



BEFORE &
AFTER

Taming the tilt

How smart design turned two steep, oddly shaped lots into outdoor rooms to envy

CARDIFF, CA

1. Sunken patio

Because her house near the Southern California coast is set in a hillside, Leslie Mannes was short on outdoor space for get-togethers. The only possibility: a tiny, crumbling patio out back. Enter landscape designer Ryan Prange (fallingwaterslandscape.com), who revamped it into a stylish, surprisingly roomy-feeling refuge. Prange hid part of a broken concrete retaining wall behind a wooden screen and the rest under a curtain of creeping fig (*Ficus pumila*) planted against the wall. He repaved and planted the patio floor, tucked a seating area into the corner, and added built-in benches and a gas firepit. “Now the patio is inviting,” Prange says, “and full of nice little surprises.” —*Kathleen N. Brenzel*



PLANTED
RETAINING
WALL



BEFORE



BUILT-IN SEATING

MIRROR

FIREPIT

BUILT-IN SEATING

"The only way to save space was to use built-ins," Prange says. A low wing wall doubles as a backrest. LED lights under the benches illuminate the seating area and eliminate the need for light fixtures.

FIREPIT

The gas flames are ignited by a switch behind the wing wall. Any fixtures poking out of the pit would be real "shinbusters" in this tight space, Prange notes. Ceramic fire balls add interest and heat, and sedums, echeverias, and blue fescue soften the foreground.

MIRROR

Set into a 5-foot-long pocket in the wood screen, "the mirror bounces light around and makes the space seem larger," the designer says. "It's playful—and a conversation piece." The screen is made of redwood 2-by-6s finished with a custom stain.



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**ALFRESCO
DINING**

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**WATER-WISE
PLANTS**

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**WATERSIDE
SEATING**

▶
FIRE BOWL

SAN FRANCISCO

2. Terraced slope

Rob Lieberman and Brian Schneider loved everything about their Victorian house in the Castro District—except the unusable backyard, a tangled mess of greenery cloaking an uneven slope. The couple, both Philadelphia transplants, craved California-style outdoor space for grilling, entertaining, and gardening.

They called in Beth Mullins of Growsgreen Landscape Design (growsgreen.com), who installed retaining walls to create three tiers that serve as outdoor rooms. The lowest level is a patio and the second an alfresco dining room; the third holds vegetable beds and a cutting garden in raised cedar boxes from Natural Yards (naturalyards.com). —Caitlin Atkinson



BEFORE



WATERSIDE SEATING

Water spills through a wall slot and into a pool beneath the steps; the pump and reservoir are hidden behind the wall. An ipe wood bench, mounted on a perpendicular wall, is framed with soft, easy-care foothill sedge (*Carex tumulicola*).

WATER-WISE PLANTS

Pinkish purple rosettes of *Echeveria* 'Perle von Nürnberg' accent a bed of blue fescue (*Festucaglauca* 'Elijah Blue'), bright green *Lomandra longifolia* 'Breeze', and fuzzy lamb's ears. *Verbena bonariensis* blooms (above) echo hits of purple throughout the garden.

FIRE BOWL

The low Cor-ten steel firepit by Bol, from Paloform (paloform.com), warms the nearby benches without taking up too much gathering space. A surprise bonus: The concrete surrounding the fire absorbs, then radiates heat, keeping the space warm on chilly San Francisco nights. 🍷



DIGITAL BONUS 38 more firepit designs: sunset.com/firepits.