

Before & After: A Tiny Backyard Painting Studio Transformed

by [Annie Quigley](#) | July 21, 2017



Admiring, in the spirit of [Quirky Backyards](#): A tiny 270-square-foot studio transformed in a young family's San Francisco backyard—small-space hacks, full-ceiling skylight, and two-level patio included.



The Challenge: To transform a run-down carriage house, integrating it with the main house, and make it livable as an art studio (for the parents) and a hangout for the kids, while hemmed in by tight boundaries. "Working with the San Francisco Planning Department was a challenge because the existing structure was semi-historic," says Beverly Choe of [Bach Architecture](#). "We were very limited in what we could alter on the driveway side, and were not able to enlarge the existing structure. Upgrading the structure while not demolishing it was a big challenge."



The Solution: Choe squeezed in a WC, plenty of storage, and a lounge space, and called on a previous summer stint in a landscape architecture office to create a dual-level patio that's an extension of the living space. Here's a look, inside and out.

Photography by [Mariko Reed](#), except where noted.



Above: The painting studio and new patios, as seen from the main house.

Before, the space between the outbuilding and the main house was awkward and sloping. But Choe solved the issue with a new two-level patio, “excavating two feet of dirt from the yard to create a lower patio that would be level with the studio floor.” Poured-in-place concrete retaining walls and a center planter make the two levels “distinct but unified.” Choe painted the exterior in cheerful [Benjamin Moore Aegean Teal](#) and for the trim chose [Benjamin Moore Stonecutter](#).

Before



Above: “The original structure felt cramped, and it turned its back to the yard. We really wanted to integrate the carriage house into the rear yard and open up the space,” Choe says. It was also overgrown with shrubbery and a haphazard rock wall. Photograph courtesy of Bach Architecture.

After



Above: Now, the “lower patio” is defined by a low, board-formed concrete retaining wall (poured against a wood framework, so the concrete resembles boards). See our Hardscaping 101 posts: [Poured-In-Place Concrete](#) and [Retaining Walls](#), plus [10 Genius Garden Hacks with Poured Concrete](#).

An 18-inch-high concrete ledge in the shape of an L surrounds the lower patio and doubles as a bench and step. Hidden behind it: the sewer pump. “We moved it outside to maximize space inside,” Choe says. “You can kind of see the utility pit behind the bench because it has a cedar plank cover.” A garden bed with Cor-ten steel edging juts between the upper and lower patios to create definition between the two spaces.

Choe designed all of the hardscaping, drawing on her time spent working for a landscape architecture firm. Still to come: a “wonderful, lush planting plan” by Vee Kuemmerle of Berkeley-based [Vee Horticulture](#) to add to the current selection of plantings, purchased from [Flora Grubb](#).



Above: Custom floating cedar benches add built-in lounging space and “create a material link between the patios.” (Shown here: a cedar bench on the upper level.)



Above: A set of bluestone and river rock steps connects the two levels of the patio. For continuity, Choe used the same bluestone from the upper patio; the rocks are [La Paz beach pebbles](#). At right: the corner of the Cor-ten steel garden bed. (For more, see [Landscaping Ideas: 8 Surprising Ways to Use Cor-ten Steel in a Garden](#).)



Above: Stepping inside the studio. A newly installed wall of painted aluminum windows and doors connects the studio to the lower patio. (For a similar look in steel, see [Hardscaping 101: Steel Factory-Style Windows and Doors](#).)



Above: Inside the charming studio, looking away from the main house.

Though it's only 270 square feet, the inside of the studio feels bright, open, and efficient. Along the left wall are a series of clever small-space built-ins. Opposite, a single high shelf runs along the length of righthand wall. "From the get-go, the client wanted lots of shelving, so we added the high shelf to provide shelving on both sides of the space," Choe says. "We used the oak material for visual continuity," she adds (the built-ins, newly-installed flooring, and floating shelf are all white oak) and "mounted it high so it didn't compromise the usable, open space." The high placement also leaves room for flexibility: The family can add a desk or furniture without bumping into it.

To further open the tight space, Choe added a "light chimney," an extended skylight that stretches from front to back. It lets in natural light through the ceiling joists and, Choe says, lends "a strong sense of verticality within a relatively low space." As a result, the small studio is like "a box for suffused light."



Above: A study in small-space living: Choe packed built-in shelves, a pocket-sized WC, and a concealed utility closet along one wall. It looks streamlined, even spacious, thanks to the uniform white oak.

By fitting the WC and utility room, puzzle-like, into the back quarter of the space, Choe saved space to create a "small reading niche." The built-in bench is hollow, allowing the kids a spot to read while their parents paint—and a place to stash their toys. (Cameo by Choe's dog, Peluche.)



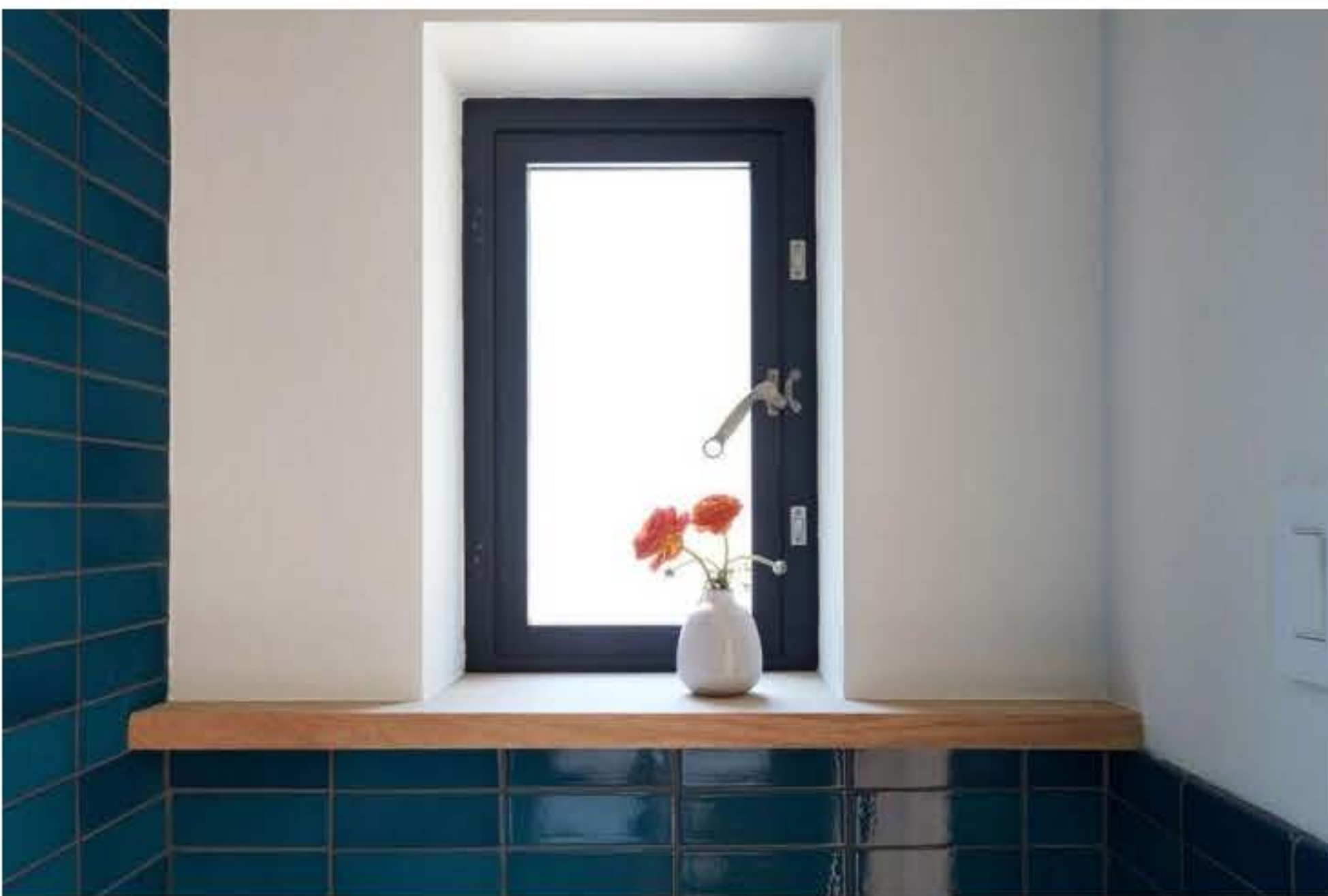
Above: Even more shelving surrounds the reading nook. The rugs and pillows throughout the studio are from [Krima Fine Rugs and Decor](#) in San Francisco, and the gray-glazed vases on the bench are by Brooklyn ceramist [Julie Hirschfeld](#).



Above: Toward the back of the studio, a white oak pocket door between two bookshelves slides open to reveal the powder room (and a riot of blue).



Above: The WC is just big enough for a small sink and toilet. The blue tiles are Heath's [Classic Field Tiles](#) in Opal Pacific.



Above: A [Heath bud vase](#) holds wildflowers on the bathroom window ledge.



Above: A detail of the "light chimney" in afternoon sun.



Above: Looking back towards the entry and main house.