



URBAN VISION

FRIENDS AND FAMILY COMBINE THE BEST OF PRIVACY
AND COMMUNITY IN AN INNOVATIVE, NATURE
INFUSED VISION OF SUSTAINABLE URBAN LIVING

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IN THE EARLY 2000s, DENNIS ALLEN AND HIS WIFE, JENNY, WERE LIVING HAPPILY IN THEIR HOME NEAR THE TOP OF TUNNEL ROAD. BUT AS A 60-SOMETHING VISIONARY BUILDER WHO ADOPTED SUSTAINABLE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION AHEAD OF THE CROWD and grew his company, Allen Associates, into the leading green builder on the Central Coast, Allen was also considering the future. “I was looking beyond where we were then to the time when we’d be older and might not be as mobile or be able to drive anymore,” he says.

In fact, for several years he had been talking with friends who were interested in eventually moving downtown and living a more urbanized lifestyle. The idea was to find a property and construct residences that would push the limits of green building and allow a few couples to enjoy life with plenty of privacy, shared space, communal gatherings and a satisfying experience of the natural world in an urban setting.

“I had a list of about a dozen couples who said they might be interested,” Allen says. “When it came time to commit, two of them said, ‘We’re in.’” They found the 50 foot-wide, 225 foot-deep downtown property – home to a single dilapidated historic Victorian house dating to the 1870s – in 2006 and began working the project through the city bureaucracy. Five years later, they moved in to the Victoria Garden Mews.

Friends occupy the completely rebuilt 2300 square-foot Victorian home in front, which has its own water-wise front yard and shares a courtyard with the new three-level Spanish-style condominium building in back. Other friends live on the first level there, the Allens have the second-level, and their son lives with his toddler daughter and her mother in the top unit, proximity that Allen describes as “my definition of heaven.” “It wouldn’t be the same if they lived downtown and we still lived up Tunnel Road,” he adds. “This is the way to raise a family. The parents get more time off, and we see our granddaughter multiple times a day.”

Wanting to “test the limits of sustainability” on the project, Allen installed every conceivable green element, earning the highest sustainability rating from the US Green Building Council – LEED Platinum certification – while accruing one of the highest number of credits for sustainable features ever.



Spanish meets Victorian (clockwise from opposite): Great wood makes for a great room in Dennis and Jenny Allen's second-floor living space; French doors link the casual kitchen table to a generous deck; a brick path feels right at home with the restored Victorian; terracotta colors warm a view from the deck table.





The property has all the expected green components, from water-efficient plumbing and landscaping, super-efficient LED lighting, recycled wood and sustainably harvested lumber to a rooftop photovoltaic array that generates 85 percent of the electricity.

But the Mews is full of innovative extras, too. They include a high-performing shell with rigid foam insulation, and dual-pane glazed windows, some with electric retractable awnings to provide better climate control; an underground system that returns runoff to the water table; electric stoves with state-of-the-art magnetic induction cook tops, which boils water three times faster than a gas range and generates heat only when in contact with a metal pan; and a whole-house vacuum system to ensure that no dirt or dust returns to the interior.

But building in all those – and other – sustainable features wouldn't have meant nearly as much to Allen if they weren't also part of building a community.

“That was a really important goal,” he says, before taking an unexpected tack to describe the hydraulic car lifts in the back. But it was those lifts that allowed him to stack cars and meet the city’s parking requirements on just ten percent of the land, leaving space for the big communal courtyard around which life revolves here.

With drought-tolerant plants, two fountains, a pond, thirty fruit trees, separate vegetable and herb gardens, gravel paths and a table that can hold 16, the yard is a South of France–style sanctuary that perfectly reflects the residents’ desire “to bring what we all loved from the rural space into the urban space.” They keep bees and are visited by monarch butterflies, dragonflies and birds. Raccoons swim in the pond at night.

“The garden allows us to mimic the sustainable elements of nature,” Allen says. “We wanted to grow some of our food and have as much productive vegetation as possible. We all share in the care and the harvest. It’s community-building, and everyone enjoys it.”

As for those days of retirement ahead, well, they’re looking pretty good.



Corners of a common garden (clockwise from top): Flowers and a gate interact, a gravel path and colonnaded arbors lead past the Victorian to the shared courtyard; benches invite interaction; drought-tolerant natives line the walkways; part of a table for 16.



Urban retreat, mountains included: Thanks to generous doors from living room to deck (top), inside and outside overlap in the third-floor residence where the Allens' son and his family live. High ceilings and an open-plan design (below) bring the kitchen, living room and dining area into one big, warm, all-purpose headquarters for the family.

DESIGN RESOURCES

ARCHITECTURE

Thompson Naylor Architects
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GENERAL CONTRACTOR

Allen Associates
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LANDSCAPE DESIGN

Grace Design Associates
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INTERIOR DESIGN

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