

From the ashes rises a Mediterranean-style home with eclectic details, commanding views, and comfortable rooms

A house rebuilt with mixed motifs

BY JOHN CONNELL

EVEN BEFORE IT WAS LEVELED BY THE INFAMOUS OAKLAND, Calif., wildfire of 1992, Will and Julia Mies's house was hardly the perfect home. Built in 1929 on speculation, the Tudor house was designed for a flat site, but there it had sat, perched on a hillside, two floors above street level, even as the land descended an equal distance to the backyard. While the views were sweeping, the traditional floor plan and smallish windows didn't take full advantage of them.

The fire brought loss, but it also opened the way for a house that met Will and Julia's needs and at the same time complemented its remarkable site.

Starting with a blank canvas

After the fire, the Mieses contacted architect Barbara Winslow, whose firm, JSW Architects, is renowned for architecture created around basic design principles. (Winslow and her partners have detailed these principles in the book *Patterns of Home: Ten Essentials of Enduring Design*, The Taunton Press, 2002.)

Because the Mieses were happy enough with the previous house, they never indulged themselves in dreaming about a better one. When asked to recall the best





Before



After



Rob Karosis

NEW HOUSE ON AN OLD SITE Will and Julia Mies's 1929 Tudor-style house (top), which burned in 1992, sat high on the lot. Their new house (above) sits low and has a direct connection to the land, while taking advantage of the views to the rear. Just outside the front entry (left) is an intimate courtyard. A plaque near the front gate (right) commemorates the old house and the building of the new.



Architect and clients
with **Mediterranean** details,
and a floor plan that **steps**

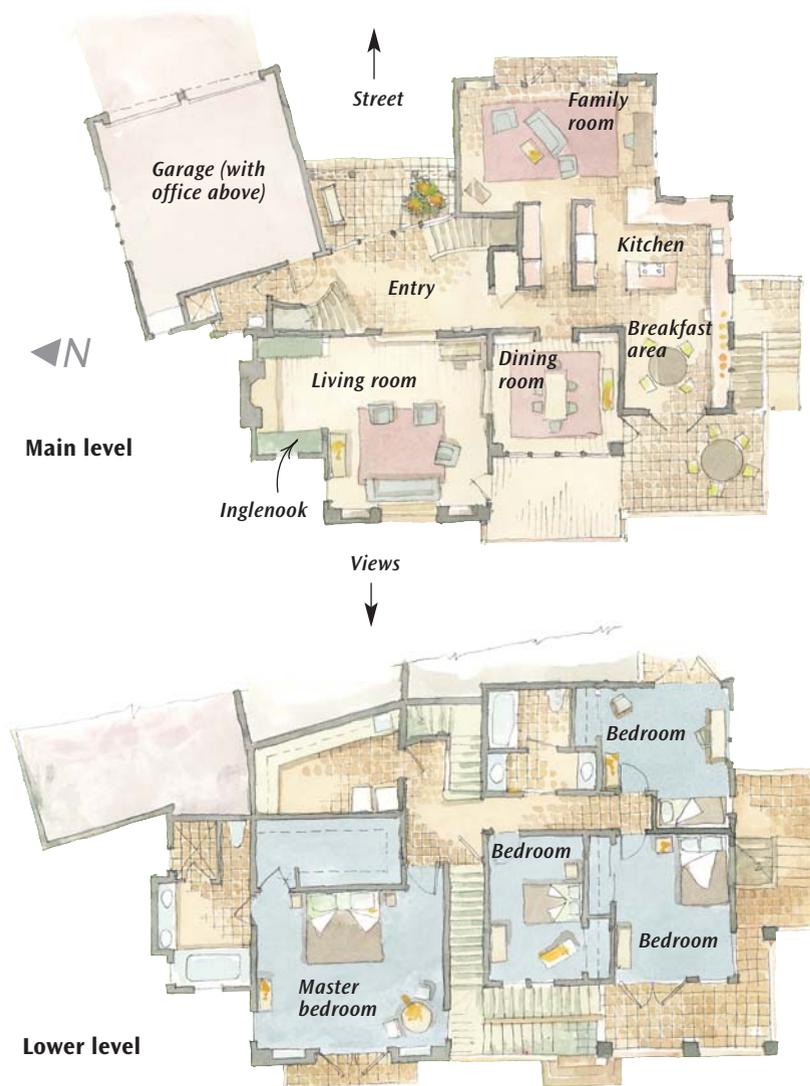
A COZY PLACE TO SIT BY THE FIRE The beauty of the inglenook—a intimate alcove next to a fireplace—is that it allows Julia Mies a well-lit spot for reading, away from the melee of the rest of her house, but still connected to its goings-on.

design a home open rooms, down a hill.



A HOUSE DESIGNED FOR A SLOPING SITE

To minimize its presence on the street side and make the most of the spectacular views out the back, this house is designed to be one story in front and two in back.



ROOMS WITH A VIEW Just beyond the eight-paned living room door, a deck overlooks the Oakland, Calif., hills. The dining room is one step up and through an arched passageway.

aspects of the house they had lost in the fire, they could list only two: the fireplace and the views. The wish list they gave to Winslow was short: comfortably sized, open, airy rooms plus some smaller, private spaces. And they wanted full access to the front yard and the backyard.

Their marching orders were exactly what Winslow wanted to hear because all of it was in keeping with her firm's conviction about what makes good architecture. As Winslow developed the plans, her clients became more enthusiastic. That kind of appreciation is pure rocket fuel for most architects, and it propelled Winslow into the project. Their collaboration became so compelling that Winslow remained active long after the building itself was designed. She didn't stop until she had helped the Mieses shop for tile and fabric (see sidebar, p. 60).

From the street, a one-floor house

Of all the resources at Winslow's disposal, none was more powerful than the land she had to work with. She took two bold moves. First, she restored the balance between house and street. She allowed the building to rise only one story in the front and laid out the rest of it to cascade down the hill in back. She also moved the house as close to the sidewalk as possible, getting rid of a bland front yard and replacing it with a smaller, intimate courtyard. The change was dramatic. The mass of house facing the street is much less imposing than was the old Tudor, so it seems friendlier and more inviting.

With a second floor on the street side of the house eliminated, Winslow moved the bedrooms to a lower level, locating them below the living spaces on the main floor (see floor plan, left). The views are just as good as they were, but the bedrooms are more protected from weather extremes—they are cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Winslow's approach also solved one of the old Tudor's most nagging problems by making it easy to get to the

AN ARCHITECT GIVES ADVICE ON SERVICES

Will and Julia Mies never expected to need an architect, but when fire destroyed their home, they turned to our firm for full architectural services. After drawing final plans, we followed the construction and finishing process on a weekly basis and were even involved in many aspects of interior design. But the services of an architect do not have to go that far.

DESIGN IDEAS An architect's services can be minimal if a client has a clear idea what he wants, excellent contractors, and the time and inclination to pull permit and contract drawings together. In this case, the most cost-effective way to use an architect may be in the development of a "schematic design" that establishes the site plan, the floor plan, cross-section drawings of the building, and the building elevations.

WORKING DRAWINGS With somewhat more involvement, an architect can take the design to the next level and develop construction documents—drawings that include structural engineering and electrical and mechanical systems. These drawings are suitable for getting a building permit and will allow a builder to estimate costs and build the shell of the house. Decisions about products such as windows and doors, equipment, interior finishes, fixtures, and cabinets are left to the owner, and the builder is expected to resolve questions that arise during construction. A disadvantage: It can be difficult to accurately determine the total cost of a project.



Architect Barbara Winslow (left) worked with Julia and Will Mies throughout their project.

COMPLETE PLANS At the next level of service, the architect provides complete documents, including interior elevations that lay out each wall and define its materials, construction details, and specifications for building processes. With all this information, a contractor can provide a precise cost estimate, then build a finished house. In this case, the architect is typically involved during construction, but services may be limited to answering questions about the design.

FULL SERVICES A typical contract for complete services means the architect is involved in the building process every step of the way. In this case, it's the architect's responsibility to see that the building complies with the intent of the drawings, that construction is completed to the clients' satisfaction, and that contractors are paid. Because drawings cannot cover every aspect of building, it's only through regular visits to the site that an architect can make sure a job stays on track, problems are resolved, and payments correspond with progress.

For more information on architectural services, visit the American Institute of Architects Web site at www.aia.org/consumer.

—Barbara Winslow

backyard by a series of steps that wind down the outside of the back façade.

A comfortable Mediterranean style

Will is from the Arizona desert, and Julia grew up in a Virginia farmhouse, so Winslow might have been expected to run into trouble as she was helping them settle on architectural preferences. Once Winslow broached the subject,

however, Will and Julia were astonished to find how easily they agreed on arches, stucco, tiles, and low-pitched roofs as the best parts of California architecture. They asked Winslow to create something with an older Mediterranean look that incorporated these features.

Good designers understand that views from an elevated or protected vantage point are psychologically comforting, and Winslow put this principle to work for the Mieses and their steep site. Decks that overlook the backyard and provide good views to the west are one example. Even better is what the Mieses call their terrace room, a space just off the stairs half way between the bedrooms and the backyard. It is surrounded by walls on the east but open and covered by a pergola to the west. The same principle is at work in the upstairs entry area. Guests arrive at an elevated level that looks down into the living room and then out to a stunning view.

A slightly different but related design principle is found in the inglenook by the fireplace. Though they had used it only infrequently, the Mieses missed the fireplace in their old Tudor. In recreating it, Winslow added a sitting area off to the side (photo, p. 58). This

“We followed the designing cabinets even helping with





THE ARCHITECT'S AESTHETIC
 Architect Barbara Winslow helped the homeowners choose tile for the house (below). She was involved in even the smallest details, including overseeing the design of the urn-shaped staircase balusters.



construction and finishing process, and light fixtures, the choice of tiles.”

—Barbara Winslow, architect

BLENDING OF STYLES
 Floor tiles, arched passageways, and exposed rafters in the front entry hall (above) set the stage for the eclectic details in the house. The stairs lead to an office over the garage.



Photos: top and bottom right, Rob Karosis

A HOMEOWNER'S FIRE INSURANCE TRAVAILS

The pain of losing our home to a fire was horribly intensified by the realization that we were grossly underinsured. In California, there are two main kinds of insurance coverage—replacement and market value (the cost of a house of comparable size). At the time, many carriers would insure older homes at market value only. As such, our 1929 house was covered at less than a quarter of its replacement cost.

We joined with others who were covered by the same carrier and, with the help of the state insurance commissioner, pressured the carrier to cover all of us at replacement value. The only way to determine that value was to reconstruct what we had before and have a contractor bid on those plans. JSW Architects drew up the plans based on our discussions and pictures. It was important to consider the fact that old homes have plaster walls, solid-core doors, molding, even hardwood flooring under the carpet, all of which add to the expense of rebuilding. A contractor who had done a lot of remodeling for us presented the bid.

Planning for our new home was delayed until we arrived at a mutually agreeable settlement. But it was well worth the effort—and definitely to our advantage—to be as precise and thorough as possible.

It all worked out in the end, but I'd advise homeowners to read their fire insurance policies carefully to avoid ever having to face a similar situation.

—Julia Mies



BREAKFAST WITH A VIEW A small table and four chairs sit at the western end of the kitchen, which opens onto a deck with sweeping views.

“Our 1929 house was covered at less than a quarter of its replacement cost.”

—Julia Mies, homeowner

cozy little bench allows Julia to curl up with a book, away from most household commotion but aware of general activity.

Warm and welcoming eclectic decor

By its very nature, eclectic decor is warm and welcoming, suggesting that everyone and everything has a place. In fact, everything doesn't go with everything else, and as such, eclectic design is tricky. Winslow made it work in the house by restricting design elements to ingredients from similar climates.

Coexisting happily under the house's overarching Mediterranean style are tiles from Tunisia, a window from India, Craftsman-style light fixtures, and modern metal windows. It's not always obvious what will work with this aesthetic. Will, for example, found a Chinese ceramic lion sculpture that had survived the fire half buried in the backyard. He set it down by the front door when they were moving into the new house, and it looks great. Julia countered an undesirable view from her kitchen desk with a stained glass window (photo, below).

Winslow made it clear at the outset that she wanted to hear Julia and Will's wishes, and the design details that resulted helped to create a place where the Mieses feel comfortable. Julia asked for eastern light in their kitchen. This was accomplished by fitting the upper cabinets on the eastern wall with a glazed back and glass doors. The glassware stored in those cabinets sparkles each morning as the Mieses make their breakfast. Meanwhile, because Will insisted that he have a great view from the kitchen table, it was moved from the east to the west side of the kitchen. Unwittingly, the clients had embraced two of the architect's principle tenets: placing rooms according to the sun and providing protected lookouts.

The Mies family has been on this hill for almost two decades, the first in a Tudor and the second in an eclectic Mediterranean-style house. With every passing year, this house builds another layer of family stories, memories, and history. Even as the children grow up and start their own lives, this is the home base to which they will return. **H**

Contributing editor John Connell is the author of the forthcoming Taunton Press book The Inspired House from which this article was adapted.

See Resources on page 90.



GLASS-BACKED CABINETS LET IN LIGHT
The homeowners' request for morning light and lots of storage in the kitchen led the architect to design upper cabinets with glass backs that hang over a window.

