

tract or

Remodeling a ranch  
home into something  
**fresh and new**

By Kim Boatman



Above, the family room of the Towle-Stewart home before renovation. Right, the same room after the ceiling was raised, windows were added, and new cabinetry and counter tops were installed in the kitchen.

THE KITCHEN linoleum was cracking.

Since they were replacing the floor, David Towle and Luvonne Stewart thought it might be nice to freshen up the kitchen in their Los Gatos rancher as well. And say, wouldn't it be great to do something with the living room and dining room floors, too?

Before they knew it, the couple had em-

barked on the sort of remodeling project few of us have either the heart or the budget to attempt. Their 23-year-old, three-bedroom, two-bath tract home was transformed, from top to bottom. Walls were bumped out. Ceilings were raised. Closets were moved from one side of a room to the other. The remodel was meticulous and detailed, down to the molding and wide base-

boards.

The couple tossed out their old furniture and started anew. And the yard was professionally landscaped to match.

The end result is a comfortable, modern home outfitted with striking natural materials that still blends in with its cul-de-sac neighbors. In many ways, the home, which the couple returned to after the 18-month





renovation in February 1999, is a primer on how to remodel a rancher.

New homes today often are beefed up like shotputters of Olympian proportions, with all the subtlety and swagger of trash-talking sprinters. But for decades, the rancher has defined the California home. Drive across Silicon Valley, and you'll play connect-the-dots through tract after tract of

ranch homes.

In many cases, ranchers can be dark and dated, without the airy spaces that are the signature of modern homes. And the facade of the Towle-Stewart home, like that of other ranchers, lacked dimension and interest.

Still, the trick is to remodel without sticking out too much among your neighbors.

The Towle-Stewart remodel added only 225 square feet to the home's original 1,740.

"We think our design fits into the neighborhood," Towle says. And indeed, neighbors were so pleased that three others have hired Lorraine Reiss, the architectural planner who worked for Kris Linder, of Interior Design Source of Los Gatos, on the project.

Most remodels are unlikely to be of the



---

## rancher

magnitude of the Towle-Stewart project. While Towle, 63, an independent insurance agent, and Stewart, 65, a retired flight attendant and enrolled tax agent, are reluctant to discuss costs, Linder, their interior designer, says construction alone on similar projects will run anywhere from \$250,000 to \$400,000. (Chris Carvalho of San Jose handled the construction.)

Indeed, Linder cautioned about putting so much into the rancher, which appraised at around \$500,000 when the project began. The house sits a stone's throw from Highway 85. But Towle and Stewart love their neighborhood, and, says Towle, "We decided we couldn't move and get this."

### **Don't stray from the style**

What Towle and Stewart got, says Linder, is "a livable home. We didn't build a home with all the whistles and bells of a monster home. We didn't build a home to show how much money they spent.

"Our goal was to keep the integrity of the house but to bring it today's lifestyle with today's products. They'll get another 20 years easy out of this house without feeling dated."

The couple avoided the first temptation of many homeowners: adopting a new style, such as Mediterranean.

"When most people remodel exteriors of ranch homes, the problem is they fight the ranch style and want to update the exterior to Italianate villa or something. A good-neighbor rancher doesn't stray far from that style of architecture," says Wendy Teague of Garcia Teague Architecture + Interiors of San Jose. "Mediterranean styles of architecture do not blend in a ranch neighborhood."

To stand apart from your next-door neighbor, you can introduce simple Asian or modern elements such as wood screens on the exterior or geometrical shapes in an addition or a remodel, Teague says. Custom shutters, upgraded doors and windows and trim can update the exterior.

Light and space are the first order of business for rancher remodels, say interior designers such as Linder and Teague. Walls are toppling all over the valley.

In the Towle-Stewart rancher, bumping the walls out 5 feet in a couple of places added a sense of space to the front of the home, which also now has a clearly defined entry area. The flat acoustical ceilings that so typify homes of the era are gone. The living room and dining room ceilings were raised more than 3 feet. Now, sturdy wood beams set the tone for the use of natural materials in the home of two nature lovers.

A clerestory window soars above the bay window in the living room, flooding the home with natural light. Throughout the home, larger windows, and more of them, bring the outdoors in. Skylights also lighten things up. And to avoid that dark, chute-like appearance when looking up at a skylight, opaque



## rancher

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22

windows were set in molding at ceiling level over the skylight openings.

In other parts of the home, the ceilings were also raised and walls moved without affecting the exterior lines of the house. The family room bump-out, for instance, took a little space from the garage. The bedroom ceiling was raised by simply going into the attic. The master bathroom expansion still stays under the once-wide ranch eaves of the house.



JOANNE HOYOUNG LEE

### Timelessness

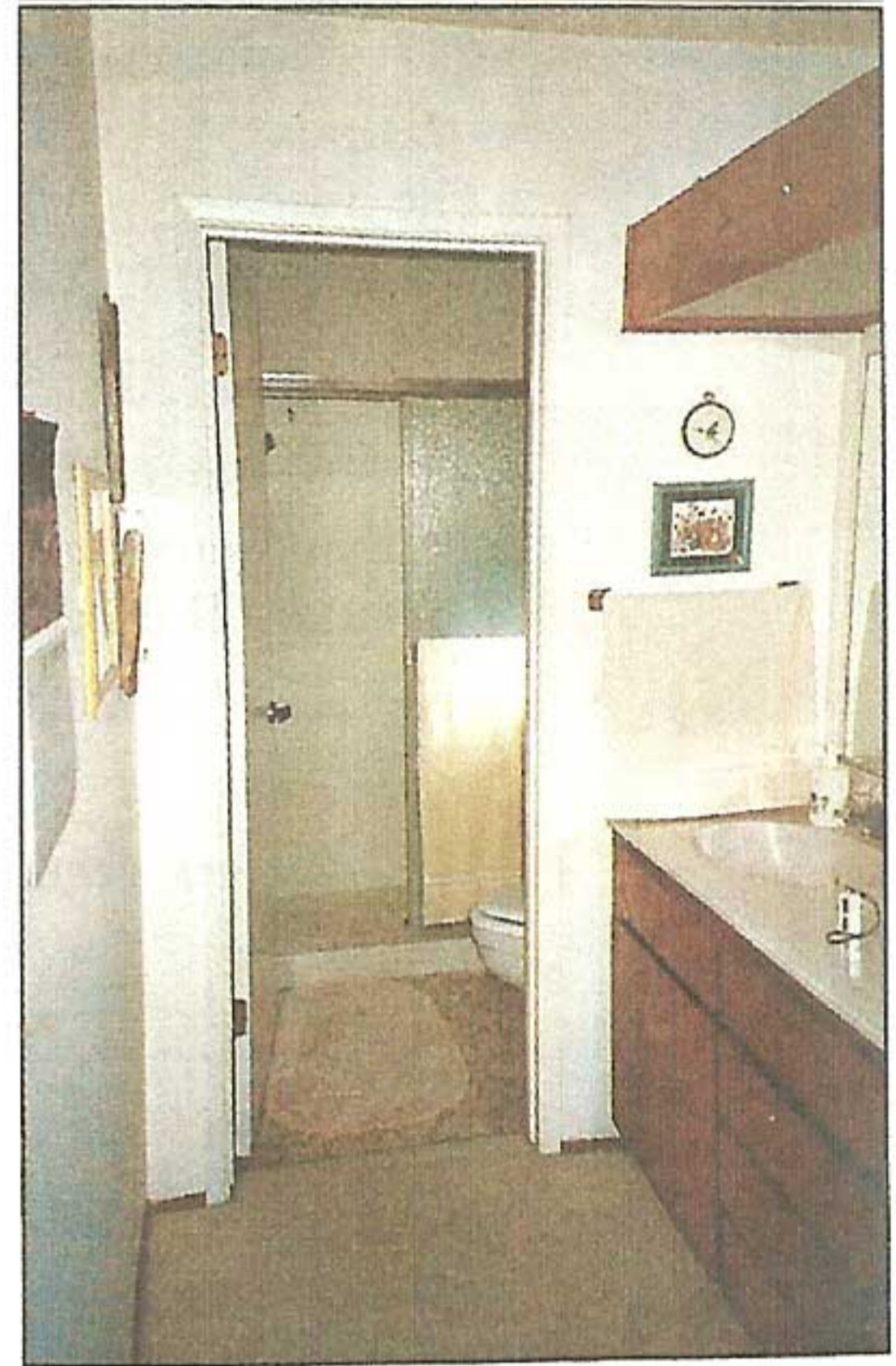
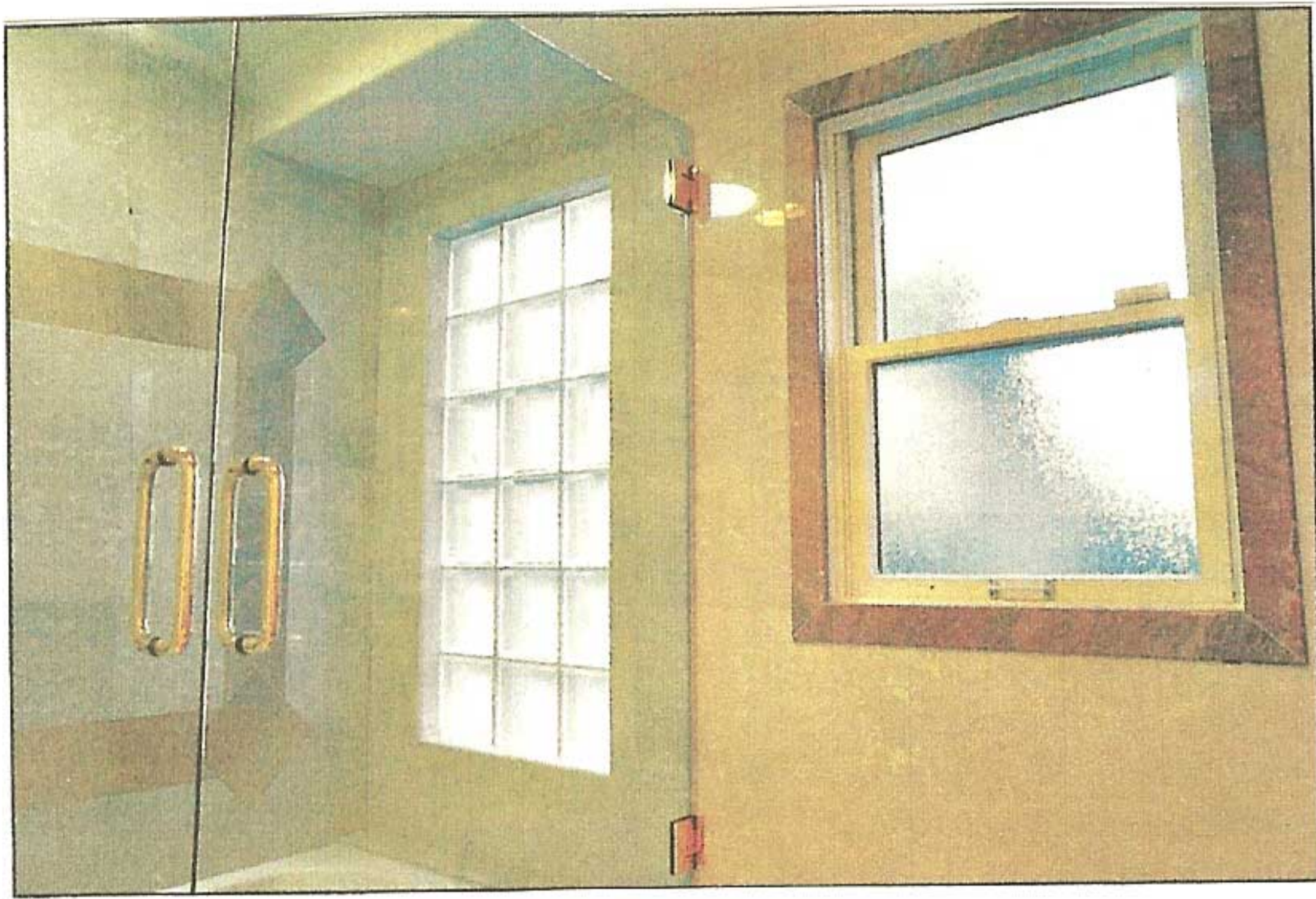
The use of materials also makes a difference in a ranch remodel. Interior designer Linda Kay DeMartini of Kay Designs in Burlingame moved her own home's design from ranch to an updated English Cottage style. The front windows were pushed out to an angled bay window with a copper roof and diamond-pattern leaded glass windows.

Most ranch homes have aluminum windows and sliding doors. DeMartini installed wood-framed windows and replaced sliding doors with French doors.

In the Towle-Stewart home, limestone replaced the brick facade on the front of the home. Inside, the couple chose a striking ash hardwood floor in 3- and 4-inch widths.

"Everybody uses oak," says Towle, who wanted something unique.





Molding and wide baseboards add a finished look to the Towle-Stewart home, and they're a relatively inexpensive way to update a rancher.

The Towle-Stewart home resonates with a subtle individuality. Slate backs the counter of the built-in cabinet in the dining room. The striking note is a deep, hammered brass sink in the counter. The oversize black iron clamps on the wood beams are echoed in the living room curtain rod, the solid matte black ceiling fan in the family room, the iron kitchen cabinet handles and even in the fat black coils of the gas range.

The use of natural colors and materials, says Linder, likely means the remodel won't become dated. Linder worked with the couple to avoid any design element that will scream "late '90s" a couple of decades from now.

That's important because Towle and Stewart aren't going anywhere.

"There's no way we want to move," Towle says.

"I love every room," Stewart says. **SV**

**KIM BOATMAN**  
(kboatman@sjmercury.com)  
is an SV staff writer.

**Above, the dark, crowded bathroom before it was remodeled (top) to let in more light. Below, the old living room had a low, oppressive ceiling. Left, the ceiling was raised and beams and rafters were added, integrating the living room with the dining room.**