

A touch of the tropics / A major remodel brings the flavor of the islands to Marin

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John Sutton Photography

When you think Bay Area, you think of strong tropical breezes and relaxed island living, right? Well, maybe not. But don't tell that to Ken Chase of Novato.

"I really like the tropical lifestyle," said Chase, 54. "Whenever I vacation in the winter, I go south. I take off for Tahiti, Bali, Thailand or Fiji, and I wanted to capture that tropical feeling in my home."

Chase, a former facilities director who supervised construction of Chevy's restaurants around the Bay Area, owns a 1,800-square-foot, three-bedroom, two-bath house right on the water in Novato's Bel Marin Keys, a development with man-made waterways and appealing vistas.

"I used to live in an apartment in San Francisco, and I was always going to the delta or the lakes to ski, but then I found this home and thought this was a nice alternative - and it's much closer to the city."

But although Chase loved the location, the boat ramp out back and lots of western exposure that offered wonderful sunset views, the home interior was not exactly what he had in mind.

"It was decorated in the 1960s and never changed," he said. "I really like symmetry, and I wanted a very minimalist look."

Chase hired architect Alan Ohashi, of Ohashi Design Studio in Oakland, whose easygoing manner and simple, uncluttered approach to design he appreciated.

"Ken's home had some structural problems, including a fireplace that was falling apart and a wood deck that needed repair," Ohashi said, "but our main focus was creating a tropical paradise that takes advantage of the home's location right on the water."

Ohashi and his wife, Joy, a designer, transformed the simple tract home into a showplace celebrating island living, with plenty of room for entertaining and some resortlike features Chase wanted.

Indoor-outdoor living

A key decision was adding new lava-paver floors with radiant heating below throughout the home. Besides helping the indoors and outdoors blend together, the unglazed, ash-colored pavers fit the project's goal.

"I wanted all natural materials that didn't require maintenance," Chase said. "For example, the new stucco on the side of the house is colored, so it doesn't require painting like wood. The nice thing about using natural, permanent materials is that they develop a patina over time."

New sliding glass doors make the home feel more spacious. They also frame water views, allow breezes to circulate and give Chase easy access to his new deck, an impressive entertaining space with a large barbecue grill, built-in sink, blender station and bar with four chairs.

"I love grilling and entertaining out there because you can just take a hose and clean it all off once everyone leaves," Chase said.

Besides having the full outdoor kitchen, the deck is fronted by a protective tempered-glass and stainless-steel windscreen that keeps the elements at bay. A new outdoor gas fireplace keeps guests comfortable on chilly nights. Chase plans to add a hot tub in the near future.

"When you're in the tropics, it's the weather that makes it special," Joy Ohashi said. "The nice weather allows you to live outdoors. For this home, we were able to extend the living space to the outdoors and really take advantage of the beautiful location."

The deck is landscaped with palm trees and other tropical plants and flowers.

"I have tons of palm trees all over," Chase said. "They're easy to maintain,

they're permanent, they create shade and their roots don't tear up your foundation. I also have a high planter next to the fence on one side of the house with over 40 feet of birds-of-paradise. During most times of the year, there are at least 50 buds blooming out there, adding lots of nice color to my yard. I also planted some bamboo, orchids and a ton of subtropical plants. Having some really fragrant flowers around helps give you that tropical feeling."

Interior decisions

The large glass sliding doors are the only barrier between the deck and the home's new great room.

"This part of the house was very much set up like a bachelor's apartment," said Alan Ohashi. "There is the main living room and dining room with a great stereo system, then a simple kitchen and a nice master bedroom and bath, with the whole area utilizing sliding cherry-wood pocket doors so Ken has the flexibility to open everything up."

The dining room's polished granite table rests against the new kitchen's main island counter. The table was designed with wheels so Chase can push it out to the deck when hosting a large dinner party. All of the appliances in the kitchen are hidden in custom cherry cabinets that complement the kitchen's rich granite countertops and the cherry pocket doors.

"I rarely cook, so I use the stove maybe once a week to boil water for pasta. Winter or summer, you can usually find me outside grilling," he said.

Removing an old fireplace helped solve problems with settling and freed floor area for this space. A new barrel ceiling with perimeter lighting makes the great room look even larger. Having all of his lights on a computerized system allows Chase to program and control the level of light.

Master bedroom and bath

The master bedroom and bath were designed with the same simple elegance used in the public spaces. Chase keeps nothing on his bathroom counter and stores most of his toiletry items in a large sliding drawer. Tile on the bathroom walls runs right into the shower, which is equipped with a grate system for draining water.

The master bedroom has a headboard that incorporates up-lights over a large bed. More cherry cabinets offer lots of storage, including room for his hidden TV and built-in speakers for his stereo. A wall full of mirrors reflects the outside garden, reinforcing the tropical theme. Another sliding glass door gives Chase entry to the private garden.

Chase and his contractor friends handled the project's \$300,000 worth of construction work on their own.

"There is something very fulfilling about coming up with your own ideas and being able to enjoy them," he said.

"Capturing the outdoor environment in every direction makes this house feel more spacious but also private," Alan Ohashi said. "The home was very unspectacular, and we found a way to create a relaxed, resortlike atmosphere with the new design."

Resources

Ohashi Design Studio, 5739 Presley Way, Oakland; (510) 595-1300 or visit www.ohashidesign.com.

If you want to turn your home into a tropical retreat, here are some ideas you can try.-- For this project, pathways landscaped with tropical plants outside and sliding pocket doors inside help create private zones in the property. Architect Alan Ohashi advises looking at the whole environment, from entry to how people move through the house and yard.-- Tropical plants, flowers and trees add important color and texture to this renovated property. "I think finding a way to connect yourself to the garden is wonderful," said Novato homeowner Ken Chase. "Don't be afraid to invest in the long term. It bugs me when people ignore some landscaping because they don't want to invest the time. My place just keeps getting better as the palm trees mature. It looks more tropical every day."-- Highlight water views. If you are fortunate enough to have a home near the water, make sure to frame views from as many rooms as possible. If your home is landlocked and you still want that tropical feeling, consider adding a water feature to your yard or a built-in aquarium inside the house. Something as simple as a new fountain on the patio can introduce the tranquility of water and the feeling of the tropics to your environment.