

## AT HOME

*Hands-off design*

Unique 1947 rental in Mill Valley inspires respect, not renovation

By Anh-Minh Le

Take two interior designers and put them in a home that has barely been touched since its construction in 1947. Despite it being a rental, you might expect the couple to go on a makeover frenzy — or, at the very least, paint walls and swap out fixtures.

But Charles Delisle and Ralph Dennis did no such thing, even though they both have experience overhauling mid-century abodes for clients. Dennis is the design director for Steven Volpe Design, while Delisle runs an eponymous furniture and interior design firm.

In 2011, after successfully lobbying the landlord, they moved into a two-story cedar dwelling perched on a hillside in Mill Valley. During the rental application process, they expressed their reverence for the unique property. Architect Donn Emmons had built the house for his young family to occupy, and it remains in the family.

For decades, Emmons worked alongside William Wurster and Theodore Bernardi in the firm that bore their names. The trio was known for an appreciation of wood and a respect for a structure's natural environs, which is evident the moment you walk through the vine-covered fence that marks the entrance to Delisle's and Dennis' residence.

Overlooking Richardson Bay, the yard is populated with oak and birch trees, ficus, sage, salvia and dwarf manzanita. According to Delisle, the garden was originally designed by Lawrence Halprin.

"We walked through the gate and saw the views and thought, 'This is amazing,'" recalls Delisle. "Then we walked into the house, and that's when we were like, 'This is super amazing.'" Expanses of glass, including almost the entire facade, take advantage of the setting.

Inside, Emmons was efficient in his use of the home's 1,200 square feet. For example, a ship's ladder, rather than a conventional staircase, facilitates movement between floors. The second level is lofted, allowing for a double-height ceiling that yields an open and airy quality.

Dennis and Delisle have put their own stamp on the interior through art, accessories and furniture. The living room is dotted with Delisle's own designs: a wood-and-metal bookcase; a pair of triangular side tables; his Coda table lamp that rests on the mantel; and a sofa with a steel frame, topped with cushions covered in an Anne Kirk wool-and-linen fabric.

A settee, situated next to an Eero Saarinen pedestal dining table, was found in a lighting vendor's warehouse. It has been upholstered in a black denim that features a vinyl-printed floral pattern that Delisle designed. Suspended above the table is another of his creations: the prototype for the Linden vertical chandelier.

Hans Wegner's Keyhole rocker — a 1960s design and "one of the first real pieces of furniture I ever bought," says Delisle — takes pride of place in front of the fireplace.

He and Dennis clearly value items with a history. "We do interiors all day long and love pretty things," says Delisle, "but in our own house, we like stuff that's kind of worn and not so fancy. We have a tendency to be a little messy." He and Dennis also share their home with two dogs.

The upstairs corner that Delisle and Dennis have designated as their bedroom has no doors, which means the view is a focal point. Aside from an Isamu Kenmochi round rattan lounge chair and a bed, the space is appointed with just a few light fixtures, including a spiky Lindsey Adelman design and several works of art.

An alcove adjacent to the living room serves as a guest



Photos by Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle



**Designer Charles Delisle, above, on the ship's ladder used to access the second floor. To his right is a prototype of a Linden chandelier. Left: The lofted bedroom in the 1947 home contains an Isamu Kenmochi round rattan lounge chair and simple furnishings.**

surveying the collection of Japanese ceramics that line the shelves, Delisle comments on how well-suited the space is for two people to cook.

"I like the humbleness of this kitchen," he says. Although the layout is original, a few updates have been made over the years, such as a new stove.

Pressed to name the one thing he *might* change in the house, Delisle pauses before ceding: He would replace the upstairs shower's gray-tiled enclosure with glass.

"It's this tiny space that feels cramped," he says. "And it's so pretty in there in the morning, it would be great to be able to look out at the trees."

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quarters. A daybed comprised of a queen-size mattress on a wooden platform that has been wrapped in an antique textile sits atop a rug procured in Morocco about 10 years ago.

Nearby, a lounge chair by Italian designer Vico Magistretti is accompanied by London designer Martino Gamper's

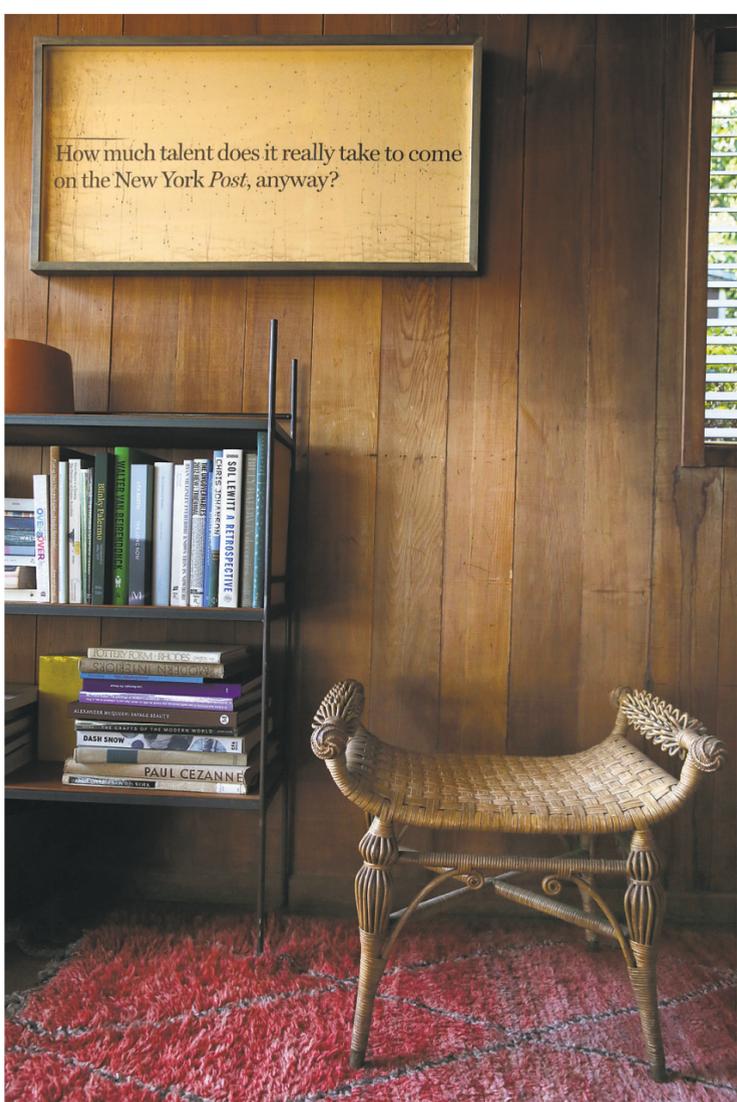
Circus stool. Then there's the ornate Heywood-Wakefield wicker stool.

"I grew up one town away from their big factory in Massachusetts," Delisle explains, "and they had thousands of wicker designs, and they were really over the top. I love them; I have a couple of other pieces, but

I keep them in storage because they're just so crazy to live with."

The trove in his storage unit allows him to switch up the decor. "I like living with objects and figuring out how they feel," he says. "There's no reason why we can't move furniture around."

As he arranges freshly cut blooms in the galley kitchen,



**Top:** Interior designers Charles Delisle and Ralph Dennis were drawn to the home's views. The second floor looks down on the living room and out onto San Francisco Bay. **Above:** The front of the Emmons house in Mill Valley. **Left:** One of Delisle's prized possessions is this wicker bench by Heywood Wakefield.

### Small home's engaging history

Charles Delisle has researched the Emmons House, which appears to have been continuously rented out since the mid-1950s, with just a handful of tenants over the years. Here, Delisle shares some of its interesting background:

» "The first renter was Ernest Hemingway's son, Jack, and his three daughters. He lived here for 11 years. We found that out by accident. I looked online and found this letter that Ernest Hemingway had written to his son, asking if he still lived at this address."

» "Donn Emmons' son came and visited once and told us all these great stories. His dad did architecture for a client who owned a pencil factory, so he was able to source all the cedar for this house from the pencil factory more affordably."

» "I love that you can see the fingerprints of the original contractor who was installing the boards on the roof. If you look across the ceiling, you can see the same handprint all the way down, which is pretty amazing. Most of the door hardware was salvaged from ships after World War II and is still original. I think the ladder was also salvaged and repurposed as well."

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