



In San Francisco, Lili Weigert relishes the comfortable home she made out of a world-class wreck

“My house has totally changed my life”

**A BOUGAINVILLEA-COVERED ARBOR** frames the front door, which Lili (above) found at a salvage yard and repainted. **LILI OFTEN USES THE BRICK PATIO** of her 1906 earthquake cottage for entertaining. She says, “It almost doubles the size of my house.”

**AN EARTHQUAKE COTTAGE** sounds like a questionable place to call home, but it was the answer to Lili Weigert’s prayers. Lili had rented apartments in San Francisco for years and was convinced she’d never be able to buy a house to renovate and restore. Still, she found herself searching for real estate on the Internet late at night “just for fun.”

That’s when she discovered an ad for a tiny, neglected “earthquake cottage”—one of the only surviving temporary housing units constructed after the devastating 1906 earthquake that leveled most of San Francisco. The cottage was in a great part of town and was actually within her price range: “I was thinking something has to be wrong with this picture because the price was too low for the description,” she says. So, >

## CREATING COTTAGE STYLE LABOR OF LOVE



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without getting her hopes up, she invited her mother to join her for a walk-through one Saturday afternoon.

“No one had taken care of this place for like 60 years,” Lili remembers. “The front yard was a jungle. The cottage had ivy growing all over it, and it was so dark looking.” The inside was even worse. Totalling only 630 square feet, the house’s choppy floor plan had two tiny bedrooms and a completely outdated kitchen and bath. But despite the obvious shortcomings and the fact that it was almost entirely unlivable, “It was an easy choice for me,” she says. “Although people were telling me it would be too much of a challenge, I just had that sense that with a little bit of hard work, it could be exactly what I wanted.”

For the next four months Lili spent every weekend and most nights working on the cottage. “The first thing I had to do was tear out the bathroom and the linoleum throughout the house to the wood subfloor.” She found the subfloor to be in good condition, so to save costs, Lili decided to refinish the existing wood instead of installing new floors throughout. She also needed to reconfigure the floor plan. “The >

**THE LIVING ROOM ALSO SERVES** as the foyer and office in Lili’s 630-square-foot home. She tore out a guest bedroom to open up the floor plan and make the house feel larger.

**WHITE WALLS AND TRIM** plus two new skylights brighten the interiors.

**A BUTCHER BLOCK ISLAND** divides the kitchen from the living room and doubles as a table and countertop.

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### What's an Earthquake Cottage?

**UNLESS YOU'VE LIVED** in San Francisco, chances are you've never heard of earthquake cottages. The tiny buildings, sometimes called "refugee shacks," were erected in a hurry after the disastrous 1906 quake and fire destroyed much of the city, leaving nearly a quarter of a million residents homeless.

**MOST EARTHQUAKE COTTAGES** were built in the fall and winter of 1906-7 with redwood walls, fir floors, and cedar-shingled roofs. The city painted them "park bench green" and put in wood- or coal-burning stoves, but no toilets or kitchens. Needy residents left homeless by the disaster applied for cottages on a case-by-case basis: Families living in refugee camps were first on the priority list, followed by people in makeshift buildings, residents staying in cellars or with friends, and—finally—those who'd been forced to find shelter outside of the city.

**IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE**, but at one point more than 16,000 San Franciscans lived in refugee shacks—many in public parks.

**ONLY A HANDFUL** of earthquake cottages remain standing. The majority were torn down as the city slowly rebuilt. Many others were converted to garages or folded into larger structures. Two still stand at the Presidio.

**IF YOU HAVE A STORY** about an earthquake cottage that you'd like to share, please go to [cottageliving.com](http://cottageliving.com) and click on "Web Bonus."

“It's such a refuge to come home, turn on some music, have a glass of wine, and relax.”

**HANGING THE CURTAINS** about a foot above the window adds vertical height in Lili's bedroom and helps the small room feel bigger.

cottage had a second bedroom, so everything felt really small," she says. "I tore it out so now the house feels completely open and spacious." Lili gave up a guest bedroom, but that added 100 square feet to the living room, a move that instantly made the house feel larger. "I also put in two skylights and painted the whole house white inside," she says. "I knew if I could lighten and clean it up, it would feel so cozy."

Modernizing the kitchen also increased the cottage's appeal. Lili repainted the cabinets and installed a new sink and countertops, but working within the room's small confines proved to be her biggest test. She says, "I kept asking myself, 'Do I want space for a dining room table?' I ended up having to sacrifice that for the open feel." Then Lili's friend Seth had a great idea. He designed and built a butcher block island that extends from one wall, dividing the kitchen and living room, providing extra counter space, and also serving as the dining room table.

For Lili, living in a 630-square-foot home requires this kind of creative thinking. She finds multiple uses for every room and is always on the lookout for clever storage >



**A MARBLE SLAB** used for the vanity was a great find at \$40 from a remnant store.

solutions. Her foyer serves as a home office, thanks to a small desk where she keeps her laptop and bills. And she treats the brick patio out front as an extension of her living space, which allows her to make the most of San Francisco's mild climate. "It almost doubles the size of my house," she adds with a laugh.

Once Lili had whipped the inside of the cottage into shape, she focused on the exterior—namely the ivy that was consuming the walls and roof. "The ivy made it quaint, but it was literally eating through the house," Lili says. "It took two weekends to tear it all off, but I had so much energy that I just got after it and Rambo-style ripped it off the house." She's proud of the hard work that she poured into the cottage—"I never hired a contractor," she says. "I just went bit by bit." And she's especially pleased with what she's received in return. "My house has totally changed my life," she declares. "It's the first time I've ever taken on anything like this, and it's really been self-expression for me. I know so much more now than when I first started, but I know it was meant to be for me to buy this house. I just love being here." ■

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Learn from Lili

**TRANSFORM HO-HUM ACCENTS**, like a plain chandelier, by repainting or adding your own personal touch. "I saw one in *W* magazine like this that was really original," Lili says. "I showed it to my friend who repainted it for me as a housewarming gift."



**KNOW WHEN TO SPLURGE AND SAVE.**

Lili fell in love with a pricey French fabric in a San Francisco store and had a friend sew curtains out of it for her. On the patio, Lili cut costs by finding used wicker furniture for sale online. To sweeten the deal, the seller threw in a barbecue grill for free.

**LOOK FOR SIMPLE STORAGE SOLUTIONS** to get the

most out of a small house. Even if it's as simple as hooks for coats and bags, clearing the clutter on your floor will help you avoid that crammed-in-every-nook-and-cranny feel.

