

CAN THIS HOME
BE GREENED?

Condo Conversion

Carol Venolia

A SAN FRANCISCO APARTMENT TRANSFORMS FROM BACHELOR PAD TO COUPLE'S NEST.

"My fiance and I are struggling to implement house-greening ideas into our apartment. We can't control other units, yet I feel compelled to do the best I can where I do have control." —Alexandra Tower



PATRICK AND ALEXANDRA are turning their condo into a home that reflects their shared values.



THE LIVING ROOM'S RED WALLS were painted by a previous tenant. Alex and Patrick will cover them with earth plaster for a warmer feeling and less contrast with the bright sky.

Photos by Jeremy Harris

Alexandra Tower and Patrick Ewers have interconnected backgrounds: Patrick was born in the United States and raised in Germany, while Alex was born in Germany and raised in the States. Both have dual citizenship, and they speak "a strange mixture of English and German" when they're together.

Six years ago, Patrick fell in love with San Francisco; as a high-tech entrepreneur, he found it the perfect balance between European lifestyle and American commerce. Meanwhile, Alex was getting a master's degree in holistic health education at John F. Kennedy University and writing her thesis on the effects of surrounding environments on human health and well-being.

When the couple met two years ago, Patrick was living in a rented apartment with a view of the San Francisco Bay. "I wanted us to move to a new place together," Alex says, "but we decided to buy Patrick's apartment and stay here for a while." They're making the place theirs by transforming one room at a time. "Remodeling the kitchen and rearranging the closets has shifted my relationship to this place, which formerly didn't reflect who I am," she says. "I have a more romantic, eclectic taste, whereas Patrick prefers modern, clean design. We're discovering that our separate personalities can be expressed with furniture and colors that reflect nature. Our rule is that whatever we buy has to be practical *and* beautiful. That way we both feel part of the space we create."

Can YOUR Home Be Greened?

Send us information on your home and what you'd like to accomplish in it. You could be the lucky recipient of a visit from one of our eco-experts. To submit your home or get more information, contact NaturalHome@NaturalHomeMagazine.com or write Can This Home Be Greened?, 1503 SW 42nd St., Topeka, KS 66609-1265.

CAN THIS HOME BE GREENED?

PRIORITY #1 Is carpet the culprit?

PROBLEM: The 15-year-old wall-to-wall carpet looks funky, and Alex suspects it might have contributed to a bronchial infection she had for seven months. (Carpet is infamous for harboring dirt, dust and mold). Though the couple would like to replace the carpet with hardwood, the homeowner's association requires that 60 percent of the floor area be carpeted to keep the building quiet.

SOLUTION: Linda Delair from Green Fusion Design Center dropped by to offer advice on materials selection. For durability, noise reduction and health, she recommends Bio-Floor wool carpet with jute backing in the bedroom and stairwell. For the entry area, she suggests Natural Cork plank flooring; cork is sustainably harvested and naturally antimicrobial and antibacterial. In the hallway and living room, she recommends Flor carpet tiles, made from primarily recycled or renewable materials in an energy-efficient process. The carpet squares are even designed to be recycled.

COST: Bio-Floor carpet: \$63 per square yard (includes carpet, pad and installation). Natural Cork plank flooring: \$10 per square foot, installed (less if you do it yourself). Flor carpet tiles: \$6 to \$25 per 19.7-inch square tile (install them yourself).

PRIORITY #2 How's the air in there?

PROBLEM: With her background in environmental health, Alex knows it's possible to have invisible problems in the air: volatile organic compounds (VOCs), mold, asbestos, inadequate fresh air. She didn't know if the apartment had an air-quality problem, but she wanted to be sure.

SOLUTION: We called on Matt Golden, president of Sustainable Spaces, a San Francisco company that specializes in applying building science to improve indoor air quality, energy efficiency and home comfort. Golden installed an Environmental CheckUP Monitor to record levels of particulates, VOCs, carbon monoxide, temperature and humidity inside the condo for several days. Overall, the monitor indicated there were no major air-quality problems. "That makes me happy," Alex says. "I don't have to worry that we live in a sick apartment."

The story isn't over, however; Alex and Patrick should be careful not to introduce new VOC sources, such as from paints. In addition to their thoughtful floorcovering selections, they need to use least-toxic products when they paint their "scuffed" walls. Alex fell in love with American Clay's nontoxic earth plaster and has decided to use it on the hallway and living room walls. Elsewhere, they'll go with AFM Safecoat paints.

COST: Five days of Environmental CheckUP monitoring: \$295. American Clay plaster: \$75 for a bag that covers about 120 square feet (plus \$250 for an optional day-long workshop on how to apply it). AFM Safecoat paint: \$30 per gallon (covers about 350 square feet).

PRIORITY #3 Field of bad dreams

PROBLEM: The living room reflects Patrick's attraction to high-tech toys: computers, electronic gadgets, surround sound and projection equipment for big-screen TV viewing. Alex worries about the electromagnetic fields they generate.

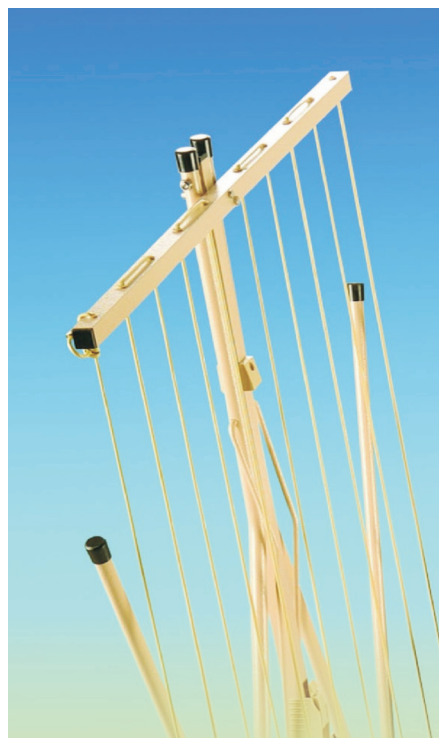
SOLUTION: Golden pulled out a gauss meter, which measures electromagnetic fields (EMFs). To everyone's relief, he found no significant EMFs in the bedroom; bedside clocks or televisions on the other side of the wall can create fields that may disrupt sleep and other biological processes. (Golden is careful to say that the evidence about health effects of EMFs is still mixed, but he agrees with Alex that it's a good idea to avoid high fields for prolonged periods.)

Moving into the living areas, Golden found high levels of EMFs at the computer, projector and two-wire low-voltage lighting system in the stairwell, but the fields dropped off quickly with distance from the source. So, unless Alex and Patrick spend hours snuggled up to these electronic devices, they're probably safe. Marriage crisis averted!

COST: Screening was included in Golden's overall home testing fee (\$295). No remediation required.



Alex was concerned that Patrick's ELECTRONICS might be creating harmful electromagnetic fields, but a preliminary screening assuaged her fears.



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Just where the couple would like privacy and quiet, the BEDROOM WINDOW overlooks a noisy courtyard.

PRIORITY #4 A bathroom of their own

PROBLEM: A previous tenant remodeled the bathroom in ways that were aesthetically odd and functionally awkward for the couple. They want to replace plumbing fixtures with water-efficient models, remove the black tile that's hard to keep clean, and use more sensual, eco-friendly finish materials. Patrick wants a tub to soak in.

SOLUTION: Delair recommends Forbo's Marmoleum natural linoleum for the floor. "It's not cold to the touch, and it's made of linseed oil, wood flour, pine rosin, natural pigments and limestone powder," she says. In addition, she suggests a dual-flush, water-conserving toilet from Toto and a low-flow, water-filter showerhead. Alex and Patrick will reuse the existing sink ("nothing wrong with it") and install it in a vanity custom-made from recycled barn wood. I suggest they replace their standard-issue bathtub with a small soaking tub such as the Greek model by Kohler, which uses much less water than larger styles. To surround the tub, Delair recommends Richlite—a surface product made with paper, often used for countertops. Richlite's earthy colors will go well with the Marmoleum palette.

COST: Marmoleum: \$7 to \$9 per square foot, installed. Toto toilet: \$400. Vanity: \$1,500. Kohler Greek tub: \$1,300. Water-filter showerhead: \$40. Richlite surround: \$80 per square foot, installed.

PRIORITY #5 To sleep, perchance to breathe

PROBLEM: Alex and Patrick like to sleep with a window open for fresh air, but their bedroom overlooks a courtyard that brings them the sounds of their neighbor's late-night parties, arguments, you name it.

SOLUTION: Golden suggests installing an exhaust fan on a programmable timer in the bedroom. (He recommends Panasonic for quality and quietness.) As the fan pulls air out of the bedroom, it would suck fresh air in from elsewhere. In this case, the best bet is to keep the bedroom door open and a window on the other (quieter) side of the apartment cracked open at night. If Alex and Patrick prefer to keep the bedroom door closed, Golden suggests installing a "return air path," which has a grille on either side of the wall and a membrane in the middle that blocks sound and light, but allows air in.

COST: Panasonic fan: \$1,250, installed. Programmable timer: \$125, installed. Return air path: \$375, installed. **NH**

CAROL VENOLIA is an eco-architect and coauthor, with Kelly Lerner, of [Natural Remodeling for the Not-So-Green House](#) (Lark Books, 2006). CarolV@NaturalHomeMagazine.com



The bathroom's COLD COLORS and hard surfaces lack the earthy feel the couple wants.

Rx AT YOUR HOUSE {bring the wisdom home}

- ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING** If you're concerned about indoor air pollutants, consider having a professional measure for VOCs, mold spores and other hazards.
- DON'T INTRODUCE TOXINS** Be careful not to bring new hazards into your living space. Carpets, paints and cabinets can be laden with chemicals, such as VOCs, formaldehyde and biocides (antimicrobial treatments that will outgas toxic pollutants into your home).
- REUSE WHAT YOU'VE GOT** Remodeling doesn't require you to throw out everything. Perhaps your serviceable kitchen cabinets just need a new finish and some updated hardware.
- GET ADEQUATE VENTILATION** It's a good idea to have the air pressurization of your house professionally tested (EnergyConservatory.com has a national list of contractors). An expert can advise you on the best strategies for sealing and ventilating your home.
- AVOID HIGH EMFS** An EMF monitoring specialist will focus on areas where you spend the most time, such as your bed or favorite chair. Also check the usual suspects: microwave oven, bedside clock, television, computer, refrigerator.

RESOURCES

GREEN FUSION DESIGN CENTER
(415) 454-0174
GreenFusionDesignCenter.com
retail store and education center for natural building materials and furnishings

SUSTAINABLE SPACES
(877) 554-7336
SustainableSpaces.com
identifies ways to improve indoor air quality and energy efficiency

AMERICAN CLAY
(866) 404-1634
AmericanClay.com
premixed clay plasters

AFM SAFECOAT
(800) 239-0321
AFMSafecoat.com
no-VOC paints

EARTH WEAVE
(706) 278-8200
EarthWeave.com
Bio-Floor nontoxic wool carpeting

INTERFACE
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InterfaceFlor.com
FLOR recyclable carpet tiles

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TheMarmoleumStore.com
natural linoleum

NATURAL CORK
(800) 404-2675
NaturalCork.com
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TOTO
TotoUSA.com
low-water toilets