Doors Galore

Story by K. Andarin Arvola

*When one door closes, another door opens*... —Alexander Graham Bell

Doors are everywhere and nowhere. We cease to see the doors in our lives whether in reality or figuratively. When was the last time you noticed a door or thought about a door?

Doors are portals into worlds. Stepping outside—a wider world. Stepping inside—more private. But what if you open a door to the chicken coop? Or a door to a communal sauna? What about a door to Grandmother’s linen closet?

**Beauty**

To invite opportunities into your life make sure your primary entry door is in good working order, according to Feng Shui principles. For example, the paint is fresh, it opens and closes easily, the glass is unbroken, the locks work. Have the door be beautiful since beauty often travels hand-in-hand with function.

For decades, the Highlight Gallery in Mendocino has been a great patron to the extensive woodworking community on the coast. When I inquire about doors, Carmen Fraser says they have a Brian Lee redwood entry door upstairs. After I admire that door and dozens of other pieces of fine woodworking, Fraser points out a tall double-doored wine cabinet in the corner, and to a low dresser across the room. “Remember, there are other kinds of doors.”

Yikes! She is so right. There are doors on dressers, cabinets, closets, barns, chicken coops, garages, saunas, greenhouses, pump houses, pantries and more, more, more. Don’t forget French doors and Dutch doors. We take doors for granted but they can be such fun. And such hard work—or not.

**A Mess?**

The doors were a mess when I first moved into my house, or so I thought. Cracked and bubbled paint, chipped and worn through to show several previous colors. With much help from my late father-in-law, I carefully sanded and repaired the two exterior doors and one of the interior doors. They were primed and painted, red for the front door and turquoise for the back. The interior door was painted bright yellow on the inside and the wood cleaned on the outside. It took weeks.

Then I realized through my work in retail, I could’ve saved myself all that trouble. In their condition, they were “shabby chic” and needed only a little light sanding, a touch of a wire brush, or nothing.

**Function**

In times of cheap gas, electric or wood energy, there was little emphasis on saving it. Many older homes lacked insulation, either in walls or ceilings. Those same homes invariably had single-pane glass in windows and doors that let in cold or heat and let out cold and heat.

Replacing those windows and doors with double-pane glass is not inexpensive, but according to spokeswoman Ivy Bene of Pacific Gas and Electric, the big advantage is that heating and cooling bills may be reduced by 15 to 20 percent a year. It adds up.

The most important factor to consider when choosing new windows and doors is to have a low “E” rating. What that means is, look for windows and doors that are labeled by the National Federal Rating Council with a “U” (ultraviolet ray) factor of 0.35 or less. This measures the heat flow through the window from the inside to the
Windows and doors should also have a Solar Heat Gain Coefficient of 0.32 or less. This is a measurement of solar energy coming into the house.

With energy costs so high these days, it pays to be attentive, whether those low “E” doors and windows are for replacement or new construction. While there’s a certain aesthetic about wood doors and windows, they are not the only option.

Modern technology has made selection and choice vast. The sheer number of manufacturers makes it difficult to know who to buy from and what to install in the first place. Plus, the many combinations of new and old materials make it more complicated. These days recycled components over a wood core can last years longer than a completely wooden frame.

And our coastal climate makes some choices for us. The blend of wind, salt air and moisture makes it imperative to choose wisely.

I ask someone who’s been in the construction business for forty years to give me some basic guidelines. While not definitive, Joe Moura of Moura Construction reiterates that a low “E” factor on doors and windows is imperative on the coast, especially in oceanfront homes. “They let the sun in but not the cold,” he states. Many of the new materials can be painted or stained and hold up well in our climate.

Fiberglass outside, with a choice of wood inside, offers a tremendous warranty, Moura tells me. There’s no warping, rusting, or cracking; they don’t swell up and are easy to maintain.

Another long-lasting material is vinyl. Vinyl products are leak-proof since they’re welded in the corners. They don’t rot or corrode and have few metal parts, none of which are exposed to the weather. “For the last ten years vinyl has been in so much use that aluminum windows are fast becoming a product of the past,” says Moura.

He suggests caution when thinking about French or double doors—they seem to be more prone to leaks. One of the biggest issues with wooden doors is swelling, says Ron Stark of Stark & Thornton Construction. “With exterior stock doors the moisture gets into cracks and some will come apart. Vinyl-clad or aluminum doors that have a baked enamel surface hold up much better,” he explains.

In lieu of the above, Stark recommends a high-end wooden door. He particularly likes Honduras mahogany. “Use glues that don’t come apart and woods that don’t expand or contract. I use Gorilla Glue®, it’s bullet-proof!” He stresses the necessity of a porch or roof overhang.

Stark says to put a sheet metal, copper or stainless steel pan under the door before installation. The pan will catch water that could seep down between the sill and the door jam. The pan channels the water back outside to prevent leakage into the house, he says.

Doors as Art
The electric, lime-green studio, owned by Vicki and Steven Bates of Fort Bragg serves as Vicki’s Hair Care and an art and music studio for Steven. They now live on the same property.

The design of their novel home and studio came when the couple was living in a sweet, two-story, 520-square-foot cabin in the woods and kept asking themselves, “If this cabin could be perfect, what would it be?” The fascination with doors and windows for them is that their overall design is so simple and open they have only one interior door in the studio and two in the house. But —what doors?

“It’s a chance to make a statement artistically for a minimalist,” explains Vicki. “Mostly, interior doors have always bored me, people shut themselves off behind awful doors.

“So, if they have to exist, they might as well be beautiful,” Vicki says.
Leading into the studio, the dramatic Javanese door handles of heavy brass, on a modern door, signal the visitor to be alert.

“In the studio, part of the design, it’s that throughout—is not to hang other pieces of art on the walls where the doors are placed,” she explains.

The only interior door in the studio came from Central Java. They found it at Gado Gado International in Santa Rosa. The owner buys properties, dismantles the structures and ships the salvaged items here. The figure on the hand-carved teak door is the warrior Arjuna, hero of the Sanskrit epic, Mahabharata.

The molding around the door is unique as well. The Bates’ only directions were “no straight lines and asymmetry is good.” Brian Brown of Mendocino executed the work. Vicki said of the molding, “It’s a perfect example of how amazing an artist can be when trusted.”

Brown, the owner of Soul Focus Stone, is also a master of decorative concrete. “I specialize in spontaneous interruptions of normality,” he says. “I trained with Fu-Tung Cheng.” Brown’s designs are award winning on a national level.

To add even more impact, the double exterior doors will soon be mirrored to reflect the Arjuna door. Within the house all the doors and windows came from Albion Doors and Windows. Vicki says, “It was a lot of fun to design with Larry (Sawyer). We would play architect with all that was available.”

The dragon door is for the closet. It was carved by a Chinese man around the turn of the twentieth century. Circling dragons are on the outside of the closet with a much simpler design inside. Stained and finished on the outside to resemble mahogany, and on the inside to look like maple, the only evidence that the door is black walnut is when the edge of the door is observed.

Bob Sanderson and Taimi Barty hung the dragon door and trimmed the exterior doors in teak.

The pagoda (a Japanese temple) door consists of two paneled pocket doors that open simultaneously. “They were an opportunity to play with the mahogany that Steven’s father, Raymond Bates, and the late Happy Paoli retrieved from Ten Mile Beach. The twenty-four-foot log probably came loose from a freighter and eventually washed up on the beach,” Steven says. “It cured in Happy’s garage for thirty years.”

The door was carefully crafted by the father-and-son team of Jim and Greg Brickey of Fort Bragg, who also created the dramatic trim of a Torii gateway [typically used to mark the approach and entrance to a Japanese shrine] that leads to the bathroom.

**Custom Doors—Art, Function and Beauty**

After thirty years of building custom doors, Brian Lee knows what he likes. “I like to do doors,” he says. “A door is the first thing people see when they walk up; it’s a calling card. It makes quite an impression and there’s a certain person who agrees with me. What I really want to do is work with people who want nice doors, and we end up being friends.”

Lee, Jake Ford and Jason Magnone, who often work together, are building a door Lee calls “self-commissioned” on the day I visit. It’s one he’ll sell on his Website but it isn’t custom-built for a particular person.

“Custom doors versus commercial doors is the difference between night and day,” Lee says. Ninety percent of commercial doors are veneer. His doors are solid wood and sometimes use glass. He uses traditional joinery, and cope and stick joinery. The glue is special and—secret. “What I'll say is, it's a two-part urea-resin exterior glue.” Lee, Ford and Magnone all bust up [laughing].

The main body (frame) of the door is a durable wood such as old-growth redwood, mahogany, white oak, black
walnut, cedar and some Douglas fir.

A Brian Lee door almost always has very, very “fancy” panels. “That’s our trademark,” he tells me. Flame mahogany, fiddle-back maple, burled, and curly are all names of “figured” or “fancy” wood. The contrast of a dark, straight grain with the deep dimensions that occur with a curly wood is striking. Peer into the wood. The light reflects in the depths; it seems to move as a solid wave.

A problem with highly figured woods is that they can’t be run through a planer; they “blow up,” says Lee. Now, with a dimensional sander, it’s possible for him to use woods he’s had stacked up for years.

Much of the glass in his doors is beveled, with some fused-, art-, and stained glass. Recently he’s been working with Fort Bragg resident Sandy Forrington of DragoneyeGlass.com.

Lee agrees that climate figures in a major way with wooden doors. He has to factor in where the door is going, an arid or a humid climate, and design accordingly. I ask him where he dries his wood. “Oh, on racks in the living room,” he says casually.

“I have work all over the country; Alaska, Canada and Hawaii. Nothing yet in Europe, but I’m working on it.”

Looking around Mendocino one can see about a hundred doors that Lee has made. Good examples are the front and interior doors of the Savings Bank in Mendocino.

One of the beauties of ordering a custom door from Lee is watching it being built—even if you’re in Maine. “We build on-line, the door can be viewed as it’s being made. Each client has their own unique Website,” says Lee. His customers have names and so do his doors, often having to do with place.

**Art—Sand-carved Glass Doors**

It was nearly twenty years ago that Cynthia Myers went to her first craft fair with “two vases and some glass jewelry” on a Labor Day weekend in Fort Bragg. For years she worked alone going to street fairs and wholesale shows; shipping orders from her studio. These days, she not only has a local open studio but she’s expanded her endeavors to include architectural glass in doors and windows.

“The medium of etched glass allows me to create a canvas that plays with light in a variety of ways, by capturing it, by penetrating the etched design, or by reflecting and bending light to create a luminous effect,” says Myers.

“I like the collaboration between architects, home owners and builders,” she says happily, “although the whole process is time-consuming." Often, the doors are custom, but not always. Well-built, interior doors are especially delightful.

Working around air-borne glass is dangerous. “To protect myself from the abrasive silica dust, I wear an air-feed hood,” says Myers. “It’s sort of like what urchin divers wear.”

**Beauty and Function**

Naturally enough, not everyone wants or can afford custom doors and windows but there are ways to have something individual and unique. It takes searching, sometimes in other locales, on the Internet or, in one case, in our own backyard.

Albion Doors and Windows was first developed by Harriet Bye, who later passed it on to her partner Larry Sawyer. It’s been in existence about three decades providing recycled, salvaged and vintage doors, windows and fixtures. It serves creative individuals who want something besides the standards available in their homes.

“This is one of the more creative endeavors I’ve been involved in,” says Debra Scott, who runs the business for Bye and Sawyer when they’re out of town.
Scott tells me that people come from across northern California, and now with their Website, from beyond, to find that special accent for their home or that reasonable chicken coop door. “Sawyer often, on short notice, travels around northern California doing demolition to save these gems from the wrecker ball.”

One of the specialties that draw attention from far and wide is an incredible collection of vintage hardware. “I tell people they can’t drool on the merchandise,” laughs Scott.

Bye and Sawyer live on the premises where many fine examples of their use of the recycled doors and windows that they’ve rescued can be seen. For example, a greenhouse is composed of a multitude of their found doors and windows. Albion Doors and Windows is open by appointment only.

You, too, may peek into some of the possibilities for doors and windows.