IN BRIEF

What Urban garden on a cliff edge.
Where San Francisco, USA.
Size 1.00 square metres.
Soil Light loam, mainly brought in from
Climate Mediterranean, with cool
 summers.

A fine view across the city and its bay is not such an unusual asset
when it comes to high-end houses in hilly San Francisco, but
what this property offers is in a league of its own. For anyone who
is prone to vertigo (like me), the steps up the side of the house,
complete with prowlanding Cotter steel and glass overlooks, appear
daunting indeed. Carved into the cliff edge, each overlook
has a gridlike base that ends with a glass panel, so the intrepid
visitor has a view down the almost-vertical cliff face. Huge
eucalyptus trees grow in abundance on the cliffs and then the eye travels on to the city, the docks, the downtown
skyscrapers and, beyond, the bay itself, criss-crossed by ferries and bridges, with the
former prison island of Alcatraz looming in the distance.

"Kids absolutely love the overlooks," says designer Andrea Cochran, so of course
it is absolutely necessary for us to skip up the steps and "walk the plank" until we are
essentially hovering in mid-air above the abyss. Perhaps now would be a good time for
Andrea to introduce me to the rest of the garden.

Cars have to climb a short but extremely steep driveway before coming to rest on the
brick platform of the parking forecourt. The first thing you see on arrival is the garage,
since the front door is several storeys above. "I wanted the experience of getting to the
front door to be an interesting one," Andrea explains — hence the dramatic over lookers
that dominate the garden’s opening act.

A whimsical sculpture of a man gazing skywards — Looking Up by Jim Rehnert — greets
you at the foot of the steps, which only increases your sense of anticipation, while the
smooth Cotter steel planes of the overlooks create a sculptural tableau reminiscent of
the monumental works of the American sculptor Richard Serra.

The overlooks also create framed views of the city beyond as you ascend the steps,
which are flanked to one side by the acid green of a large block planting of Lomandra.

Above A generous brick terrace spans the bay front of the house. Here it’s all about the view
and about feeling part of the surroundings. The wide terrace looks out over the sprawling
Bay Area of San Francisco and has incredible views out over the Oakland Bay Bridge. Planting
has been kept simple with blocks of rosemary, lavender, plumbago, trumpet vine and Ivy
adorning the front wall.
SUBTLE GREYS AND GREENS DEFINE THE MEDITATIVE REAR GARDEN

Block planting can be useful in contemporary settings. On this site planting in the parking forecourt and up the steps is realised in blocks of green-leaved perennial plants: first, a line of bamboo, then Lomandra longifolia ‘Breeze’ at the foot of the steps. Then Ophiopogon further up – create pleasing contrasts with the variegated woody hues of the cedar shingles on the building. The plantings play an architectural role, in that the size and shape of the blocks respond to the volumes of the house’s facade. Block planting is also useful in areas visitors pass through quickly and where a complex planting scheme would compete with another distraction, in this case, a stupendous view.

1. A line of temple bamboo, Semiarundinaria fastuosa var. viridis flanks the parking forecourt.
2. Block-planted Selsaria ‘Greenlee’, a cultivar developed by the Californian natural-garden expert John Greenlee.
3. Carax tumulicola, a shade-loving native sedge which tumbling out of planters.
4. Steps lead down from the meditative rear garden, with block plantings of Liriope muscari, one of Andrea’s ‘most trusted’ plants in difficult situations. Tough plants such as these can be thugs in company, so it is a good idea to corral them.

Above: Complex textural interplay is always a keynote in Andrea Coughlan’s work, as thirsty the different tones of gravel, basalt pavers, cedar shingles, Corten steel, fire, maple foliage, Liriope muscari (top left) and cast-concrete seat ‘boulders’ all play a role.

♂ Longfelia s ‘Breeze’ at the foot of the steps, which is later replaced by blocks of the grass-like Ophiopogon higher up. The colour tones of these different foliage plants play off the earthier colours of the steel, the brick terrace and the cedar shingles of the house – which has been re-composed in ‘homelike’ style by architect Olle Lundberg.

The steps lead up to a substantial brick terrace that spans the bay-front of the house, with seats in the walls seemingly moulded from soft brick. This is not a material one readily associates with Andrea’s work – she tends to favour the more muted colours of natural stone and cast concrete in her sleek, Modernist works. But Andrea explains that the terrace was formerly a driveway that soaked along the front of the house, and it made sense to keep it. Atop the front wall there are simple plantings of rosemary, lavender, plumago, trumpet vine (Campsis radicans) and ivy – but it’s all about the view. Andrea explains, gazing across the wide expanse of the bay below us, criss-crossed by ferries and offset by bridges that are...
CORTEN STEEL OVERLOOKS FRAME THE VIEW FROM THE TERRACE

Above: Andrea found that the site’s scenic dramatical for simplicity, especially at the foot of the slope where a single block of Comandri longhills Bronco ‘contacts’ confronts with the Corten steel. The sculpture Looking Up by Jim Rennett stands sentinel by the steps. Though your viewer is drawn to look out to Yerba Buena Island and the Oakland Bay Bridge.

De lit up at night, “I’ve been to parties here and people like to hang out in this space. It’s like being in a bird’s nest. In fact, the birds fly at eye level.” As if on cue, a flock of noisy parakeets gobbets by. The brick gives this terrace a warm, social feeling (underfloor-heating helps), while the grey basalt used in other areas imparts a quiet, modern flavour.

Another level up and visitors finally arrive at the front door. Here Andrea has created a stylized ‘lawn’ of Prenatton phaeoanthem in a rectangular bed because the client wanted to be able to see green all year round from her study window. Above is the top terrace, an elegant private seating area alongside the kitchen commanding more spectacular views.

The garden area at the front of the house are spectacular but they are also highly exposed. So to allow for quieter moments, Andrea has created a meditative garden space behind the house in a most unpretentious setting, hemmed in by the sheer vertical wall of the neighbouring building that was once a barn. This enclosed space has a completely different feel, realised in subtle tones of grey, green and rust-brown. At one end is a seating area defined by Corten steel walls with a large concrete fire pit. The garden is shaded by maple trees and surrounded by a bucolic planting made up of sarcococca, heliabores, heucheras, dogwoods – planted for their winter colour – and the white Japanese snowball, Viburnum plicatum f. lontmon. There is intriguing textural variety between the basalt pavers, grey gravel and three large cast-concrete ‘pebbles’ strewn across the space. A panel of Corten steel, framed by clumps of Helianthus tuberosus, creates a sculptural moment at the other end of the garden space, where pink camellias from next-door’s garden tumble over the wall in season, a pleasingly random interloper which Andrea also enjoys.

USEFUL INFORMATION
Find out more about Andrea’s work at goodlifefue.com