Point of Departure

With a lifetime of great houses behind them, a couple chooses to simplify—on a hallowed stretch of California coastline.

BY JAIME GROSS
On a recent Friday afternoon, Connie Riddler welcomes a visitor to her just-renovated home in Pebble Beach, California, and then steps out her back door, binoculars in hand, to scan the horizon for her husband. Saying him in the distance, she holters, "Tony!" and quickly hops into a golf cart to chase him down on the ninth hole of the Cypress Point golf course, which is consistently ranked one of the most spectacular in the world. Later, seated on a sofa framed by a backdrop of sunbathed dunes and the undulating fairways beyond, the couple reminisce about the path that led them to this spot and the changes it heralded: a new phase in their lives and an embrace of smaller, more pared-down living.

Their move was a long time in coming. The Riddlers (he is the former CEO and chairman of Knight Ridder newspapers; she is a retired attorney) joined the Cypress Point Club in 1973 while still in their thirties; at the time they were the youngest members (they’re both sixty-nine now), and they would drive down on weekends from the Bay Area. They’d always hoped to acquire a house on the course, but with only eleven dwellings and no plan on the club’s part to build more, it seemed like a fantasy. In 2008, though, a 2,600-square-foot bungalow with two outbuildings became available after the owner, a nonagenarian widow, passed away. The sixties stucco home was only a humble one-bedroom, but its location—overlooking four choice fairways, with the Pacific and its rock-stream coastline glittering in the distance—was superb.

For the Riddlers it felt like kismet, and they swiftly put in an offer. Then they speed dialed their daughter, Katie Riddler, a celebrated interior designer in New York City known for her creative, often Eastern-influenced interiors, and asked for her help. Katie, in turn, enlisted her husband, architect Peter Pennoyer, whose eponymous firm handles some of the most important residential preservation in New York. The pair collaborated occasionally. “He’s my go-to guy for family work,” Katie admits. “Every detail is thought through perfectly, and he’s so clever with the elements that make a project sing.”

Katie wasn’t surprised by her parents’ call; after all, she’d already decorated five houses for them over the past two decades in a diverse range of styles, from traditional and antiques-filled for a home in Miami Beach to tropical modern for a place in

Clockwise from top left: A guest-room headboard covered with fabric from London-based textile company Molbaher; a ceramic Chinese dog, inherited from Great-uncle Joe; Katie at the dining-room table, which is oriented to take full advantage of the dunes and the Pacific; Draper Bros. apple-green curtains and the Ridders’ beloved four-poster bed in the master bedroom; a custom ottoman from Antique Textiles; orange and yellow vases by Middle Kingdom, a maker of contemporary porcelain.
A More Colorful Outlook

Katie Ridder offers up four ways to plot your escape from a neutral interior.

1. Stencil-based Venetian-glass chandeliers are a favorite of Katie’s. “Colored glass lends casualness to a room,” she explains. “Vintage chandeliers are most prevalent in blues and greens,” which coordinate well with seaside residences. If a vintage example eludes you, try Jan Showers’s Elizabeth chandeliers. Above: 814.332.2688; janshowers.com.

2. Katie often brightens a living room or library with pillows and ottomans upholstered in pied-à-terre fabrics from Virginia Di Sciascio, of Antique Textiles, in New York City. “Virginia cuts up antique textiles, combin- es them with vintage linens and places them on pillows or ottomans. The result can make a basic room dressier and snappier.” Another perk is that the ottomans are “multi-functional, as pull-up seating,” Below left, from top: $1,400 and $850; 212-704-8807.

3. Grass cloth is a wonderful material to use on walls. The colors are usually variegated, unlike painted finishes, so choosing a bold color may feel safer than bold paint. Grass cloth is backed in paper, making it easy to install and a good mask for imperfect wall surfaces, which paint won’t be.” Try Donghia’s grass cloths. Abo
ew, from top: Raisin in sisal and Hay, Sea and Rose in jade; to the trade, donghia.com.

4. “Moroccan tiles come in so many mouth-watering shades, and they’re more interesting than typical French examples. They can feel very modern when used on fireplace surrounds or on the walls of a kitchen, bar or bathroom with basic elements like flat molding and white cabinetry.” Katie likes the selection at Mosaic House. Above: Cement tiles; mosaichouse.com.

Hawaii. But what they’d purchased this time around did come as a shock. She’d been quite attached to their most recent place, a 6,000-square-foot Tahitian-inspired residence in Woodside, California—with two acres of formal gardens, three greenhouses and a detached guesthouse—which she and her husband had painstakingly renovated ten years earlier. In comparison, the bungalow was hardly bigger than a guesthouse itself. How would her parents cope?

As it turned out, they’d already thought that through. The Ridders retained their more spacious home on the Big Island of Hawaii, where they often host some amalgam of their four children and twelve grandchildren during school holidays. They told Katie that they anticipated balancing the time between the two houses in a way that felt right to them once the new place was ready.

The Cypress Point house was, to put it mildly, a fixer-upper. Its wood-and-stucco facade had deteriorated with time and exposure to harsh coastal winds and salty air, and the roof was infested with termites and dry rot. The twin outbuildings, which the couple hoped to repurpose as guest rooms, weren’t much better off. As Connie recalls, “Katie walked into the main house and said, ‘Mom, what were you thinking? This is a disaster!’ But we told her, ‘We know you two can work your magic.’” Connie pauses, then continues with a winning smile, “And they did.”

Though renovating for one’s parents and in-laws sounds like a thinly veiled nightmare, or at least the plot of a screwball comedy, both Katie and Peter insist the process was painless. “It’s easier to help clients make decisions when you know them really well,” Peter notes. “Connie reads plans as well as anyone in my office; she really thinks in 3-D. And Tony is very decisive. As a couple they’re savvy, adventurous and incredibly optimistic.” Katie, too, has hit her stride with them over the years, gaining
confidence and assertiveness as her parents’ designer of record. On this project they gave her a lot of latitude, requesting only that she provide them with plenty of seating in the living room to accommodate parties. Katie incorporated some antiques from their former homes, including their much-loved four-poster bed with its pineapple finials, but she started fresh with all the upholstered pieces.

The simple ranch-style house has a sunny courtyard garden on one side and the golf course on the other, with the outbuildings facing onto the courtyard. It also has an impressive pedigree: it was built in 1960 by Gardner Dailey, one of the forefathers of Bay Area modernism, who was known for incorporating Asian elements, like overhanging eaves and Japanese joinery, into his work and for enhancing the connections between indoors and out. Breaking with existing architectural conventions, Dailey also developed the concept of an informal living area that was ideal for entertaining; he liked to call it “the room without a name,” to emphasize its flexibility.

Peter undertook a six-month renovation that focused on upgrading the structure and updating the floor plan, including enlarging the kitchen and adding extensive his-and-hers closets in the master bedroom. To highlight the home’s Asian
accents, he painted the exposed rafters a
glossy persimmon and fashioned their
ends into Japanese-style scallop shapes
that “make the house look happier,” says
Connie. He also suggested enclosing the
breezeway that connected the master
bedroom to the living room to correct a
rare instance of indoor-outdoor overdose.
“Just imagine that it’s cold and foggy or
there’s a raccoon!” squeals Connie. Now
the converted breezeway gleams with
rippling blue ceramic floor tiles from Mo-
rocco that echo the Pacific Ocean, which
lies just over the dunes.

Throughout the house Katie used col-
ors drawn from the surrounding land-
scape. Compared with the Woodside
house, where walls were generally neutral
and rooms were mostly monochromatic
(a yellow bedroom, a white library), Cy-
press Point blossoms with a medley of
saturated hues. Katie lobbied hard for this
bright, varied palette, hoping to avoid the
stripping-away process that had unfolded
in decorating the Woodside living room.
Back then, she had tried to respect her
parents’ divergent tastes—Connie’s quieter,
Tony’s bolder—removing fabrics and
shades each didn’t like until she ended up
with something that was distinctly more
subdued than she’d wanted.

At Cypress Point, Katie says, “When I first
showed them my design scheme for the liv-
ing room, they liked the sofa and the grass
cloth on the walls but thought there was
one color too many. In the end, they came
around. They’re my parents; I can be a
little more forceful in negotiating with
them than with my regular clients.” Her
father raises his eyebrows: “You mean
you can push us around?” He laughs
heartily and adds, “We’ve learned to trust
Katie’s judgment.”

It helped that the dominant hues of
green (taken from the golf course and the
grassy dunes) and blue (inspired by sky
and ocean) aligned perfectly with Tony’s
aesthetic. “It’s a family joke that my dad
is always on a blue-and-green kick,” says
Katie. It takes no more than a glance at
her father, sitting across from her, to
affirm this: he’s dressed in navy cord-
rousers, a blue polo shirt and an emerald
sweater vest. Katie’s role was to “tone me
down and increase the volume with her
mother,” says her father. “Fortunately, we
ended up with something that works for
both of us.”

Indeed, they’re thriving in their new
house, where they’ve decided to spend
about eight months of the year. With just
one bedroom (and the two outbuildings,
now recloseted as ad hoc guest rooms), it’s
much smaller than their previous homes,
to be sure. But that’s precisely why they
like it. When they want to host family,
they’ll do so in Hawaii.

Tony sees the change as organic, a nat-
ural evolution of aging. “I used to be
surprised by how readily older people
downsized their lives,” he says. “But now
I see how, as people get older, they want
to be more in control of things, and they
tend to want smaller spaces to look after.
Living in a compact house really works
for me. I don’t need big spaces anymore.”
That’s quite a statement after minimizing
so dramatically. Perhaps his new sur-
rroundings have helped ease the transi-
tion. In the early morning, when the sky
lightens to lavender and pink, he and his
wife love to sit by the living-room win-
dow, read the newspaper and wave at the
golfers coming through. At dusk, they
watch herds of deer wander amid the cy-
press trees and Monterey pines.

They promised Katie that this would
be their last house, their last major move,
an assertion she’s inclined to believe.
“There aren’t many places like this on
the West Coast,” she says. “It’s one of the
most beautiful California landscapes.
Once you’ve arrived, it’s a place where
you’ll want to stay.”