

DISTINGUISHED DIGS

Mission Hills home rebuilt from the ashes — only better

BY RON HAM
SPECIAL TO THE UNION-TRIBUNE

Steven Shuchter was not surprised seven years ago when the media contacted him during the

Cedar Fire, a devastating wildfire that killed 15 people and destroyed more than 2,000 homes in the county. He is a psychiatrist, and grief is one of his areas of specialty.

About a week later he and his wife, Susan, had to deal with their own grief when an electrical malfunction set their Mission Hills home ablaze, gutting it. No one was hurt, luckily, but the Shuchters faced the daunting task of finding another place to live and then figuring out what to do next.

"Initially we were just in shock," said Shuchter, a retired UCSD professor who still has a part-time psychiatric practice. He and Susan, an internist at Mercy Hospital, had lived in the house on Hermosa Way for 28 years and raised three daughters there, and suddenly they were without a place to sleep.

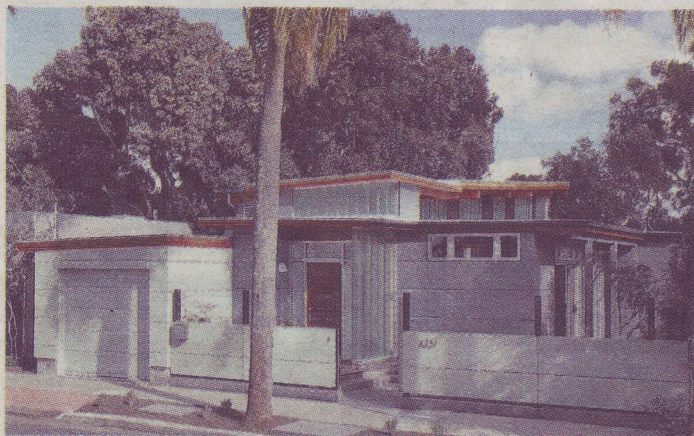
Two years later the couple moved into an eye-catching new house on the same lot that featured a 23-foot ceiling with Douglas fir beams, uncovered

vertical steel beams, and lots of glass. Continuing what Shuchter calls "industrial style," the windows were framed in aluminum and the exterior was covered with cement fiber board siding — non-flammable, impervious to insects and low-maintenance.

La Jolla Architect Heather Johnston said there were some challenges in the rebuild, which she dubbed the Phoenix Project. To speed up the permit process, for instance, they stuck with the footprint of the old house — constructed in pieces in the 1920s and 1970s.

"The design challenge: to insert a new home full of light and promise into this established neighborhood, using a template from the past," she wrote on her website.

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The entrance to the Shuchter home in Mission Hills shows off its gray siding made of cement fiber board. Photos provided by Heather Johnston.



Counters in the kitchen are topped with soapstone and zinc. The cabinets have a eucalyptus veneer.



This rear view of the Shuchter home is from across the canyon.

Photos provided by Heather Johnston

PHOENIX PROJECT

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So to give the place a new look while keeping the same floor area, 2,500 square feet, and the same number of bedrooms (4) and bathrooms (3), they raised the top floor's ceiling and added new materials.

Channel glass lets in lots of light and because of its strength is used for huge windows as well as room dividers.

Soapstone covers much of the kitchen counter space, and the rest is topped with zinc, which acquires a desirable patina with use.

Cabinets throughout the home have striking veneers of eucalyptus.

The place also features a 900-square-foot, roof-top deck with a view of the backyard canyon, and a wet bar downstairs in the family room.

Shuchter remembers that back in 2003 it was emotionally tough sifting through the ashes in search of anything that could be salvaged from the fire.

Fortunately, some of their possessions stored in the basement



The high ceiling is remarkable for vertical steel beams, Douglas fir cross beams and channel glass windows.

and garage escaped damage.

Some important family mementos inside the main house also survived

"We were most concerned about the kids' photo albums," Shuchter said.

Apparently they were packed so tightly that oxygen needed to feed the fire couldn't reach all of them.

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