



above:
 "Found" items and sunny colors infuse the living room of B.J.'s guest house.

opposite:
 Watched over by some acrylic livestock, B.J. and Zelda share a moment in the yard in front of the guest house "barn."



It's 1,647 miles from the broad golden swells of Nebraska cornfields and 46 miles from her sleek San Francisco apartment on Russian Hill, but B.J. Droubi's Springs-area bungalow and guest house provide an easy median where her many influences intertwine—in one of her favorite communities. With a cow here and there.

On a mild, milk-white day in January, B.J. sits on her living room sofa, chatting over coffee with her friend and interior designer Ken Fulk of Ken Fulk Design. There's a fire in the fireplace, and outside the sun slowly dilutes the cloud cover, sending the thickest formations rising to the top like cream. Light filters through the curtains and cushions of the deep window seat, shines her fir floors and sculpts Zelda, a snoozing shar-pei German shepherd mix, in noble bronze.

Walking in, it's easy to understand why visitors have a difficult time leaving B.J.'s Springs cottage and guest house. And why it's so wonderful to arrive.

Comfort "first and foremost" is what guides B.J.'s style and living sensibilities. In her main cottage, a Craftsman-style

City house, country house

There's a bit of both in B.J. Droubi's Glamour Shack

STORY + PHOTOGRAPHY SARAH BERKLEY



above:
The open floor plan in B.J.'s living room creates a feeling of spaciousness.

top right:
B.J.'s lushly appointed living room exemplifies elegance without the fuss.

bottom right:
The porch is the perfect place for fresh air and privacy, where B.J. shares a glass of wine with her designer and friend, Ken Fulk of Ken Fulk Design.

ingenuity and solid country simplicity temper lush, sophisticated decor.

"I come here and I feel my blood pressure drop," she says.

Reminiscing with Ken on the intricacies of her home and guest house renovation reveals just how intensive that overhaul was, but also how two derelict houses galvanized B.J.'s penchant for process itself—the agonizing, delightful challenge of it all.

"I'm never drawn to something that is a finished piece," she says.

From Ransack to Glamour Shack

It's been two years since, driving up a narrow Fetters Hot Springs road, B.J. first came upon two dilapidated, paint-peeled 1920s-era ruins on a singular lot. She was instantly hooked.

While some friends and associates recoiled in horror at the amount of work and money it would require to restore the disheveled blights, B.J. laughingly attests that the property harbored "some innate charm that only I could see."

And the ultimate clincher?

The smaller bungalow "had a covered front porch," beams B.J., who radiates with memory of the many summers spent on her grandparents' corn and soybean farm in Fremont, Nebraska—a place "where every house has a front porch."

The intrepid founder of her own company and a luminary in the Bay Area

real estate world, B.J. is no stranger to following her entrepreneurial heart.

Though she grew up primarily in Tucson, Arizona, her dear Nebraska farm never left her blood. She moved to San Francisco at age 20, and, out of a small office in Noe Valley, built what soon became a wildly booming independent business, Droubi Real Estate. (Last year she sold the company to her daughter and son-in-law and now works just as a buyer's agent.)

Though she still enjoys the pace of city life, B.J. began to seek a getaway refuge in a relaxed, more rural milieu. Enter Sonoma Valley, the perfect hybrid of culture and country, and a place she was familiar with because of her Springs-area branch office.

What followed can only be described as a pure labor of love: a painstakingly executed renovation of the vintage houses. The smaller of the two would become her one-bedroom bungalow, or what B.J. now refers to as her "glamour shack," and the larger, a guest house.

Both were far from glamorous when she first took the sad site under her wing: the two residences had collectively reached their apogee of uninhabitable despair and deterioration. Plagued by mold, riddled with termites and neglected by an indifferent landlord, "Nothing had been (fixed or upgraded) for 50 years," said B.J. The foundations of the two houses were so bad, "We actually had them taken down to the studs."



"B.J.'s houses always have to be pretty, but without the frills. ...Nothing in this house is 'precious'."
- Ken Fulk of Ken Fulk Design.

Over the course of roughly two years, a beautiful reincarnation of the buildings unfolded, with architecture remaining true to the original design (excepting some minor, largely internal upgrades).

During that time B.J. worked closely with a qualified crew, including general contractor Jon Ballard, landscaper Scott Anderson and architects Bob Benz and Amy Alper. Along with Ken, whose shrewd aesthetic eye B.J. "trusts implicitly," she attributes the project's success largely to this team of talented experts.

Together they helped her to accentuate the lot's unique treasures, from incorporating the property's bounty of giant, primordial boulders to preserving a cluster of cypress trees and wrapping the guest house porch around a towering redwood.

B.J. even found a stone inscribed with a charming 1920s-era script spelling "Rocky Haven." She has since showcased the stone





in her yard and filled in the letters with a bright mosaic of pebbles.

Around B.J.'s home, landscaper Anderson has created an understated cottage-style garden with native plants in a variety of forms and textures. Here and there around its peripheries, local artist Nerio Festa's industrial nouveau gates and stair railings unfurl in wrought-iron loops and squiggles, suspending rocks within the spirals of their bars.

The final results transformed B.J.'s property into a verdant vacation home and "this wonderful oasis," says Ken.

A Brilliant Barn-Raising

Just up the garden path, her 1,100-square-foot red "barn" guest house is flooded with relaxed light, patchwork quilt hues and playful, larger-than-life-antiques.

Originally the "barn" was just a residence and a bit architecturally bland. But in a stroke of whimsical genius, Ken and B.J. reinvented it as a barn. After a few coats of rustic red paint, a metal awning over the door and some old hay feeders installed as planters, the barn's simulated country twang was pitch perfect. B.J. even commissioned local artist Ellen Into to paint an acrylic cow gazing through a framed "window" on the exterior wall. In keeping with the barn's provincial pragmatism and offering a modern twist, Ken had corrugated steel fencing wrapped around the guest house porch.



Inside, batten board wall treatments and a vaulted ceiling reinforce the rural tone in the living room.

Ken, who first launched his illustrious design career staging homes for B.J., knows her well. He knew she would love the shiny old Wedgewood 1930s stove and the giant ramshackle farm signs he hunted down for her, among countless other "found" items.

The tone here is definitely more "casual and fun" than the main bungalow, he says. Bright textiles, overstuffed furniture and weathered relics --like a vintage bench or an old picket fence fragment for a headboard-- lighten the mood without lapsing into cliché.

The guest house will continue to comfortably accommodate B.J.'s growing family. Her daughter Lamisse expects her



top left: Chrome gleams on a old Wedgwood stove in the guest house kitchen.

above: In the main house, Stacia Brady's Holstein looks over B.J.'s kitchen table.

left: A distressed picket fence becomes a headboard in the guest bedroom.

first child in April. B.J.'s other daughter Christina will wed in July. As a mother and soon-to-be grandmother, B.J. admits there's nothing better than being able to make her Springs dwelling a memorable retreat for them, too. Since both children are Bay Area residents, the Sonoma house is a reasonable drive away.

The Springs

As for the neighborhood, B.J. says she was immediately drawn to the culturally diverse and thriving corridor of the Springs. She can walk a few blocks to the world-renowned Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa and partake of a five-star meal. But she equally delights in the area's less polished charms, from the densely gnarled grid of old bungalows to the babble of ducks and chickens in surrounding back yards.

The area's mix of vintage cottages and houses "charmed me," she says. "It is reminiscent of (San Francisco's) Bernal Heights neighborhood with the hills and

small lots and close-knit neighbors."

Before settling on the site, B.J. was admonished by a number of acquaintances to buy only real estate on Sonoma's more affluent east side.

"I've been surprised by the condescension expressed about the Springs area," she muses, adding that she wouldn't dream of moving. "I thoroughly enjoy my neighborhood and my wonderful neighbors."

Making Small Count

When given the choice, buyers will often shy away from smaller living spaces, but that's precisely what B.J. wanted in her snug 900-square-foot refuge. Her main cottage features an open floor plan for its kitchen, living and dining rooms, and also houses her library, master bedroom and bath. B.J.'s curtained front porch adds a luminous additional space for entertaining guests, reading or dining by candlelight. It truly is her "favorite part" of the house, she says.

The porch itself is beautiful; sitting outside on this winter's day, one can see the calligraphy of bare tree branches just beyond the railing and hear echoes of a lively neighborhood - chatting joggers, dog-walkers, chickens ruffling and dispersing as cars wind slowly up the serpentine street.

But the porch's truly unique asset is a superficial, not architectural, one: floor-to-ceiling curtains.

"I wanted an outdoor space, but I don't like being in the sun," B.J. says.

The curtains, made of a durable, umbrella-strong fabric, control the quality of light; even if half-drawn, they envelop the space with a sense of seclusion. This addition instantly transformed it "from a porch to a room," says Ken.

By blurring the lines between inside and out, it lends the small cottage a spaciousness that still feels filtered and private. The porch's fir floors were also left unpainted to match the interior floors and augment that sense of continuity.

The kitchen's breezy layout adds another boon to the bungalow's streamlined flow. Because they're low and protrude over countertops, overhead cupboards will often exacerbate the claustrophobic "boxiness" of a tiny kitchen. Ken banned overhead cabinets in B.J.'s kitchen and instead concentrated the bulk of the storage below

the counters and through an extensive pantry along a far wall. He also used unobtrusive elements like a downdraft stove.

At first glance, the overall effect is one in which "you're not even aware it's a kitchen," says B.J.

Configuring ample storage space is paramount in designing a small house; one obvious reason is limited space, while another is mitigating clutter. Inspired by a style she found in Richard Sexton's "The Cottage Book," B.J. hired an experienced craftsman, Brian Bauer of Twin Lakes Cabinetry, to embed cabinets and storage spaces seamlessly throughout the house: the kitchen pantry, the library bookshelves, storage chests under the window seats and wall-to-wall cupboards in her airy dressing room. The consistent formula-chrome cup handles on a creamy white finish--resonates with a vintage, spic-and-span ingenuity reminiscent of a ship's cabin.

Other space-saving features of the cottage include a discreet flat-screen television in the wall and a series of speakers installed discreetly in the ceiling, so that B.J., a pianist and a jazz enthusiast, can pipe her music throughout the whole house - without the bulk of an entertainment center.

The Right Touches

After years collaborating for her clients and her own debonair digs, B.J. and Ken speak in the easy shorthand of old friends, finishing each other's sentences and laughing over the various tribulations, tales and triumphs they've experienced together. But when getting down to business, the two innately know what they're doing and what choices feel right.

Ken also knew that for B.J.'s main cottage, the look couldn't be too "citized."

"B.J. came with lots of art and furniture from her former city life - we wanted to incorporate it, but not duplicate it. ... so we edited and altered until we came up with the right balance."

Describing B.J.'s tastes as feminine but not fussy, "B.J.'s houses always have to be pretty - but without the frills," he says. "Nothing in this house is 'precious.'"

Take the leather-bound leopard skin rug in the living room: Although it originally migrated from B.J.'s glamorous city bedroom, "Here it feels perfect for country

life; muddy feet and muddy paws never show," Ken says. (And after all, this is a "glamour" shack.)

Similar to Ken, B.J. has a marvelous knack for finding and breathing fresh life into things. Like the two old fireplace mantels she happened to find on eBay for her main bungalow and guest house. Or her embellished, quirky old piano.

These artifacts - with all their stubborn histories and glorious flaws - are reinvigorated in a refined and modern context.

"It's interesting how things can transform themselves," says B.J., and "how to make a piece fit."

And like the final accessory that "makes" the dress, B.J.'s cottage comes together under the brush strokes of a subtle color palette.

"There's a soft edge to the colors (in B.J.'s houses)," says Ken. "Even when bright, they are never screaming."

As hues that Ken must have plucked straight from the plant kingdom, the living room's mossy mustard and the kitchen's pale celadon seem to breathe a photosynthetic energy into the cottage, resulting in an organic, insular glow no matter what the time of day.

And then there are the cows.

Adding a country feel more Bohemian than bumpkin, cows permeate the most unusual places in B.J.'s abode, from local artist Stacia Brady's oversized acrylic-on-wood Holstein to the cow on the barn wall. The dramatic contrasts and frank depiction of these creatures makes them anything but trite folk art; from their perches throughout B.J.'s home, their obsidian eyes emit a regal sheen.

To B.J. they recall another life on that faraway farm in Nebraska.

"I guess I just have a thing for cows," she smiles.

She also has a penchant for "creating things that last."

"If you do them right, 50 years from now they'll still be around," she says, and that's what she hopes of her "glamour shack" and guest house.

"People are always talking 'resale' - but that creates homes that are bland and boring. Forget resale - within reason, of course," she cautions with a smile. When it comes down to it, "The key is not to do it for any other person but yourself."