



‘Spirit of the West Coast’: How M Stark Gallery was built with design in mind

Inside the Half Moon Bay gallery and artist residence

By Eleanor Jonas

Photos by Anna Hoch-Kenney



Along Half Moon Bay's Main Street, M Stark Gallery is a "dream come true" for founder and principal Marianna Stark. With ties to one of the city's earliest families, the Cunhas, the building now embodies the coastal feel in its design and art exhibitions.

After purchasing the old, "Frankensteined" building in January 2021, Stark worked in tandem with local businesses Verdura Construction and interiorstyle to transform the space into a community-oriented art gallery and artist

residence, which opened in January 2023.

Staying local was at the forefront of the renovation process, both in trying to capture the essence of the community and in working with local businesses and artisans for materials, according to Stark.

"We really support, as much as we can, local artisans and craftspeople," said Lisa Fahrbach, owner and senior designer of interiorstyle. "We kept this very local and we reused as much as possible."

Fahrbach described the space as "customized," with an array of furniture pieces both from Abode in Half Moon Bay and a commissioned artist near Santa Cruz, as well as handmade fire clay tile, also from a company in Santa Cruz.

Original materials were used as much as possible during the renovation, for economic, environmental, and aesthetic reasons: for example, the polished concrete foundation is used as the floor downstairs. According to Jamie Verdura, general contractor at Verdura Construction, they





saved as many materials as possible during the renovation.

Stark, Fahrbach and Verdura all highlighted the reuse of redwood in the space. Verduras noted that they reincorporated old redwood into the window trimmings of the building. On the upper floor, where Stark resides with her family, they removed a drop ceiling to reveal beautiful redwood beams, one of the defining features of the upstairs space.

Once commercial office space, the ground floor is divided into the gallery and artist residence, which is meant to attract local artists and can also serve as an Airbnb, Stark said.

“We feature artists whose work evokes the spirit of the West Coast and is in dialogue with contemporary art movements,” Stark said. “I strive to feature

Marianna Stark says using local designers and builders were key to remodeling the M Stark Gallery, which has an artist residence space on the ground floor.

coastside, San Mateo County, and Bay Area artists.”

Her gallery currently features the work of Mariet Braakman, a deceased artist and friend of Stark’s whose landscapes reminded her of Poplar Beach and Devil’s Slide. The gallery, which is about 450 square feet, changes exhibitions every six weeks and mostly exhibits solo work, with just one group show a year, Stark noted.

When designing the gallery space, the “key component” was neutrality to center the art itself, according to Fahrbach. Lighting, too, was crucial. When branching out to other spaces, the themed colors of the space become more prominent. Ezra Luke, a senior designer at Interior Style, noted the focus on oranges and blues, reminiscent of California poppies, the sky and the ocean.

“We developed a coastal picture that was a bit modern and nuanced with various bits and pieces that are specific to Half Moon Bay,” Luke said.

The outside of the building now creates a “striking contrast,” according to Stark, with white paint and black trim. She noted locals appreciate that the building remains essentially intact and in character with nearby buildings, in such a historic area.

A copy of the deed referencing Mamie G. Cunha shows the building at least dates back to 1953. Originally a single-story cottage, the building was lifted up fifteen years ago to add the current ground floor, Stark said.

“I took an old, kind of funky building and made it look special and new,” she said. “It’s been through a lot, but it still retains quite a bit of character.”

Stark, who studied art history in college, has always stayed close to the art world. She noted that the gallery is something she’s been “striving” towards for the entirety of her adult life. Fahrbach also has a background in art, as a former art gallery owner with training in architectural design and experience working in museums.

Fahrbach noted that the focus on art and collaboration was perfect for her design crew, which is currently made up of five people. After being hired by Stark, Fahrbach recommended Verduras be brought on as a great addition to the team.

“It was a dream project for us, in terms of being able to have all the things that were important — our mission statement as an interior design firm, as well as her mission statement,” Fahrbach said. “They just aligned really beautifully.” **COASTSIDE**

