

Nowhere to go but up

Stuck with a 20-by-20-foot downtown lot they thought was unbuildable, a Santa Barbara couple take an unusual tack.

Jane Hulse, Special to *The Times*
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Santa Barbara — BUILDING a luxury home on a gritty back-alley patch measuring only 20 feet by 20 feet seemed preposterous on its face. But Neil Ablitt and his wife, Sue, just moved into their pint-sized palace, a whimsical four-story tower that suggests the hand of Dr. Seuss.

Each floor has just one room — in ascending order: bedroom, kitchen, living room — all atop the ground-level garage.

It's not an arrangement for the weak-kneed. To reach the rooftop patio and its panoramic view, the Ablitts must climb 72 steps from the ground.

"It's an impossible project," said Neil Ablitt, a 63-year-old retired dry cleaner. And it nearly was.

It took four years for the Ablitts and their architect, Jeff Shelton, to get approval from the city of Santa Barbara, partly because of the project's improbable downtown location. The entrance to the lot is down an alley behind a popular nightclub on a stretch of State Street, the city's main commercial strip. The couple's immediate view takes in the trash bins lining the alley and the unadorned back sides of buildings housing restaurants, a bar, a T-shirt shop and a metal plating shop. There's not another house in sight.

And you won't see the Ablitt house from the street either, unless you crane your neck. The white stucco exterior is dotted with 57 various-sized windows and topped with a colorful tiled dome.

Inside, the same sort of brightly colored tile is everywhere, zigzagging up the walls and across the floors in bold shades of blue, yellow and green. A 108-foot-long banister, carved from black walnut, snakes along the Italian marble staircases. In a playful touch, gargoyle-like faces that are carved from limestone poke out of walls throughout.

"It's a work of art," Ablitt said, from the house. "We're living in art."

An unapologetic champion of urban living, he isn't put off by the proximity of boisterous nightlife and the occasional homeless person wandering by.

And you won't hear him complain about the scarcity of closet space in his dream house. Since 1993, he and his



A whimsical exterior hides the fact that the Ablitts' \$1-million home is just three rooms stacked atop a garage. (Brian Vander Brug / LAT)

wife had lived in the cramped confines of a 37-foot sailboat. Their new home has a freezer — a luxury they've gone without for 14 years.

"Initially, I wanted to make a statement," he said. "Show that you can build small, comfortable and luxurious."

After a month of living small, the couple have no complaints. Their legs are holding up, they don't worry about safety and they say they've gotten used to the noise, although, as Ablitt observed: "We do know when the bars close."

Ablitt, who grew up in the Santa Barbara area, is accustomed to taking chances. After 12 years in marketing for Caterpillar Inc., he turned entrepreneur. But a venture manufacturing roller skates fizzled, as did another, selling mobile drilling equipment in Mexico.

After returning to Santa Barbara, Ablitt, who comes from a long line of dry cleaners, founded Ablitt's Fine Cleaners & Launderers in 1984, setting up shop on family-owned property downtown. It was the same year he bought the tiny, commercially zoned lot where his house now sits so he could serve on the local parking board. When he later learned that due to the lot's size there was little he could do with the dismal patch near his dry-cleaning business, his \$6,400 investment seemed doomed.

But in 2002, he got Shelton — who was working on a nearby house — to tackle the challenge of designing a home in a space with the footprint of a two-car garage. The affable architect was already making a name for himself in Santa Barbara with his stylishly whimsical designs.

What followed were four frustrating years of seeking approvals for a slew of modifications to the city's building code. The outcome is a solid concrete house 53 feet tall that covers virtually the entire Lilliputian lot — forget setbacks, forget yard.



Italian marble and multicolored tiles help carry a zigzag motif throughout the house. (Brian Vander Brug / LAT)

Because a garage is required by the building code, that became the first floor, but the Ablitts may use it for an office, laundry and storage — allowable if the space can still be used as a garage. The three floors of living space above total 699 square feet, excluding the stairs.

The bedroom above the garage holds little more than the bed and two small built-in dressers, each situated beneath about two feet of closet rod to hang clothing. The slender adjoining bathroom has a shower — no tub.

"I try to get down to what people need," Shelton said from his Santa Barbara office.

One flight up, the kitchen showcases the couple's love of wine. Nooks for bottles are built in, near a temperature-controlled wine cooler. Up above, the living room has just enough space for a couch and a couple of chairs.

A second staircase to the roof and its patio — required by the city because of the height — turned out to be a plus because it enabled Shelton to tuck in another tiny bathroom under the stairs.

He designed big windows in the living room and kitchen with opaque glass on the bottom to block out the immediate view of scruffy buildings below and clear glass above to display the surrounding mountains.

Shelton and local contractor Dan Upton rounded up half a dozen local artists to provide such touches as the Seuss-like wiggly ironwork crafted by Shelton's brother David and the seven faces carved by sculptor Andy Johnson embedded in the wall.

Such work doesn't come cheap. Ablitt initially thought he could build the house for about \$480,000, until it morphed into a "work of art." Now he figures the cost at about \$1 million — still less than the \$1.2-million median price that homes sold for in Santa Barbara in December.

For contractor Upton, who has worked with Shelton on other buildings with unusual sizes and designs, it was the usual: one challenge after another. Because the property is so small, there was hardly any room for crews to work. With no elevator, all the building materials had to be hauled up the stairs.

The irony, he said, is that opponents feared the tall, small house would stand out, but in fact it isn't visible from the street. He figures the privacy won't last, though, and that's a prospect he seems eager to embrace.

For the Ablitts, who have been married for 41 years, the four-year approval process was a roller-coaster ride. "We were a year into it before we knew it would happen," said Sue Ablitt, 64.



In the third-floor living room, windows obscure close views but display the distant mountains. A stairway with a snaking banister leads to a rooftop patio. (Brian Vander Brug / LAT)

The city's planning commission rejected the project in 2004, but the City Council overturned the denial two months later, embracing its eccentricity.

"We were enchanted by it," said Mayor Marty Blum, who confided that around City Hall the unusual home was known as the "Smurf House."

But William T. Mahan, who retired from the planning commission recently, had voted against it, saying a 20-by-20-foot lot off an alley and surrounded by commercial buildings was no place to build a house. For the council, he said acidly, "it was love at first sight. They gaga-ed over it."

Another commissioner, Bendy White, said the house represented a missed opportunity to use the small lot in combination with adjacent properties for larger urban redevelopment.

Others opposed it too. Kay Morter, general manager of the Holiday Inn Express/Hotel Virginia adjoining the Ablitt property, said she feared initially that the house would block guests' views. That didn't happen, and now she's on board with the house she called "really darling." The hotel is working with the Ablitts to add a fountain between the properties.

Ever the optimist, Neil Ablitt plans to redo the alley as an inviting paseo, perhaps with a touch of cobblestone and some landscaping. He hopes that his project will spur other owners in the area to undertake some face lifting.

"I think it will become a tourist attraction," he said.

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