



HOUSE CALLS

# A family's San Francisco building becomes a home to grow in

*Purchasing and renovating a three-unit property was a risk—but it paid off*

By **Samantha Weiss Hills** | Sep 9, 2019, 6:00am PDT

Photography by **Carlos Chavarría**



Sonia Kimotsuki and Alden Huen have called San Francisco's Marina District home for close to 20 years. It's been a backdrop to the big moments in their lives: buying a home, marriage, the birth of their son, Ethan. So when they decided to completely transform their three-unit building in 2014, it was another investment in the area that they've lived in and loved for decades.

Back in August 2003, the couple was seeking what they say everyone was looking for in San Francisco at the time: a two-bedroom condo. And it wasn't going according to plan.

“That was the sweet spot, every young couple wanted a one- to two- bedroom condo, and there just weren’t that many properties around,” Kimotsuki says.



Kimotsuki, Huen, and their son, Ethan, at home. “The moment we stepped in, it just felt right. It felt like home,” Huen says.

After losing out on so many properties, they widened their search—but, as it turns out, their future home was just across the street. One day, as Huen was returning from a run in the neighborhood, he noticed a for-sale sign going up on a house diagonal to theirs, one that featured arched windows on the top floor, an elegantly curved entryway, and terra-cotta shingles. It was clearly not a two-bedroom condo, but they immediately called the selling agent to see it and made an offer before it even hit the market. “It was a little risky, because it was a three-unit building,” Kimotsuki remembers. “We were kind of like, are we ready to be landlords? The whole idea was very scary at the time, but we did it and it ended up being really good.”

The purchase process was a whirlwind, not least because the couple happened to be getting married the same week. “We had family from all over the world traveling in and the timing could not have been worse,” she says. “There was a lot of trust put into the process. Sometimes that happens in a good way, right? You have to prioritize.”

In the 13 years between buying the building and renovating it, Kimotsuki and Huen split time between San Francisco and New York for six years, and also had Ethan, which meant more extended family was around the house. So when both rental units opened up at the same time, they took advantage of the vacancies to transform the building into a two-floor residence, opting to convert a small unit in the back into an apartment for rent.



The exterior of home is reminiscent of many throughout the Marina district, with curved windows and an Art Deco influence.

Their initial thought was to combine the building's middle and bottom units, but the more the couple thought about it, the more they realized that change wouldn't add much space, and they enjoyed living on the top floor, which had been their apartment since the beginning. Instead, they fused the top two units, which were both two-bedrooms, and added a roof deck.

Kimotsuki and Huen turned to interior designer [Jay Jeffers](#) to help them reimagine the interiors. Jeffers brought in [Apparatus Architecture](#) to collaborate with on the renovation.

"Having Jay involved from day one was so important, because he didn't just come in and do the design of an interior that he didn't have any say in," explains Kimotsuki. "He actually was part of the building process and figuring out with the architect the layout and our lifestyle, and incorporating how we wanted to live in the space."



A gray vase and burl wood box are vintage, and the drapes are custom by [Leong Interiors](#).

Jeffers enlisted senior designer Victoria Nady to work with him on the project, and describes the process of working with Apparatus as a joint design effort on everything from the staircase that leads up to the living space on the second floor to the look and flow of the kitchen, like a custom banquette that greets them at the top of the stairs.

He took cues from the home's Art Deco-influenced curves and mixed them with jewel tones and a modern sensibility in the design and furnishings. "We knew the clients were fairly modern, we knew they wanted to be very comfortable," Jeffers says. "They have a busy life, but they love being at home and having friends over."

Instead of putting the living space on the first floor of the residence and bedrooms on the second, they inverted them for a more seamless flow onto the roof deck. To boot, the ample light from the top level's arched windows fills those daytime-use rooms. The original layout of the home was more formal and segmented, but Kimotsuki and Huen wanted a casual, easygoing floorplan.

"When you come up to the top of the stairs, you're basically in the kitchen," Jeffers explains. "The back of the kitchen island is a banquette with a table and you would think that might be just their breakfast table, but that is their all-occasion dining."



The kitchen backsplash and countertops are Giada Bianco slab from [All Natural Stone](#) and the light fixtures are custom [Amanda Wright Pottery](#) pendants. The cabinets are painted in [Benjamin Moore Lead Gray](#).

They divided the family room and kitchen with a section of cabinetry, allowing the kitchen to be more expansive without being closed off. The media room flows directly into a library—framed by a curved molding that plays off the arched windows—that houses the couple's family book collections and desks.



In the living room, [Avenue Road Rua Ipanema lounge chairs](#) upholstered in [Rogers & Goffigon LTD](#) fabric sit around a [Lawson Fenning Normandie](#) coffee table. Venetian plaster by [Willem Racké Studio](#) covers the fireplace wall, which is complemented by [Benjamin Moore Grey Owl](#). The cabinets and trim are painted in [Benjamin Moore Deep Space](#).

The master bedroom is anchored by a row of windows and a floor-to-ceiling custom upholstered headboard. The bed is flanked by paneled walls with a hidden door into Huen's closet, and nightstands were built into the walls to give a streamlined look. (Sonia's closet is off the master bathroom.)



The master bedroom is anchored by a floor-to-ceiling custom upholstered headboard. The bed is flanked by paneled walls with a hidden door into Huen's



An oval mirror from [West Elm](#) and vintage pendants by [Vilhelm Lauritzen for Louis Poulsen](#) hang in the guest bathroom.

Kimotsuki and Huen gave Jeffers full freedom to execute his style, which made the project an exercise in creativity for him. The couple was thrilled with the end result, and were delighted that the design allows for their son to age without feeling stuck.

“He made it a space that Ethan was going to be able to grow in and it wasn’t going to be outdated from day one,” Kimotsuki says.



A custom Jay Jeffers–designed sofa, upholstered in [Osborne & Little](#) fabric, sits in front of the library, painted in [Benjamin Moore Newburg Green](#). An [Avery Boardman](#) sofa upholstered in [Zak & Fox](#) fabric sits in front of a Jay Jeffers–designed ottoman in [Moore & Giles](#) pewter gray leather.

Huen loves how much warmth the home now exudes.

“It took a long time to kind of plan, but we’ve been so happy that we went through this,” he says. “The moment we stepped in, it just felt right. It felt like home.

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