Atherton Splendor

Architect Eric J. Smith Created A Northern California Residence That Responds To A Historic Location And A Family's Classical Dreams

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Surrounded by centuries old oaks and redwoods, the Atherton house graces its setting with a sense of harmony and symmetry. The exterior is Roxbury granite with a steel superstructure. Landscape by English born landscape architect, Peter Cummin, Cummin Associates, based in Connecticut.

ABOVE Eric J. Smith's attention to detail is especially evident in the living room, which includes classic architectural details like a modillion cornice, an elaborate plaster ceiling, a graceful pedimented door, and deeply inset windows. The glazed wall treatment, inspired by an antique Chinese panel, was crafted by Stancil Studios, San Francisco. OPPOSITE A pair of fluted columns elegantly frames the entry to the sunny living room. Collections of fine plein-air paintings in gilt frames, and a custom made carpet, energize the classic proportions of the room.

New York based architect Eric J. Smith is a life long classicist. One of the original members of the highly regarded Institute of Classical Architecture, he has designed houses in classical styles ranging from French Country to Mediterranean Revival, Cape Dutch, and Queen Anne, throughout the country.

"The foundation of a fine house is a classical sense of order and balance, and spaces that are logically connected," said Smith. "Our firm develops concepts based on the finest examples and precedents. We conduct in-depth research and explore historical architecture in many styles, so that our work is pure and true to the vocabulary."

Smith recently completed a gracious five bedroom residence on a three acre site in the heart of Atherton, near Palo Alto. It bears all the hallmarks of Georgian Revival traditions, but feels entirely fresh and contemporary.

"The program was to create a house with a sense of permanence, a residence that looks as if it had always been there," says Smith. "My clients, originally from the East Coast, wanted an elegant distillation of a Georgian country house. Our approach was to create a legacy for the family in a style that would evoke the history of Georgian design but with a simpler, more family friendly scale and feeling."

Smith's brief was expressed in both the exterior and the interior, in the overall planning, placement and design, but in every molding and plaster scroll, as well as the interior architectural detailing and materials of the house.

The approach of the Eric J. Smith Architect firm is meticulous. The residence was placed on the site with extreme care and attention to the landscape so that it is at home

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The dining room is given distinction and grace with Gracie handpainted wallpaper with California birds depicted in the landscape scene. The triple hung windows and doorways are framed with highly detailed moldings that add an architectural boldness to the room.

ABOVE A columned bronze conservatory window with Gothik arches opens the kitchen and breakfast room to the landscape. The countertop on the island is tiger maple. An oculus window above the sink connects to the family room. OPPOSITE The dramatic bronze lantern with quatrefoil detailing was custom made. The limestone floor in the conservatory/breakfast room has a radiant heating system.

among large heritage Live Oak trees. The harmonious result is the sense that the trees have grown up around the house.

The interior detailing and materials, which include paneling of Nordic pine, were selected to enhance the Old World feeling, with a clear sense of traditional craftsmanship. This classical approach is also expressed in the rift cut English brown oak floors, selected for their tight grain and clarity. The pine paneled library was custom built and installed by Charles Manners and Company, a traditional firm based in Shropshire, England.

Throughout the house are French polished, crotch veneered mahogany paneled doors and custom cabinetry. Every surface and fixture has a provenance: The door hardware is in historically inspired patterns from Butler and Company, New York; and the custom plaster cornices and ornamental features were fabricated and installed by Troika.

Smith's approach is very hands-on."I started with a written program, the clients' wish list," he says. "I set up a clear dialogue so they could visualize each detail and proportion." Smith and his team prepared small hand sketched plans, mockups, full-sized pieces of wall assembly, and drafted perspectives that illustrated and revealed the design program, the siting, general room functions, and the overall design of spaces.

"We progressed to scale drawings, visualized with interior renderings, scale models of both interior rooms and the exterior of the house," says the architect. Samples and mockups were then prepared for approval so that his clients had a touchable experience of residence.

ABOVE The double height recessed windows are fitted with motorized shades but are free of the clutter of curtains. The floors are oak. OPPOSITE Random width English brown oak planks, set above a radiant heating system, give the entry hallway a traditional style. Architect Eric J. Smith perfected every detail of this expansive space, adding a series of columns for balance, and specifying triple hung windows to fill rooms with light.

"As we detailed everything built inside the house, including the cabinets and doors, we were also working with a team of engineers to plan the complex structural issues," says Smith. Engineering was particularly challenging for this house as it is built on expansive soil and within the seismic design codes. Construction included structural steel.

"I always tell my colleagues that the most important part of our job is to make sure that clients are able to see what they are going to get," says Smith. "It is essential that we use many techniques so that they are able to experience as much of the house as possible before it is built."

The complex project, which included interior architecture, took two years. In addition to Eric J. Smith, principal, the team included Ken Yost, project architect, and Susan Salsbury, Alejandra Blanco and Igor Idak, staff architects. The general contractor was Ryan Associates, led by Paul Ryan with Robin Beauchamp, project supervisor.

The landscape architect was Cummin Associates, directed by Peter Cummin with Brian Chandler.

"From the start, this project was quality driven," says Smith. "These were dream clients, willing to commit to the time it takes to create a house of this stature."