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hen Abigail Turin got a call from her then-fiancé, Jonathan Gans, telling her, "I've found our house," she was as worried as she was elated. After all, Turin, a Harvard-trained architect, would be working in the house as well as living there, and she wanted to make sure it represented her aesthetic—"young and modern."

But the house Gans wanted to show her was neither—its stucco facade boasted a wrought-iron "Juliet balcony" and other faux-palazzo details. The inside was overdecorated—floorboards were painted to look like redwood—and a series of partial renovations had left a cacophony of styles. And yet, the garden views were stunning, and the house's proportions, including ten-foot ceilings on the ground floor, "made it a real find," Turin says.

So she threw herself into the task of updating the house. In the living room, that meant deciding what to do about the ornate marble fireplace. Turin didn't really like it, but she appreciated it and wanted to keep it—in a less dominant role. Luckily, Turin isn't the kind of modernist who thinks every wall has to be white. "If there are going to be bright, light rooms, there ought to be at least one room that's dark and moody," she says. So she painted the living room black. But not jet-black ("I tried that—it was stark and a little cheesy"). The shade she chose, with pronounced purple hues, is from a color guide, *Polychromie Architecturale*, by Le Corbusier (available in architecture libraries). Her contractor, she says, made three or four samples before he got it right. Think of it as black with modernist credentials.

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uch of the house had been renovated in the 1990s, and Turin tried to keep whatever fixtures and appliances she could. "There's something really wasteful about tearing everything out," she says. The glass doors to the backyard remain, but Turin replaced their "big, brass levers" with stainless-steel handles. Through those doors, there's a view of a terrace shaded by bamboo and a venerable eucalyptus. That means that between the black-painted living room and the garden beyond the terrace, the eye "passes through stages of lightness," Turin says.

That transition parallels another one—through stages of ornateness—starting with the marble fireplace and ending with Monica Armani's minimalist picnic table on the terrace. Along the way are a couple of iconic pieces (above left):

Marcel Wanders's Brobdingnagian *Shadow* lamp ("It's all about scale," says Turin) and a chair and ottoman by Gaetano Pesce ("It reads as pure form").

The *Cellula* chandelier (above right) was designed by Nunzia Carbone and Tiziano Vudafieri; it's made of Swarovski crystals hung from stainless steel, a mix that, Turin says, "is emblematic of what I tried to do with the house."

Also emblematic are floors stained and dyed black, so that they seem to be continuous surfaces rather than individual boards. "People warn you not to use black, that it's impractical," says Turin, but she disagrees. "It's the same as wearing black clothing; if you get a speck of white on it, you see it. So you do need to vacuum. But with black, you see exactly where to vacuum," she says, ever upbeat, "so it's easy."





Turin says Patrick Norguet's acrylic *Rainbow* chair, in her dining room, may be her favorite piece: "It's almost childlike in profile, but sophisticated in execution." Dining chairs by Charles and Ray Eames surround a group of four Ikea tables. Soon after buying the house, Turin and Gans got married at San Francisco City Hall. The tables were bought for a party held in the unfinished house that evening.







Going for a play of textures, Turin placed a shaggy linen rug ("it harks back to the '70s but feels natural") on smooth oak floors and cushions of shiny leather on a honed-basalt banquette; kitchen chairs are white leather. Walls are Benjamin Moore White (eggshell finish). The dining table is made of powder-coated steel with the thinnest possible profile.



**T**o a lover of clean lines and simplicity, a kitchen with mismatched parts can be the hardest room to pull together. "There were upper cabinets everywhere, and they were different heights and different depths," says Turin. She tore out all the uppers (since she's five-foot-two, they didn't do much for her anyway) and had the lowers painted white. "One of the things that I learned is that you can paint over laminate, and it sticks." (Experts advise sanding the surface first, then applying a layer of bonding primer before painting: Turin's contractors applied one coat of Fresh Start alkyd enamel [217 White] and then two coats of satin Impervo alkyd enamel [low-luster C235 White], both from Benjamin Moore.)

Removing the upper cabinets left the kitchen (above) with the simplest possible configuration—a pair of parallel counters. The range hood is an unadorned rectangle, which—since the fan itself is on the outside of the wall—was light enough to cantilever without brackets. Countertops of black basalt were honed (not polished), then sealed with old-fashioned mineral oil. With admirable economy of gesture, the same basalt also covers an adjacent banquette. Its white leather cushions draw it into a mix of furniture with pop art overtones.

The fireplace was another problem; curved and sponge-painted when the couple bought the house, it's now so simple that "it reads as just an opening in the wall," says Turin. When she rebuilt the fireplace wall (far left in the photo at left), Turin didn't add baseboards—but on the walls she kept, she didn't remove the existing baseboards either, proving that a house doesn't have to be utterly consistent to be comfortably coherent.



## Renovation Tip v

### What the Pros Know About Ebonizing Floors

When Turin bought the house, the floorboards were faux-painted to resemble wider redwood boards. Turin wanted the floors to recede—which meant getting them black. And because the floors were not all made from the same wood, achieving a consistent color was a challenge. Turin's refinishers machine-sanded the floors, then went over them with 80-grit sandpaper to raise the grain. Next, they used rags to moisten the wood: "So the stain goes really deep," explains Turin. The refinishers applied one coat of black alcohol-based dye (their own formula) and another coat of stain: Sable Black from Glitsa ([glitsa.com](http://glitsa.com)). After the dye job, the floor was coated in two layers of polyurethane (from Dura Seal). Though there are low-gloss polyurethanes, refinisher Devon Gadula of San Francisco's First, Last & Always says that regular poly is clearer, and thus more likely to produce uniformity.



Before



GROUND LEVEL



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French windows overlooking the garden on two sides, "it's like sleeping in the treetops," Turin says of her master bedroom. But the room required updating. Gans insisted on surround sound, which required Turin to hide several speakers over the bed. The bed itself was designed by Turin, from MDF covered in lacquer. Naturally, it's white. White, she says, "is the baseline; it's the color that shows the form of a thing best. In my mind, everything starts out white, unless it's a material, like wood or stone, with an intrinsic color." The *Rainbow* chair, usually in the dining room, makes an occasional bedroom appearance. Says the designer, "I move the small pieces around the house quite a bit. After all, the Italian word for furniture is *mobile*—I don't like rooms that become static."

Turin's biggest intervention was to hang ceiling-high drapes of sheer Trevira, a form of polyester. Her goal wasn't just to cover the windows, but to resurface the room, which required that the drapes fit the walls perfectly (they end a quarter of an inch above the floor). She had the draper (Fabric Walls in San Francisco) sew a metal chain into the hem, so that they would "hold their ripple-fold configuration." With that consistency, Turin says, the curtains "read as highly geometric."

Through the curtain, the arched windows are clearly visible (and even cast dramatic shadows onto the ebonized floor).

Says Turin, "The bed feels modern, the floor feels modern, but with the windows, you always have the sense of the traditional enclosure." In other words, you may be in the treetops, but with Turin's brand of modernism, you're safe at home. [See Resources, last pages.](#)





The sink in the master bathroom is the same black basalt as the kitchen counters; it was constructed from slabs that were mitered and glued together (which is easier and less expensive than carving a sink from one piece of stone). The bathroom door is a floor-to-ceiling sliding mirror that is hung from the ceiling, so there are no tracks in the floor at the threshold.