

# Lamorinda OUR HOMES

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*Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian*

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## Two Lafayette Homes on AIA Tours

By Cathy Dausman

Six East Bay homes – two each in Berkeley, Oakland and Lafayette – are featured in this year’s American Institute of Architects East Bay Home Tours on Aug. 10. The Lafayette homes are as different as night and day. One is a multi-acre estate, the other an in-law add-on. One was built in 1929; the other is less than 10 years old. But large or small, what they both do well is blur the lines between nature and home.

It is impossible to focus on the architectural details alone of Rancho Diablo in a 90 minute tour. Better to have nine days, or even 90. One even gets lost in the details that fill each room – the light, the furnishings, paintings, window placements, architectural collections and careful blending of old and new space.

Built in 1929 by society doctor Clarence Wills, it almost didn’t survive. His daughter Helen Wills Moody didn’t like the house (a story for another time), and deeded it to the University of California, Berkeley. UC Berkeley nearly sold it to a developer, who, the thinking goes, surely would have torn it down.

Instead current owner/architect Lucia Howard bought the house in 1989 and became its second owner. She named it Rancho Diablo because it faced Mt. Diablo and because of her “love of things devilish.”

“It was built to beat the band,” Howard said of the original home, which had foot-thick brick walls, hand forged hardware and a handmade clay tile roof. Good thing it was, because 1989 was also the year of the Loma Prieta earthquake.

It “stood pretty firm” then, Howard said.

Howard restored the home before moving in, and began serious renovations in 2000. The original house footprint has been well preserved, with its hand-painted California Faience tiles still in evidence and centuries-old first-growth hand hewn redwood which frames many archways. Howard planned the additions like bookends on either side of the original house.

Where the old wood is heavy and dark, she brought in heavy but light colored wood in the new wings; where there was brick, the new wings feature rough stucco. Light fir in wide strips echo the board and batten wall covering in the old house section.



*A blueprint of Rancho Diablo was etched into the fireplace flu in the living room.*

*Photo Cathy Dausman*

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