

A man with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and a light-colored knit vest, stands in profile in a kitchen. He is looking towards the left. Behind him are wooden kitchen cabinets with glass doors, filled with various dishes and teapots. In the foreground, a stainless steel sink and a blue bowl are visible on the countertop.

residential architect

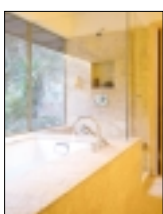
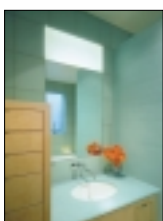
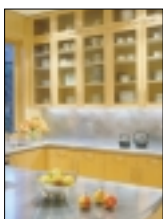
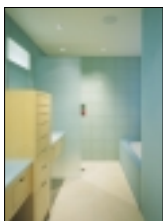
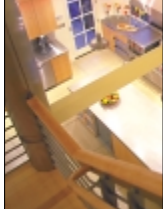
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a little light music

dan phipps
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and radiance
to kitchens
and baths

kitchen currents / idylls of the bath /
growth control / building community /
fougeron's hazy glazing / DPZ's sprawl brawl

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a little light *music*

dan phipps brings rhythm and radiance to kitchens and baths.

by s. claire conroy

dan Phipps thinks architecture is like music. And in his case, maybe he's right. Using light and shadow, solid and void, color and texture, he composes rooms as melodious and moving as any serenade. Precise, practical, elemental, his designs hit all the right notes with perfect pitch. Although he's done many beautiful custom homes, he's especially accomplished at kitchens and baths.

"I see some of them as pieces of music: Vivaldi, Copland, Stravinsky," he says. "Music is part of the architecture, breaking it down into rhythms, melodies, counter melodies." He knows what he's talking about: He studied cello on a scholarship to San Francisco State College before switching to architecture at the University of California at Berkeley.

He grew up in San Francisco, the son of a surgeon who liked to make

intricate wooden boxes for relaxation. He shares his father's drive for precision, mingled with an artist's love of beauty. "I've always had an interest in building things—boats, furniture. I enjoy seeing how things fit together," he says. "Kitchens and baths are both intense rooms—so many functional issues, so many demands on them, especially kitchens. Function has to happen there but not feel that way."

Phipps still resides in San Francisco and works in the city and its tony suburbs, where remodels and teardowns are the order of the day. His interventions are highly demanding, involving such challenges as historic mansions, steeply sloped sites, and California's morass of code requirements. His clients are wealthy, sophisticated, and hard to please. And, unlike many kitchen coveters, most of his clients really use their swanky appliances and semiprecious counters. Yes, they actual-



Robert Cardin



Photos: John Sutton Photography (above); Greg Crawford/BeateWorks (below)



a little

ly cook. One would hope so, considering some spend as much as \$500,000 for Phipps' handiwork.

What do his clients get for such an investment? Someone who treats a kitchen as more than just the sum of its functions. "A kitchen is not simply a room with a bunch of appliances and cabinets. It should have a sense of place. It's just as important as a living room," he says. "Architects used to see a house as a beautiful box with some nice rooms, but they paid no attention to the kitchen." That's been changing over the last decade or so, but Phipps was an earlier adopter of the "kitchen as theater" philosophy—a stage for family life. As each family member chases a Filofax full of appointments, it's one of the few places where they can slow down, come together to fix a meal, recount adventures from the outside world.

Phipps has more than a professional interest in kitchens. An avid cook, he met his wife in a cooking class. And they both belong to a "buddy supper club," where members gather at each other's houses and cook big feasts. "I like being in the kitchen; I'm comfortable there," he says. "What we do is problem solving—figuring out the drawer for the 4x5 menu cards, for chopsticks. I wouldn't do well if we turned out widgets. I don't like doing kitchens, I like doing spaces for people."

give piecework a chance

Phipps' design somehow manages to look sleek without seeming slick. It's a talent he honed working for a commercial interiors firm early in his career. He took that job and another with a commercial architecture firm because architecture school compelled him to practice "architecture with a capital A." There was a mystique, he says, "that the work had to be large scale." But he preferred a

light *music*

smaller, more intimate canvas. And when he launched his residential design firm in 1983, running it from his apartment in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood, he began humbly with piecework: remodels, additions, kitchens, and baths.

"I showed friends what I was doing almost with embarrassment," he says. "But they said, 'Hey, this is great. You should send it in to the magazines.' So, I sent four or five projects to magazines and they gobbled them up." Today, his firm has in the works a teardown, three new houses, and 15 remodels. His office, a small, converted movie theater in a slowly gentrifying corner of San Francisco's Tenderloin district, is at capacity with a staff of 10, including five architects. Yes, he still does piecework, but the scope of those pieces has grown with the firm and with the real-estate market, economy, and sophistication of residential clients. Who would have imagined a \$500,000 kitchen remodel in 1983?

He's now at the point where he turns down projects that aren't large enough to challenge him or to contribute substantially to the bottom line. "We're at just the right size for me. I can still see, touch, feel the projects," he says. "Any bigger than 10 people and I'd be in a management position."

bathroom window

If bathrooms aren't the window to the soul, they're at least a very intimate glimpse into people's personal lives. Here's where trust between the client

and the architect is essential. "There's a little bit of therapy in what we do. We create a safe place for clients to open up and reveal themselves," says Phipps. "Listening is a key thing. You have to listen to people, spaces, surroundings, to all sorts of signals. Everybody will tell you what they want if you listen closely. You'll learn if they can get by with one vanity, or if they need two with a partition in between."

The bathrooms he designs aren't overblown sybaritic retreats, they're well-appointed spaces, thoughtfully tailored to each user. Phipps specs sleek, high-end materials but keeps them from slipping into slick by softening the quotient of gloss. Marbles are honed, not polished; metals are brushed; woods are subtly grained. "We pick the very tree we'll use for cabinetry," he says. "We'll hunt for just the right screw for a towel bar." That attention to detail is part of what sets his work apart, and how those details come together is crucial. "Surfaces, cabinets, counters, recesses, medicine cabinets—it's the intersections that are the real challenge," he explains. "God in the details comes from the intersection of this material and that one."

Even though Phipps' projects are at San Francisco's high end, space is still an issue. Tight, stratospherically expensive lots mean making the most of available square footage and letting in lots of daylight. So, in bathrooms, he often wraps tubs and showers in large tiles—like those from Buddy Rhodes—which he carries all the way up the



Photos this page: John Sutton Photography



Clockwise from opposite, top left: 1 and 2. Counters in zinc and soapstone define different zones within the large, multicook kitchen. Zinc, a soft, stain-prone metal, scars and weathers with use. 3 and 4. Mixing translucent and solid fronts lightens the visual load of cabinetry. Phipps often designs freestanding furniture to complement his kitchens. 5. Supported by a steel-wrapped column, a deluxe, remodeled kitchen soars like a big-top tent.

a little



light *music*

walls. Glass enclosures or showers left open to the room and plenty of windows maintain the illusion of flowing space. In kitchens, wood trim segues from cabinet to window frame, then up the wall and into crown molding—like his father's intricate wooden boxes. Translucent glass cabinet fronts keep claustrophobia at bay.

hurry up and wait

Such demanding work requires extremely talented craftspeople to execute. Phipps relies on long-term relationships with expert builders like Steve Stroub, of Sausalito, Calif.'s Stroub Construction, but it's getting tougher and tougher to book his jobs in the booming real-estate market. "We used to call two or three months before we needed work to begin. Now we have to call as soon as we get the project," he says. "We've got to get the contract, get the permits in line ASAP, just to stay on top of the process. Design can go as smoothly as possible and then have to wait for two years."

The hassles have made the smaller jobs even less feasible for Dan Phipps & Associates Architects. Last year, the firm held a retreat for its employees to survey the road ahead. As a result, they decided to change course a bit. "We looked at each other, what we're doing, what kinds of projects we want to work on," he recalls. "We asked the question: What's the dream? The answer was: bigger projects—and less historical work. We want to do things that reflect

today's time, materials, construction techniques. Once we articulated it, it began to happen. We started by weeding out of our portfolio the projects that represent where we don't want to go. We used to take everything that came through the door. Now if it's too small or not the right fit, we don't."

Of course, such choices are the blessing of a good economy coupled with a well-earned reputation for beautiful work. These are the best of times for Phipps, who's managed his firm's evolution wisely. He works long days, 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., but rarely works weekends. His clients, he insists, don't complain. "People love it when you have boundaries. I used to do everything they asked. Now I say, 'I do this but not that.' Before, I would have changed myself, morphed to deal with a difficult client. Then you don't know who you are; clients don't know who you are."

It comes back to the issue of trust. If clients are calling at all hours with concerns, chances are that faith isn't there and the design and building process will prove unpleasant for everyone. "If there isn't trust, it isn't going to work," says Phipps. "We're in a boat, we're pushing off from shore, I don't know where we're going, but I guarantee there's Shangri-La out there. And they're trusting me with their life savings. I have blind trust here, what's it going to be?"

It's not easy being a Pied Piper, but it helps if you have perfect pitch. **ra**

Clockwise from left: 1 and 2. Wrapping the walls with large glass tiles and dividing task areas with matching glass panels makes a small master bath seem much larger. A storage cabinet separates his-and-her vanities. 3 and 4. A glass shower enclosure keeps the view going in this master bath. Honing marble tiles and counter and clear-coating maple cabinetry softens the gloss quotient of such rich materials.



Photos: John Sutton Photography



from the editor

function and fantasy

kitchens and baths blend need and desire
like no other rooms in the house.

by s. claire conroy

We've come a long way since we were all slaves to a dark galley kitchen and a 5-by-7 bath with a shower-head over a tub. Once little more than functional necessities, these are now the most important, most expensive, most designed spaces in the house. They're a wonderful challenge for residential architects, whether you're just starting out in the profession or you have a vast portfolio to your credit.

Nearly 20 years ago, our cover guy (see story, page 44), San Francisco-based architect Dan Phipps, began his career designing kitchens and baths. Nowadays, he's a very successful residential architect, but he's happily still doing kitchens and baths. That's because these projects have grown up with him, becoming ever more complicated, costly, and creative. Phipps recently completed a kitchen remodel that topped the charts at \$500,000, more than three times the U.S. median price for an entire single-family home. "The irony is, clients will spend a zillion dollars on their kitchen and in the first week, all they'll make is a frozen burrito," he says. His clients want the ultimate in looks and function (they

could run Lutèce out of their homes) even if all they use is the microwave.

the hunger

True, some people really use their kitchens to make a meal, but more often the room is fulfilling some deeper hunger. Our homes don't simply address the way we really live, they also explore the fantasies of how we'd like to live. Clients will often spend big dollars just to obtain the possibility of that fabulous dinner prepared in that gorgeous kitchen. And the same goes for the master bath. How else do you explain all those giant jetted tubs everyone passes by on the way to a three-minute shower? Someday, they believe, their lives will slow down enough for a long, luxurious bath by candlelight.

Unless price is no object—and even among the super wealthy this is rare—architects have a very difficult task in balancing clients' wants, needs, and budget. Nowhere is that battle more bloody than in the kitchen and bath. How many times have you had to tell a client whose heart is set on granite counters that their budget can only swing laminate? Chances are, they'd rather sacrifice the pricey roofing material to get those high-end counters.



Photo: Katherine Lambert

That's something merchant builders have understood for a while now. Even in the least expensive production home, you'll find some swank materials in the kitchens and baths. They know those rooms will sell the house.

In addition to Phipps' beautiful work, we showcase five kitchens (page 58) and five baths (page 70) that demonstrate what great design talent and enlightened clients can achieve when they come together.

what's your dream?

Finally, this issue's Practice column examines how residential architects are dealing with the booming economy and the blessing and burden of too much work. Should you swell your firm to grab

the work that's out there, or overwork the people you have in case there's another Black Tuesday ahead?

Dan Phipps, for one, has made the difficult decision to turn away work. As he attempts to reposition his firm to do more contemporary work, he's starting to say no to the jobs that don't further his goals. "I always feel the bottom is going to drop out. I'll always be looking for the next job," he says. "But we asked ourselves, What's the dream?" **ra**

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