



Jean-Louis Boudreau and Josette Murphy outside About:Space headquarters in El Segundo. Photo by Brad Jacobson (CivicCouch.com)

Love in Wood

Jean-Louis Boudreau, Josette Murphy and the fine art of redesigning a home rather than tearing it down

by Mark McDermott

It all began, somewhat fatefully, one day in early 2004 at what would become a massive teardown site in the heart of El Segundo.

Josette Murphy and Jean-Louis Boudreau had been neighbors for ten years but they'd never met. She lived and worked in a 400 square foot cottage along Grand Avenue. He had a wood-working and general contracting shop about 60 feet away, around the corner on Arena Street.

Murphy was a young designer who'd spent the first seven years of her career with the revered architectural firm Gensler. During a 2001 sabbatical, she'd taken on a few home design projects for acquaintances, something apart from her regular work, which was all workplace design. She discovered three things: that there was a growing market in the South Bay for home design, that she loved the work and, perhaps most signifi-

cantly, that she was very good at it. So she took the leap. Murphy launched her own firm, About:Space, from her little cottage.

Boudreau Construction was about 60 feet away. Boudreau was a self-taught carpenter and woodworker who'd discovered he also had a knack for general contracting. He'd hitchhiked from his native Montreal all the way to the British Columbia coast as a young man with nothing more than a guitar, a back pack and some peanut butter and granola. He then wandered to California with some hippies who had friends who raced horses at Del Mar. He got married young, to a horseracing woman, and had a son. He turned to the only thing he knew to support his family. He didn't even speak much English, but he was good with his hands and loved wood.

"All I had was hustle," Boudreau said. "I could

barely understand the language, much less the jargon. A two by four to me was just two numbers; it was not associated with wood. But I had a lot of hustle and I found my niche. I looked at the finish carpenter guy — wow, chisels and things — how he could finish up something that looked so rough or unfinished just by adding a door and trim."

He obtained his general contractor's license in 1988. The marriage had ended but Boudreau Construction was thriving. Boudreau, who possesses a Clooney-esque kind of easy charm, often sat outside his shop picking his guitar. But Murphy had spent seven years commuting to Santa Monica and had never so much as laid eyes on her neighbor.

By 2004, Murphy's business was likewise thriving. By now, she had an employee, but she was

still working out of her little cottage.

"I was living there and I was working there and I had an assistant and she had a dog," Murphy said. "We were laying plans out on my bed. It was ridiculous. So finally I said the only way I can do this is to go up, on the walls, so I was going to hang shelves."

Murphy is a woman who knows how to use a drill. She was born in Maine and grew up in Costa Mesa, where her father, Kevin Murphy, was a maintenance worker. More than that, he was a handy guy, curious about the workings of things. He'd grown up on a farm in Wyoming, one of 13 kids.

"They are nothing but resourceful, and also accepting of whatever the good lord sends their way, whether death, disease, a crop ruined, truck broke down — they just go, okay, we are here, now what do we do?" Murphy said. "And they learn how to do with their hands, right? They have to, on a farm. They are unafraid to figure things out. Tinkerers, problem-solvers."

Growing up, Josette was her dad's tagalong.

"My dad took me to job sites when I was grade school age and I would just watch the crane and the poles and all the forms," she said. "I have always loved going to any place something is being made. A glass factory. A carpet factory. His shop. An upholstery shop, anything."

And so her transition from high-level architecture to hands-on home design work seemed perfectly natural. The problem on this day, however, was that when she went to look for her drill, it was missing. She'd recently emerged from a brief "starter marriage" to an architect, and when he'd left he'd apparently taken the drill with him. So she asked her assistant to go to Home Depot and buy a drill.

"No, you don't have to buy a drill," her assistant, Claire, told her. "Your neighbors make cabinets. I'm sure they have a drill."

"No," Murphy said. "I have never met them, that would be embarrassing."

The assistant insisted. "She shook her little cute little ass across the alley," Murphy recalled with a laugh. "She was like 23."

She returned with no drill. Boudreau and his business partner didn't know "we were tool-using girls over here," Murphy recalled,



The Moreland residence, after. Photo courtesy About:Space

and said they'd come install the shelves themselves. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door. When the door opened and the longtime neighbors finally laid eyes on one another, Boudreau and Murphy stopped in their tracks.

"Like the world stops, right?" she said. "I had just ended a marriage and he'd just ended a relationship and neither one of us were in that state of mind to start a relationship. No, no, no. But you are awfully cute. Perhaps you'd like to bid on the tables I just designed?"

Their first conversation was about wood. She wanted to know how he'd make those tables. And later that week, he did just that: he put in an absurdly low bid, won it, and showed up at the job site.

"Mahogany, curved legs, totally custom," he recalled. "In the hall of this big home. I put in fricking 80 hours in two days. 'Oh, I'm doing

it. It's good.'"

"Poor thing, maybe sold them for the price of wood because he wanted to make sure he got the job and we could keep talking," Murphy said. "And he built those two tables."

"We were courting," Boudreau said.

Two months later they finally gave in. Soon, they were living together. In 2007, they'd marry. And a few years later, they joined forces professionally. The cottage where they first met, a 100 year old home that was a part of a row of little cottages was razed to the ground and replaced with a strip mall style plaza.

"You know the game Monopoly? You know how you buy the little red plastic houses? And then once you own the whole block you knock those downs and you put up a big green plastic hotel? They did

The Moreland residence, before. Photo courtesy About:Space



that," Murphy said. "...They put a notice up on my door to kick me out, razed the entire block, and built the strip mall."

"It was a sad day. Because we don't like to tear things down, have you heard? We like to rebuild. We remodel."

Eleven years later, the couple have a pair of little girls, Isabelle and Camille. Boudreau has a little countrified rock 'n' roll band, and the couple's businesses frequently work hand-in-hand to reimagine space in older, smaller homes that might otherwise be at least partial teardowns.

"We are more about using what you have and making it better and building quality instead of quantity," Murphy said.

The two companies don't always work together, but when they do, they bring a lot to the table. About:Space has grown into a six person firm with a reputation for the ingenuity of its designs. Boudreau Construction is known for its carefulness as much as its cool, with a curated group of subcontractors who are almost yogic in their mindful ways. Boudreau often serves as both general contractor and cabinet maker.

"It's funny, he looks at woods and knows exactly what specific tree it came from," said David Campisi, whose Manhattan Beach home was remodeled by Murphy and Boudreau two years ago. "He knows his stuff and he's definitely a craftsman and very good at building. The project came back exactly on time, as well. He's got a very good crew of people he works with, so he built the cabinets and general contracted and he was over with all the subcontractors. They were all really spectacular workers — I mean, the guy who put in the tile was like an artist....Everybody comes on time, shows up neat, cleans up after they are done, and is good to their word. It was all very well organized and happened very efficiently."

"It's that kind of respect for one's art," Boudreau said. "I always tell people, this is like my house. I'm treating your house as if I'm living here. And all the subcontractors I use understand. There is not a speck of wood chips on the floor after the day is done. Everybody packs up and leaves the place clean. Everybody knows."

Campisi's house is a quarter century old. He and his family entertain a lot, and spend most their



A dining room table built by Jean-Louis Boudreau as part of the redesign of the Mason residence. Photo courtesy About:Space

time in the kitchen, dining room, and adjoining family room. A big island in the kitchen “kind of trapped” people, Campisi said. His original idea was just to install new counters but as he began talking to Murphy, he realized the problem was much bigger. The house needed flow. This is Murphy’s gift. She has an empathetic feel for home design — she can look at a room and see how it is used, and often misused, due to illogical, ill-fitted or outdated design. Big picture architecture is about ideas; interior home design is about knowing how people live, and could possibly live with more ease.

“Josette and her team came up with an interesting, very innovative design that made place more livable and functional as well as much better looking than it was before,” Campisi said. “The kitchen is now spectacular; before it was shut off from the family room, now it all flows together. It both looks better and is more comfortable....We always had a lot of parties, and before people would come and say the place looks cute. Now they say it looks beautiful, even spectacular. It’s really had an impact. We are much happier.”

Murphy is indeed about space. Margaret Dano still marvels daily at what Murphy did for her Redondo Beach home. It was a 50 year old home and Dano wasn’t sure its flaws could be fixed with-

out tearing it down. Then an acquaintance told her about Murphy.

“We heard about a woman that was about helping save what was there,” Dano said. “So we found that interesting and exciting. What we were told is she helps homes from being torn down, finds a way to turn an old house into something that is still there today. And that is exactly what we’ve done.”

Multiple small rooms became one large room and a little bit of space was added, but what Murphy did by only slightly reconfiguring the home’s footprint is somehow way beyond the sum of its parts. The house did increase in size — from 2,700 sq. ft. to 3,000 sq. ft., or what Dano describes as “a blessed 300 feet.”

“People come in and can’t believe it,” she said. “We only added 10 percent, but people say it feels like twice the house it used to be. And it feels twice as amazing to live in.”

Dano doesn’t call her house a remodel. She describes it as new.

“We are in love with our new house,” she said. “Almost lust.”

Elisabeth Lesser had a similar experience with About:Space, but with an odd twist — her home actually lost square footage yet somehow feels more spacious. Her family’s house was built in the 1940s but its age was less of a problem than alterations that had occurred in the late 1980s, when a local developer there and rushed to make changes, actually removing

part of the house to make room to build another house on the lot next door before the city’s Zoning Ordinance Revision Program (ZORP), enacted in 1990, would limit the size of what he could do.

Murphy found space. The home’s entryway was large, far out of proportion for the size of the house.

“It was a big as a living room and it was two stories,” Lesser said. “That was where we used for stroller parking and then bicycle parking -- we put all the equipment in there, because there was no place else. We had 1940s garage, which fits a car and nothing else, and nothing else fit in the house...We had a grand entryway for a house that was not that grand.”

They also now had two teenage kids, a girl and a boy, sharing a single bathroom upstairs.

“When they were little it was fine,” Lesser said. “As they got older, it was less fine.”

Murphy suggested a dramatic design change: moving the stairway and taking the entryway’s space to create more space elsewhere in the house. By the end of the project, the Lesser family gained an upstairs bathroom as well as a balcony, a first floor powder room, a new pantry in the kitchen, and new storage space throughout.

Lesser said that perhaps the most surprising thing about the home’s makeover is that despite the changes it has maintained the same warm character.

“I was thrilled with the difference it made,” she said. “It just solved all those nagging problems. We didn’t have places to put anything; it was all just put out. The kids are suddenly getting ready more quickly, not screaming at each other...It just made this a much more comfortable and livable home.”

Goethe famously described architecture as “frozen music.” This is an especially apt description for what Murphy and Boudreau do. It’s unsurprising when you learn that the couple are both dedicated yogis, and they practice together: they create new spaces, but what they really do is practice harmony. It’s a quality that applies in their ability to really listen to clients, in the way the features they add to homes create more cohesion — through the reworking of space and color as well as furniture and cabinetry often built on site by Boudreau — and in how they work together, as a couple as well as with a team of contractors.

“To follow the music analogy, when you’ve played with the same guys, you can just say, ‘It’s in the key of D, on one...And you go,’” Murphy said.

Boudreau said that a key element of the musical equation are the type of homeowners who tend to seek them out.

“We tend to attract mature people who have an eye for aesthetics, not just cost,” he said. “I’m not the cheapest, but I’m not the most expensive one, but usually it’s people who have an idea aesthetically, or they trust Josette’s taste. They’ve seen what she’s done. It’s a trust thing, and usually that’s the best scenario. If people are not stuck with really tight boundaries and they let the artistic part of the process go through and flow, they have great results.”

One of their clients, Campisi, had this realization one of the first times he met the couple. During the El Segundo Art Walk, Boudreau’s band often plays at Murphy’s office on Richmond Street. Campisi saw her work, often dramatic, before-and-after photos on walls, and saw Boudreau picking his guitar and singing with the band.

“Okay, this is interesting,” he remembers thinking. “It’s a two-for-one, construction and rock and roll music.”

For more information, see about-spacestudios.com/boudreauconstruction.com. **B**