

Fireproof Friendship

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AS IF IT WERE YESTERDAY, Tom and Carol Angus vividly remember the intense, unstoppable flames of the 2007 Witch Creek Fire that blowtorched their beloved home of 16 years.

The couple, who own Angus Asphalt, a well-known East County-based paving company, had built their first home in the Highland Hills, northwest of Ramona, with the idea that they would likely face wild fires at some point. Precautions included a copper-clad steel roof, sprinkler systems under the eaves, decks and the interior, and a pair of 6,000-gallon water tanks with gravity flow to a fire hydrant in the event electricity was lost. There was also an additional 15,000 gallons of water in holding tanks, a fire pump with 100 feet of fire hose for firefighters to use and brush was kept cleared back for 400 feet.

Unfortunately Mother Nature was not fazed with such homeowner diligence. None of these preparations were enough to hold back firestorm wind gusts up to 85 miles per hour, horizontal flames 200 feet long and embers the size of baseballs.

The Witch Creek Fire broke out shortly after noon on October 2, 2007. By one a.m. the next morning the Angus residence was gone.

Long after the proverbial smoke finally cleared, the decision to rebuild was a long and hard one, says Carol Angus. “Our attachment to the land has always been strong, which is why we decided to take on the big challenge of rebuilding.”

Next, the big questions were who would help them restore their lives, heal their souls, and create for them a place of peace and joy?

The answer was working right next door to their East-County business, although they didn’t know that until a year and a half later.

Enter Frank Charles Cozza, a California-licensed architect, who was educated at Ohio State and San Diego’s New School of Architecture. He began his career in the Midwest before moving West and meeting mentor Tom Grondona, a respected San Diego architect. After a decade with Grondona, Cozza started his own office specializing in custom residential projects.

Carol Angus met Cozza through her son, Charles.

Son and architect crossed paths while renovating the property he had purchased next to the Angus’ business. When Cozza finished his unique office, which was furnished in part with elegant woodwork saved from an old spaghetti warehouse restaurant and metal wings off a decrepit airplane found on the property from a previous owner, he invited the younger Angus to the open house. “Charles took one look around,” says Cozza, “and remembering that I told him I was an architect, he said, ‘You’ve got to meet my mother.’”

“I didn’t know who he was at first,” says Carol, taking up the story. “To us he was the guy who bought the junk yard next door. Our son insisted we check out our neighbor’s new office that he had fashioned out of the shell of a mid-century gas station that had sat on the architect’s property for decades.

“From the first steps inside his door, his office screamed outside the box, and that’s exactly what we were looking for,” she says.

Prior to meeting Cozza, Carol and Tom had engaged several architects from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Phoenix and even New York. Carol especially never felt a connection with any of them, but the couple hired Cozza within a week after seeing his office. What also helped Tom and Carol's decision was the fact that the Cozza family had lost their home in the Cedar Fire of 2003. That double loss bonded clients and architect.

"My challenge wasn't to design them a new house," Cozza says. "It was to design an environment that Tom and Carol would feel comfortable living in — in other words an environment that they would call home.

"From the moment I arrived at that desolated site, I saw the giant boulder that dominated the scene. I immediately began to envision how the home would be positioned, with all the views and what it would look at, and what it would look like. I knew it had to have high ceilings in order to take in everything the site had to offer, because of Carol and Tom's love for the land."

The new design had to complement the surroundings and integrate many of the elements that were left after the fire. For example, he incorporated a destroyed oak tree into the design. The burned tree was Carol's favorite. She wanted to make it a part of the new environment. "She asked me to be creative."

The architect went to work and stood the old oak bold and upright in the center of the home. To make sure his idea would work, he first built a full-scale model of that part of the house at his shop and lowered the beloved oak down through what would be the roof using a crane.

Cozza also was commissioned to handle construction management on the project.

In the end, Cozza phoenixed an expansive space that is both functional and, more important, livable. The new estate is a blend of aesthetics and eclectics or, as the architect says of his design creation: "eclectic modernism, a bit of this and little bit of that."

The walls of his masterpiece contain more than 80 custom-made windows that bring the outside in. "What nature took away is now gifting back to the Angus family by bringing the surrounding environment that God created into the home," Cozza says. "The windows allow the light to paint

large, ever-changing murals that change from deep purples and reddish oranges of early morning, through the stark colors of midday, finally ending with the tinted pinks and blues of dusk.”

Carol and Tom also liked Cozza’s use of recycled materials as being innovative and classy. “Frank has also become a very good friend. He expressed his understanding of the emotion, connection and respect for the land that we felt. We could not have chosen a more cooperative, talented, artistic person,” Carol says. “All of the subs that Frank worked with on our home had many of the same feelings and each contributed to the art and feeling of our desires just as Frank had. We are grateful for the talented folks that were part of the construction.”

Cozza adds, “Our paths crossed for a reason. I was somehow chosen to be the catalyst for Tom and Carol, helping put their lives, feelings, environment and home back together.”

As the project was nearing completion, Carol realized that because of Frank’s artistic design, loyalty, attention to detail, ability to think on his feet and truly sweat the details, the house had become “a piece of art.”

As a result, few new homes in San Diego’s East County match — indoors or out — the appearance of the pillared, two-level, three-bedroom, 3.5-bath estate built at the very edge of the San Pasqual Valley with commanding views west to Santa Catalina, east to the Laguna Mountains and north to Rancho Gujito, a magnificent 23,000-acre tract of pristine land that will hopefully be preserved for future generations, perhaps as a national park.

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