

## JUNE

Much as we appreciate the wonders of climate control, there's no better feeling than opening the door and letting the breeze fly by. Welcome back, summer. We've missed you.



# Bright Ideas

A lively yet restrained paint palette turns a century-old white box into a cheerful family home

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**Don't take Selma Blanusa** all that seriously when she tells you she almost passed up her Sonoma, California, farmhouse while zeroing in on a different house nearby. "I didn't anticipate I would fall in love with it," she says of the one whose deed she went home with. "It was pretty worn down." But Selma knows a find when she sees it. A compulsive renovator with a terrific eye and enviable resources, she was able to take one look at the frozen-in-time wallpaper, lace curtains, shag carpeting, and hulking range hood and see a stylish, light-filled forever house, its color scheme as smart and sunny as its manicured 4.6-acre lot.

The four-bedroom, three-bath house had been painted an unfortunate peach. But inside, it boasted plaster walls, white oak floors, nine-foot ceilings, and 3,200 square feet. It also offered Selma, an ex-Seattleite, a piece of her adopted town's history. While Sonoma is famous these days for its tasting rooms and \$400-a-night hotels, not all that long ago it was



**ABOVE:** A smart new portico enhances the facade of the 1907 house. Homeowner Selma Blanusa, who credits her "little-detail-orientedness," matched new elements to what was there, right down to the contours of the beveled replacement siding. Shutters: Timberlane. Paint: Benjamin Moore's Rich Coral (door), Royal Silk (siding), and Graphite (shutters)

**OPPOSITE:** Staggered Shaker-style cabinets with latches evoke country kitchens; traditional colors are paired in a modern way. Paint (cabinets): Benjamin Moore's Let It Rain and Boca Raton Blue







part of Mexico and populated by Native Americans. “The founder of Sonoma, General Vallejo, gave it to his son Paton,” Selma says of her property, which, during its recent overhaul, coughed up a number of pre-Colonial artifacts. Vallejo built a plaza downtown, within walking distance of the property, but Sonoma was still pretty low-key when early-20th-century sunseekers settled in this area. Cash crops included prunes and walnuts. Selma’s 1907 house most likely sat in the middle of an orchard.

Dotted today with crab apple, palm, and pineapple guava trees, the property came with an old barn and a stable, conjuring images of a gentlewoman’s farm. Selma, a single mother of two, liked the idea of raising sheep. “It’s flat, so you can get on your bike, skateboard—it really appealed to us,” she said. “I knew it would require a ton of work.”

Previous owners had cared for the place over many years while resisting any pressure to keep it up-to-date. At some point, the kitchen had moved into a larger space. Selma dated its most recent refresh to the 1960s.

Though she speaks about having wanted to



**OPPOSITE: A tongue-and-groove ceiling pays homage to the porch that long ago stood in the kitchen’s spot. The ceiling and the period-style built-in are balanced by a fanciful lime-green chandelier.** *Chandelier: Stray Dog Designs. Table: Ethan Allen. Hutch: Wood Touch. Hutch knobs and pulls: Anthropologie. Paint: Benjamin Moore’s Freedom Trail (hutch)*

**ABOVE LEFT: Selma relaxes with her children, Annika, 16, and Gavin, 14, in front of the new back porch.**

**ABOVE RIGHT: The front entry is a warm blend of old and new.** *Pendant fixture: Horchow*

“restore the house to its original glory,” that may not be the right word. Old photos show a white box with black shutters, originally built without indoor plumbing. Six years ago, when Selma bought the place, the plumbing still hadn’t entirely moved inside: Cast-iron pipes festooned the exterior.

She was already a veteran renovator, with the gut remodel of a sprawling Queen Anne in Seattle behind her, and this job looked, at first at least, pretty straightforward: new plumbing and wiring, new baths and kitchen, better heating and cooling. The traditional layout—“one square room after another, cozy and consistent”—pleased her.

But if walls didn’t have to come down, they did need shoring up. The house sits in earthquake territory and 75 mph winds aren’t unheard of. The essential first stage involved stripping down two perpendicular interior walls to make them shear walls, anchored in concrete footings and strengthened to resist magnitude 7 tremors.

Despite Selma’s many daytime achievements—eight years in Asia operations at Microsoft, currently a certified personal trainer and a financial



adviser—she has a second, more moonlit career as a renovator and landlord whose portfolio swelled at one point to more than a dozen properties.

She started shedding them after the kids arrived and now focuses on her own nest, where she has brought to bear some hard-won life lessons. Among them: Don't take on a renovation without a seasoned pro, preferably one you know, whether you are building an addition or replacing broken tile.

To buff up the Sonoma house, she brought in two local old-house experts, architect Robert Baumann and general contractor Chris Grippi. "Homeowners

**ABOVE: A new bay window opened up a cozy alcove in the narrow living room and brought in light, along with a built-in seat that's deep enough for lounging. Like others added during the reno, the window seat borrows details from existing woodwork, in this case echoing the fireplace surround. Chandelier: Oly. Paint: Benjamin Moore's Wales Gray (walls)**

have a hard time judging scale and proportion, which is Robert's expertise," she says. "What I like about Chris is he doesn't sound the fire alarm when he finds something odd."

"Bath plumbing on the outside—you don't see that often," says Grippi, adding philosophically, "It's easier than going inside the walls"—something his crew of course had to do.

Grippi also found himself insulating many walls and, to his muted surprise, having to install missing headers over the windows and doors (restoration experts worked on the windows themselves). Grippi



ABOVE: The fireplace's marble frame ties the living room to the kitchen, where matching marble serves as countertops. The cased opening on the left leads to the former dining room, possibly a kitchen in 1907, now the family room.

redid the kitchen top to bottom, with furniture-style custom cabinets, a breakfast nook, and quartersawn flooring to match what was there. During the reno's busy first year, Grippi's crew would also repair the chimney, finish the attic, and deftly insert a half bath in the master bedroom—an alternative to the major surgery a full bath would have required.

Generally, Grippi says, the house was sound, thanks partly to the quality of the 1907 lumber that went into it. "A lot of logging was going on," he says of that innocent and bountiful time. "Quartersawn fir was not expensive."

Baumann's architectural refinements included new porticos, bay windows, and dormers, which simultaneously added interest and dimension to the exterior and elbow room inside. "They create charm and warmth," Baumann says of the resulting alcoves and, in the case of the porticos, "human-scale transitions" between indoors and out.

As a final touch, the team painted the exterior its original white and replaced the decorative shutters with ones that open and close, a reflection, Selma says with a smile, of "my little-detail-orientedness."

Could this polished gem possibly need anything more? Well, yes. It came two years later in the form



## Floor plans

The house (above), originally 3,200 square feet, kept its existing layout while adding bay windows, porticos, a back porch, and three dormers, allowing much of the attic (plan not shown) to become living space. The baths and the kitchen were reworked, and the master bedroom annexed a sleeping porch. Because the house is in earthquake territory, two interior walls were rebuilt as shear walls.

### FIRST FLOOR



### SECOND FLOOR









of a two-gable wraparound porch, looking as neatly composed and time-tested as the living room trim.

Property improvements didn't stop there, though maybe it's best not to get into the drove of sheep that now keeps the grass under control or the horses in the stable or the freestanding exercise studio. Just seeing what a little paint and attention to detail did inside the house is envy-inspiring enough.

"The woodwork is key," Selma says. "The doors are all solid wood with five panels and glass knobs. The baseboards are a consistent eight inches or so. And we used a bright white throughout with two main colors, blue and yellow."

The takeaway for the rest of us? Before putting your money down, size up the character of a house and the quality of the materials that went into it. And when you're ready to remodel, go ahead and canvass people whom you trust—Selma invited interior designer Kim Browning and John Barnes, who runs the local paint store, to lend an eye—but "don't design for someone else," she admonishes. "Find out what your style is in terms of colors and furnishings, so you can express that."

Selma credits two influences for her success as an old-house savior: her handy parents, who grew up during the Depression and taught her the importance of a nest egg, and a then-avant-garde 1987 book, *Housewise: The Smart Woman's Guide to*



**OPPOSITE: The master bedroom annexed a former sleeping porch. The vaulted ceiling, paneled to evoke the past, is new.**  
Ceiling light fixture: Shades of Light. Windows: Pella

**ABOVE LEFT: A whimsical carpet turns the attic stairs into a runway for a newly finished space.**

**ABOVE RIGHT: A new sun-filled dormer holds a gathering spot for the kids and their entourages.**  
Paint: Benjamin Moore's Bayville Blue (pony walls)

*Buying and Renewing Real Estate for Profit*, by Suzanne Brangham. (Small-world footnote: After renovating some 70 houses, Brangham is now a civic activist, hotelier, and restaurateur—in Sonoma—and her restaurant is in the former home of founder Vallejo's daughter.)

When she was just getting started, Selma says, "I would buy a house and fix it up with the intention of holding on to it and bringing back its charm. The more I did it, the more I was intrigued." But whether salvaging a house for profit or for oneself, there's a true payoff, she adds. "It ends up being equal parts honoring the past and breathing new life into a house you love."

That goes double for a house with period detail and proportions—and maybe the occasional window seat. "When people come in, they respond because it's traditional and expected," she says of her forever house. "They feel such a sweet calm." ■