

THE REMODEL

Making modern even more so

With original plans in hand, Tarzana homeowners let Gregory Ain's bold geometry guide their update.

By **JEFF SPURRIER**
Special to The Times

WHEN Jerry and Alan Simmons decided to remodel their 1963 Gregory Ain-designed

house in Tarzana, they knew they would save as many original elements as possible and preserve the mid-century modern feel as best they could.

Working from Ain's drawings, Jerry spent months looking for the right 7-foot panel of combed wood for the eaves and even longer in search of the exact American Standard toilet in Ain's original. Work on the copper-plated fireplace, shellacked a distressingly ugly shoe-polish brown, lasted four years.

But those were all simple tasks compared with the hexagons.

The Tarzana house is one of Ain's last custom homes and represents a departure from the International Style for which he is best known. The defining motif here is the hexagon, most notably seen in twin hexagonal ceilings in the living-dining room downstairs and the master suite upstairs.

"The hexagons do dominate the house," Jerry says. "My husband always says there are no right angles anywhere here."

The one room that needed to be taken down to the studs was the master suite, a post-Ain addition in what had been a 400-square-foot aviary. The question for the Simmons: What to keep and what to throw away?

"It was almost like playing with tangram," architect Alice Fung says, referring to the Chinese puzzle.

She and partner Michael Blatt were hired for the remodel, their third project with the Simmons.

"With the hexagon, it can be very centering," Fung says. "But at the same time, if you take it off center, work off the trajectory of the sides — which is what this house is based on —

you end up with a lot of unexpected geometries."

The 1970s addition upstairs was defined by a central hallway that bisected the space, with the sleeping area and fireplace on one side and twin closets on the other; the bathroom lay behind the closets, at the end of the hallway. It's essentially a rectangle, Blatt says.

"It wouldn't have been hard to drop a flat ceiling in there, losing the hexagons, and just start from scratch," he says. "But then it would have none of the character of the rest of the house. It would have no character at all."

The biggest challenge was creating a large closet for Jerry's vintage clothing yet making the bathroom that lies beyond still feel like part of the suite.

Fung and Blatt's solution was to tweak the bed, backing it up against an angled closet wall. This move was balanced by negative spaces under the nightstands and again in the walkway leading back to the bathroom,

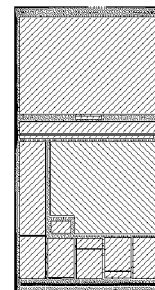
where irregular Oceanside Glasstile adds a period vibe behind the free-standing Spoon tub by Agape.

"The bathroom is a vision of something that didn't exist in Ain's day," Fung says. "The tub is made of a composite that didn't exist and the bathroom is much bigger, a much more luxurious concept."

THE architects ripped out the carpet and put in cork flooring, in keeping with the house's 1960s origins. They added metal casement windows and enclosed the walk-in closet in ash, so it looked more like fine cabinetry than simple storage.

Ash had been used throughout the house, but the previous owners had bleached it, so Simmons spent months restoring it.

"The good thing about working off the hexagon is we don't need to create opportunities to make these rooms interesting," Fung says. "You can create these very dynamic movements and still be true to what the house was



originally.”

Ain was stylistically consistent throughout his career, she says, but this house with its hexagons is unlike any other house he designed.

“With this geometry, he imposed a set of rules on the house. We didn’t break them, but we did play with them,” Fung says. “Our approach was neither to ignore what he did nor to think exactly how he would have done it. We took the angles and the ideas that we thought were stronger and interpreted them.”

The essence of Fung and Blatt’s design was to show off the geometry whenever possible yet not let the hexagons dictate the centers of the spaces.

Thanks to original plans that the Simmons tracked down from the UC Santa Barbara art museum’s Architecture and Design Collection, Fung and Blatt were able to add elements that Ain had planned for the house but had never realized.

In the living room-dining area, Ain had sketched in a built-in table and couch. The architects added both pieces, plus a leaf for the table that Ain had sketched as a triangle cantilevered from the wall.

One Ain touch that was realized back in the ’60s: an X-shaped track in the living room that allowed shoji screens to slide out and divide the space.

“The shoji screens were a feature

we loved when we bought the house,” Jerry says. “But in all our years here we never used them.”

She also never considered taking them out. As impractical as the screens are for the couple, they see them as integral parts of the original design. To take them out would have made the house less Ain.

That’s the challenge for many in Southern California, where now-classic homes are starting to need restoration and, in some cases, updating in order to function for a new era. Things change, Fung says.

In an ideal world, everything from the past could be made to work for the present, but that’s not always possible.

“Frank Lloyd Wright remodeled a number of his own houses, sometimes going back 40 years to work on a previous project,” she says. “He’s respectful to his original design, but how he remodeled them was informed by his more modern sensibility.”

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ON THE WEB

See more of the materials and geometry at play in this house.

Look for the photo gallery posted with this article at latimes.com/home.



Photographs by MEL MELCON Los Angeles Times

HEXAGONS: Jerry Simmons stands in the family room of her Tarzana home, designed by Gregory Ain in 1963, one of the noted Los Angeles architect's last custom houses.



SLEEK: A built-in table and cantilevered leaf were added, based on sketches by Ain that the Simmonses found at UC Santa Barbara's art museum. Below, architect Alice Fung walks on the cork floor, reflecting the home's 1960s origins, in the renovated master suite.

STRONG LINES: Colored panels brighten the exterior of the custom house. Fung says she and partner Michael Blatt didn't break Ain's design rules, but they "did play with them."

