent, controllable and easier to turn off. Not to mention, they are three times more efficient than other water heaters, according to the Department of Energy.

The ease of electricity, however, doesn’t come without a price. Installing an air source heat pump, which includes a furnace and air conditioning, can cost between \$15,000 to \$30,000, according to Koepke. To alleviate costs, the city offers a rebate on heat pump water heaters, which helped Palo Alto resident Jim Barbera deduct the price of his new water heating system to \$1,200.

For Barbera, the nearly 10-year-long process of electrifying his home was a gradual, cost-effective piecemeal project. In that time period, he installed solar panels, energy-efficient appliances, a radiant barrier roof, as well as better insulators like dual-pane windows, resulting in a 49% annual reduction in his natural gas consumption over the past five years. To Barbera, price comes secondary to the plant’s environmental costs.

“All of it wasn’t onerous for me because I did it as budget permits,” he said. “For me, it’s just, we need to quit burning our planet and I don’t know how else to put it. As the number of people increases, we must reduce the amount we each burn as individuals.”

Sherry Listgarten, whose home is all-electric apart from her stove, echoed Barbera’s urgency. While she would never recommend people just rip out their functional appliances, she does think that, as workforce training on electric utilities and gas prices increase, gas appliances will become more obsolete.

“I think people need to be aware that it does cost money but when it’s time to replace stuff, I think electric is going to be on par with gas. For me, it was,” she said. “I know we’re used to gas but we need to use less of it and replace it with efficient, electric heat. We all do, but don’t feel forced to do it. Just do it when you’re ready.”

For homeowners concerned about the environment, Listgarten said start small, whether that’s inputting a smart thermostat or low-flow showerheads. An easy, yet surprisingly impactful, choice is to replace all your lightbulbs with LED, what Sung calls a “no-brainer.”

“If you change your whole house’s lightbulbs to LED, instead of using 100 to 160 watts, you

are using something like 6 watts. We’re talking about a factor of 10% of your electricity consumption,” Sung said. Listgarten said that LED lights also helped cut her bills down by 30%.

For Barbera, because transportation is the largest contributor to U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, an electric vehicle is the most environmentally effective choice for a household.

“Nobody really thinks about it because it’s fueled and used outside the home, but I call it the ‘elephant in the garage,’” he said. “A lot of people complain about the cost of putting an EV charger in, but if you think about it, it’s a gas pump in your garage that delivers fuel at a steep discount. What’s that worth to you?”

Ultimately, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to electrification as costs, needs and difficulties will be variable from house to house, Koepke said. He encourages those interested to reach out to the Genie program, jointly figure out their energy goals and consult the city’s list of contractors who are versed in Palo Alto’s permit process.

Barbera agreed that electrification is a case-by-case journey.

“Do what you can when you can. I don’t expect everybody’s situation to be the same. Their environmental convictions are different. Their financial situations are different,” he said. “For me, it’s been a journey. It happened gradually, and I think the gradual way is the best way for people who don’t have the deep pockets or wads of cash they’re willing to spend all at once. This is doable even if you’re not flush with cash.” ■

Alicia Mies is a freelance writer.

Want to go electric? Here are some resources

The Switch Is On:

Provides tools and resources for electrification. switchison.org

Home Efficiency Genie:

Free electrical energy consultation for Palo Alto residents. cityofpaloalto.org/Departments/Utilities/Residential/Home-Efficiency-Genie

Golden State Rebates:

Provides rebates on various appliances. goldenstaterrebates.com

PG&E:

Offers a step-by-step guide to single-family home electrification. PG&E.com



A beautiful and functional home for a modern family

This Silicon Valley family of four had always dreamed of a home that would not only be functional, but also beautiful — a place where they could pass along their family traditions to their children.

So when they decided to take on a whole house remodel, they turned to local remodeling company Renew Connections Remodel to help them bring their vision to life.

First, the team at Renew Connections Remodel worked with the family to understand their lifestyle and financial needs.

“Like most engineering families, a home office and functional bathrooms were paramount,” said

co-founder Michael Mok. “However, they also valued time spent together cooking and playing board games, so we came up with a plan to meet all of their needs.”

The kitchen — the heart of the home — was transformed into a culinary haven that would make any aspiring chef happy. The cramped and outdated space was opened up to reveal a spacious and light-filled room with gleaming, modern appliances and a large island that invites the family to gather. This new space allows the family to bake bread, cook, and enjoy taco nights together.

Another important area was the home office. The parents

needed space to work and video conference without the distraction of the tempting smells coming from the kitchen.

“Having this new space really helps parents maximize their productivity at home so that they don’t have to sacrifice work to stay close to their family,” Mok said.

Finally, the team turned their focus to remodeling the bathrooms. The family wanted them to be both beautiful and functional, and the results were nothing short of magical. Old, outdated tubs were replaced with modern, elegant showers.

In the end, the family was thrilled with their newly remodeled



home. Throughout the remodel, the team at Renew Connections Remodel worked closely with the family to ensure that their vision for their home was realized. The team provided advice on everything from the layout of the space to the materials used, creating a customized plan that met the family's unique needs.

If you are considering a whole

house remodel, the family recommends contacting an experienced contractor like Renew Connections Remodel, to bring your vision to life.

"All it takes to get started is a single phone call," Mok said.

If you're interested in remodeling your home, you can reach Renew Connections Remodel at 650.204.5644, or info@bridgesmr.com.

WHAT CLIENTS SAY:

"Renew Connections Remodel was amazing to work with to remodel our master bathroom, master closet, and hall bathroom. They were on top of everything, from the big picture to the tiniest details. Renew Connections Remodel gave us such peace of mind and a sense that everything would be executed correctly and safely throughout the project."

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BEFORE

Courtesy Randy Feriante



AFTER

Linda Taaffe

Palo Alto house under construction for 16 years finally nears completion

Home's unique concrete, domed structure set the project back for years

BY ALICIA MIES

After prompting the creation of two city building ordinances and more than a decade of community protests, the 16-year-long construction project at 1693 Mariposa Ave. has certainly made its mark on Palo Alto's Southgate neighborhood. Neighbors, however, will soon be able to let out a sigh of relief. With interior finishes being wrapped up in early April, the uniquely all-concrete, three-domed home appeared to be close to completion.

The home boasts a 3-foot-thick concrete floor, 18-foot-tall domed ceilings and 6- to 10-inch-thick concrete octagonal walls. Drawing from the expertise of international structural engineers, inspection supervisors and his own son — the project's superintendent and designer — owner and contractor Randy Feriante called the home completely unique: "A project like this has never before been built anywhere."

This ambition ultimately became the cause for the holdup.

Additional city inspections were needed due to the project's unusual and complex design, which slowed down progress, according to Feriante. The home's concrete domed shape also made it difficult to meet California Fire Code. Feriante said he went through three different sprinkler contractors to find one who could formulate a satisfactory plan.

'A project like this has never before been built anywhere.'

—RANDY FERIANTE,
HOMEOWNER AND CONTRACTOR

Jim McFall, an architect and Southgate resident for 38 years, said that the house's design is hard to categorize into any specific style or tradition.

"Architecturally, I have a difficult time describing it," he said. "There's

three primary concrete domes, several raised flat roof sections and a very prominent fascia that wraps around the house. It's a combination of forms and shapes."

According to Feriante, the project's highly insulated construction also cost more than twice as much as that of a conventional wood structure. According to Zillow, the newly built 4,330-square-foot home, which includes four bedrooms and five baths, was valued at an estimated \$4.34 million as of March 28.

The home's eccentric design came at another price: over a decade of neighborhood complaints.

For years, a green fabric-covered chain link fence surrounded the property, concerning neighbors and evoking rumors of criminal activity.

Former Palo Alto Mayor Gail Woolley, a Southgate resident for 53 years, said she often heard murmurs about people allegedly trespassing and loitering at the perpetual construction site, which borders Peers Park. The property's

The new concrete home at 1693 Mariposa Ave., above right, stands on the lot where a bungalow, above left, was originally built as part of the Southgate subdivision developed by Palo Alto Development Co. in the 1920s-1930s.

visual blight caused even more concern among residents.

"Nobody liked it. Everybody felt it was an eyesore," Woolley said. "People thought it was an imposition, too. In terms of people who bought into the neighborhood, they didn't expect how long construction would take."

McFall echoed Woolley's sentiment, remembering various times over the past 16 years when construction would start and stop without any real progress being made.

"During those years where nothing was happening, the property was fenced off and it looked really bad," he said. "There was concern about it being somewhat

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attractive to kids who might want to hide out somewhere and be able to actually go inside the house.”

In 2013, residents took action, organizing and appearing before the Palo Alto City Council. Their coordinated effort resulted in the creation of a new city law (Ordinance 5227) requiring a renewal application be made within 30 days of the expiration of a project's building permit and providing penalties for non-compliance.

Under the law, however, such permits could be extended indefinitely as long as the holder completes enough work to advance to the next level of inspection within six months. The city soon after issued a new permit for the Mariposa project; however, Woolley asserted that for two years, Feriante kept the permit alive by completing just enough work to undergo an inspection every six months.

With their patience running thin, neighbors met with the city frequently during the ensuing years. In 2016, city Ordinance 5389 answered their demands for more stringent enforcement. The new code set a 48-month time limit for developments to reach a final inspection.

Yet, the chain-link fence still stood tall around the Southgate home's unfinished, exposed frame. In preparation for yet another meeting with exasperated Southgate residents in 2018, then-City Manager James Keene threatened to levy at least \$77,000 in fines against Feriante unless he finished the job, according to local news accounts. Keene told city staff that he presented the property owner with a contract and a demand for work to proceed and referred the matter to code enforcement, according to minutes from an August 2018 council meeting.

Feriante said he doesn't recall any threat or fine.

“There were development

department and permit fees when the project restarted. The fees (were) like it was a new project,” he said.

The home boasts a 3-foot-thick concrete floor, 18-foot-tall domed ceilings and 6- to 10-inch-thick concrete octagonal walls.

“I think those city regulations have been helpful in getting the project started up again,” McFall said. “I've been very pleased with the city. They've been proactive in monitoring the construction and being on site with the intent of encouraging and maybe pressuring the owner a little bit to get the job done.”

But for Woolley, Palo Alto's building codes have still fallen short.

“There have been other cities who have dealt with this (type of situation) better,” she said. “I wish there was some way for the city to, perhaps through legal action, do something to force completion.”

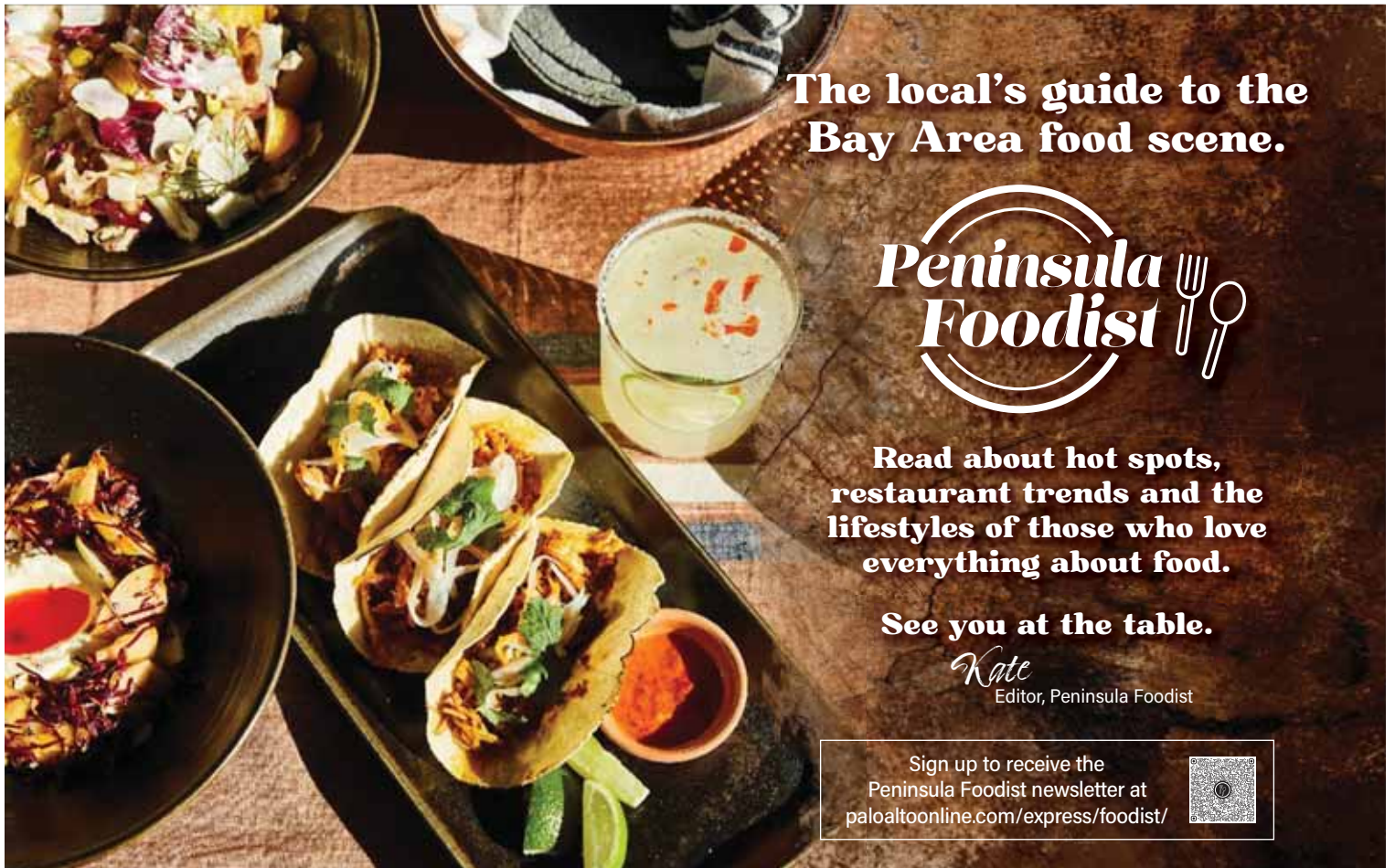
Feriante praised Palo Alto's planning department for working with him every step of the way to help move such a complex project through the process.

“Now that the house is done, the current inspection services manager is making arrangements to have his staff tour the building,” he said.


Seeing the end in sight, Southgate residents share in Feriante's excitement about the nearly finalized home.

“It's been a long time coming, so I think it's good that it looks to be very close to being completed,” McFall said. “I'm very happy that they're finally finishing the house.” ■

Alicia Mies is a freelance writer.




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GET YOUR FIX

Meet the volunteers bringing new life to household appliances

BY EMILY MARGARETTEN

Hovering over an espresso machine, Erik Gutfeldt, an engineer and tinkerer from Palo Alto, gently probed at some exposed wires, guiding a college-aged apprentice through the steps of disassembling the appliance to diagnose its faulty components.

Alberto Ribas brought the espresso machine to Repair Café Mountain View with the hope of salvaging it from the dumpster.

“I feel miserable when I have to throw something away, especially when it’s new and expensive. It’s only 4 years old,” Ribas said. “I tried to fix it,” he added. “But because the problem is electrical, it escapes my competence.”

Repair Café, which has several pop-up locations along the Peninsula, including Palo Alto, Mountain View, Sunnyvale and Santa Clara, was the obvious DIY solution for Ribas. A volunteer organization that helps people fix broken items, Repair Café got its start in Palo Alto in 2012, modeling itself on the Repair Café movement that originated in the Netherlands in 2009.

The Repair Café movement has since expanded to more than 2,500 locations worldwide, its environmental ethos appealing to people who want to keep repairable and reusable objects out of landfills — as well as those looking to expand the life of their broken household items.

Over the years, hundred of local residents have brought everything from lamps, toasters, vacuum cleaners, lawnmowers, furniture and other broken household items to Repair Café events along the Peninsula. During events, residents can work under the guidance of volunteers to repair their items themselves or have a volunteer tackle the job directly.

Maia Coladonato, co-founder of Repair Café Mountain View and lead organizer of Repair Café Palo

Alto, said the organization does more than expand the life of household items. It connects people to a lost tradition of household repair work.

“It’s a way to pass down skills that we don’t have in our modern-day disposable lives anymore,” Coladonato explained. “It brings back the service and value of repairing our own things.”

For Buff Furman, a mechanical engineer and professor at San Jose State University, the chance to help others learn about repair work drew him to Repair Café five years ago. The collaboration of the “fixers” — people who regularly volunteer their time to repair items — was an unexpected benefit. “We get ideas from each other, borrow things,” Furman said.

Jim MacDonald, a retired professor in the electronics and technology department at the College of San Mateo, also remarked on the tight-knit community of the fixers. MacDonald developed an interest in electronics as a child; his father worked in real estate and often brought home unwanted household items for MacDonald to disassemble and reassemble. MacDonald still enjoys tinkering with old appliances. “I like to give new life to everything,” he said, explaining why he volunteers at Repair Café.

This tinkering hobby is a common experience for many of the volunteer fixers, one that’s helped them develop a valuable skill set in repair work; they know how to disassemble and reassemble appliances fairly quickly. Modern electric appliances are designed not to open easily; their anti-tamper screws make repair work extremely difficult, in part to prevent electrical shocks.

But this inaccessibility also dovetails with society’s “throw-away”



Volunteers Buff Furman, left, Aaron Dano, center, and Erik Gutfeldt examine an espresso machine at Repair Café Mountain View on March 18. Photo by Emily Margaretten.

mentality, a sentiment expressed by Mark Matteucci, a retired biotech researcher from Portola Valley who joined Repair Café to give back to the community.

“This is what I call a ridiculous appliance,” Matteucci said, referring to a small food processor that he was disassembling. Replacing its faulty battery would cost as much as buying a new appliance. “It’s not designed to be replaced. It’s destined for the landfill. Planned obsolescence,” he added.

To mitigate this landfill problem, fixers often break appliances down into smaller parts when they cannot be repaired and use those parts to repair other appliances.

The recycling of parts contributes to Repair Café’s successful fix rates. Data from the most recent Repair Café Palo Alto event, which took in 195 items, showed that its full repair rate hovered well above 50% and its partial or deferred repair rate was more than 10%.

“It makes me happy to see things get fixed,” Mountain View resident Calvin Hui said after a bell rang announcing a successful repair. He was waiting for a sewer to repair his ripped duffel bag. “I’ve been coming for 10 years,” Hui added, noting that he usually brings in broken electronics and toys. “The success rate for me is about 99%.”

Ribas’ outcome was not as joyful.

His espresso machine needed a new circuit board that was not in stock at stores. “I think it’s a goner,” he said sadly. But even in this case, not all hope was lost. There was the possibility that the appliance could be fixed at the next Repair Café if a new circuit board was found.

Roland Lee, a Palo Alto resident, had a similar experience at Repair Café Palo Alto event held in February. Missing a part he needed for his bicycle, Lee returned to Mountain View a month later with the necessary components that the fixers recommended.

“It’s a great service to the community,” Lee said. He then glided away on his bicycle. ■

Emily Margaretten is a freelance writer.

Got a broken household item?

Repair Café Palo Alto events are held at The Museum of American Heritage, 351 Homer Ave., Palo Alto, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on select dates. Repair work is free, but participants are required to pay for repair parts. For more information or a list of scheduled repair events at various locations on the Peninsula, go to repaircafe-paloalto.org.

Spring Buyer's Wants & Needs

1. A wonderful young family wants to buy a new or newer feeling home on a half-acre+ parcel in Portola Valley, Woodside, or Menlo Park. Main home does not need to be huge, so 3,500 – 4,500 sq ft can work. Privacy on-site is key. Looking in the \$5M – \$12M range.
2. Another wonderful young family that is in a similar situation and does not mind a main home that could use some work. Looking in the \$4M – \$10M range.
3. Multi-generational family with need for a nice main house and an ADU or Guest House or room to build one. Main house does not need to be huge (3,500-4,500 sq ft is fine) but more finished off is better than a fixer-upper. Menlo Park, Los Altos, Portola Valley, or Woodside are the preferred towns. Looking in the \$4.5M – \$7M price range.
4. A great young couple looking in Palo Alto, Menlo Park & Portola Valley for a two bedroom+ condo-townhouse or small home that is walking distance to a downtown or shops. Pretty flexible for what works for them and location is key. Looking in the \$1.8M – \$2.4M price range.
5. Another great young couple also looking in Palo Alto, Menlo Park & Portola Valley for a two bedroom+ condo-townhouse or small home. Pretty flexible for what works and location is also key for them. Looking in the \$900K – \$1.4M price range.



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