

## BUSINESS

Home &gt; Business &gt; Upgrading a Duplex in Los Angeles

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## BEFORE+AFTER

# Upgrading a Duplex in Los Angeles

## A-Team Construction helps a Los Angeles homeowner find balance

By **Kathy Price-Robinson**

When Leanna Sun bought her tiny, rundown duplex in the Miracle Mile area of Los Angeles, it did seem like a miracle. As a divorced mom who was between jobs, Sun's prospects of home-ownership had seemed bleak until she finally found the right property. Then, last year, when Sun found the right contractor to help her fix up the property, it seemed like good fortune had come her way again.

Six years ago, Sun was a renter desperate to become a homeowner. She wanted to buy a duplex for two reasons. First, the potential rental income on the second unit would help qualify her for a loan. Second, she could rent the additional unit to her mother, who could provide childcare for Sun's daughter, Camille, then 5. Sun finally completed the purchase of a 1923 Spanish-style stucco duplex, with two one-bedroom units of about 800 square feet each, for \$289,000.

In the explosive real estate market of Los Angeles, that was below market value, but for good reason. The duplex was small, dark, and dumpy

and had been on the market more than a year. "Nobody wanted it," Sun says. She made the best of the situation, furnishing her unit with antiques and comfortable slip-covered furniture. But after five years sharing the unit's one bedroom with her daughter, the living conditions began taking a toll on Sun's peace of mind. "I needed my own space. I was at the point of losing my mind," she says. "I was really kind of sad."

At first, Sun thought she would buy a duplex with bigger units. However, real estate prices had increased so much since she bought her duplex, that she was priced out of that option. Houses on her block have sold for up to and more than \$1 million. She decided to stay put and remodel. Using \$40,000 in equity that had accumulated on her property, Sun remodeled and now has her own bedroom and bathroom and French doors that open to a sunny deck. "I've become a very happy person," Sun says, attributing her good fortune to her contractor, Brian Koh of A-Team Construction in Los Angeles.





## OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

At first, getting the job done seemed impossible. Even before she spoke to any contractors about her remodel, Sun knew that adding another bedroom to the back of her unit would be tricky. “This is a weird situation,” she was told by one contractor, who pointed out that the new bedroom would have to be accessed through the original bedroom at the back of the unit, like two train cars end to end. “This is really going to cost you,” another told her.

“I felt self-conscious about not being rich,” recalls Sun, who now works two jobs — as a legal secretary and as a clerk in a high-end retail shop — and still struggles to make ends meet. All she could say to the contractors was, “I know.” Finally, Sun got a referral for Brian Koh, who, a friend said, “will change your life.”

Koh was born in South Korea

and immigrated to the United States in 1977 at the age of 28. In Korea, he was a civil engineer, designing multimillion dollar wharfs and other large projects. In the United States, he applied for jobs with large corporations, but was turned down due to his lack of English skills. Eventually, his brother-in-law, who does construction work, suggested that Koh do the same. Koh has steadily built his business from referrals and word-of-mouth — he does not have a Web site and does not use e-mail to communicate with clients. With about 20 skilled employees, mostly Korean, he does about \$6 million a year in jobs, which average \$100,000 each. The majority of his work is remodels and additions, but he also builds new homes.

As soon as he walked through Sun's front door, Koh had ideas about how to improve her home. Even before he saw the bedroom at

the back of the unit, he suggested new windows for the dining room — to replace the broken 1960s-era louvered windows that were closed and covered up — to brighten up the space.

This suggestion was in line with Sun's belief in and practice of feng shui, the ancient Chinese art of placement. Bringing light into that side of the house was exactly what the principles of feng shui advised (see “A Feng Shui Primer,” on page 3).

Koh also had workable ideas when he saw the bedroom at the back. It immediately occurred to him that the right side of the existing bedroom could be sacrificed for a hallway, creating a smaller room for Camille. Then the hallway could lead to the new bedroom and bathroom, which would extend into the rear yard. “Sometimes you have an inspiration,” Koh says.



### MODEST MARVEL

Unlike with previous contractors, Sun, who is half Chinese, felt comfortable with Koh. “I felt he already understood,” she says. Her instincts told her he was trustworthy. And she liked the idea that Koh had his own crew of workers. According to Koh, using his own workers, rather than relying on subcontractors, allows him to have more control over the quality of the work and the schedule. “That’s the most important thing,” he says.

Koh suggested adding a modest bedroom and bathroom, and a walk-in closet, for a total of about 400 square feet. When Sun visited The Home Depot and brought back samples of tile and laminated flooring, Koh told her: “We can do better than that for you.” Indeed, she preferred the tile he suggested and was happy to see that his plan called for white oak floors, “not fake stuff.”

In early March, two weeks after Koh’s first visit to the house, the job started. Having heard stories from

other homeowners who had bad remodeling experiences, Sun was a bit nervous. “What if they don’t show up?” she thought. But her fears soon faded when the crew showed up that day to pour the foundation and arrived at 8 a.m. every day after that, except Sundays, until the job was done. Sun notes that the crew was exceptionally hard-working, extremely polite, and quiet. “They think a lot,” she says. “They don’t talk your ear off.”

When it was time to start working on the existing house, the foreman explained to Koh that she and her daughter would have to move their things into the front of the house. Sun recalls the foreman being extremely considerate about inconveniencing the family.

While the main part of the job took about eight weeks, Sun decided to add more features mid-stream, including new windows throughout the rest of the house. She chose aluminum double-hung units. At the back of the house, beyond the new

bedroom, Sun was not sure what to do with the ragged backyard. Her initial thought was to just cement over it, but Koh said he didn’t think that was a good idea. Instead, during a meeting of all his company foremen, the idea arose to install an arbor-covered deck and a lawn area behind that. “Five minds are better than one,” Koh says of his company meetings. Sun thought that was a great idea and agreed to the work.

Throughout the project, Sun’s mother brought the workers refreshments and Sun tried not to micro-manage the project. “It’s like artists,” she says. “You have to let them do their own thing.”

Still, Sun was concerned when she saw that the deck did not have railings. Although she gave Koh lots of free reign to design her project, she had always envisioned that the deck would be surrounded by railings. So she asked Koh, “Where are all the railings?” He explained to her that another of his foremen had an inspiration to put a railing on just one

side, and to then create steps leading from two sides of the deck out to the backyard. Sun realized that the foreman's idea created a streamlined, open look that reminded her of a Japanese tea house. "That's Asian style," she admits, agreeing that omitting the railings is a better design and more fitting to feng shui.

After the deck was built, Sun hired a crew to add a lawn and to plant flowers in the backyard. The landscaper reused the white fencing that once enclosed the backyard by leaning several sections of it against a back wall as a trellis for climbing bougainvillea.

Sun did not renovate the existing bathroom or the connecting unit where her mother lives, but she plans to do so in the future. The addition has made a tremendous difference in Sun's life, as well as her daughter's. Camille got to pick the colors for her new room, and she chose her favorite blue. Her room has a table and chairs, a television, and her own framed artwork, and Sun said she spends a lot of time there.

Sun furnished her own room with an antique bed, rugs, and an armoire. Her closet has more room than she needs, and the wooden deck is outfitted with an assortment of vintage iron and wicker chairs.

To create even more good luck and fortune for herself, Sun has bolstered the corner of her house associated with money and power with flowers and other symbols.

"It just all came together beautifully," Sun says of the remodel, expressing gratitude to her contrac-

tor. "He gave me a lot of peace and tranquility in my life." —

### A FENG SHUI PRIMER

In 1997, when Leanna Sun was going through a divorce, she started studying feng shui (pronounced FUNG schway), the Chinese art of placement, to try to bring more happiness and success into her life.

In the ancient practice of feng shui, energy flow (chi) is influenced by the placement of doors, windows, rooms, furniture, and other elements in a home or workplace. According to the theory, that placement affects one's health, wealth, and personal relations.

In Sun's rented apartment, for instance, she activated the corner associated with wealth with symbols such as flowers, beads, bells, coins, and statues, and she eventually became a homeowner. Later, in her new home, she bolstered the corners associated with wealth and relations, and she ended up with a compatible Korean contractor who built a bedroom and bathroom addition that improved her life.

At work, Sun situated her desk in the southwest corner (the one associated with wealth), and she has progressed steadily in her career.

Decades ago, when feng shui came into the consciousness of the Western world, it was often dismissed as a hippie fad. But according to a recent article in *The New York Times*, feng shui has risen to become a respected technique for situating doors and offices and displays in New York commercial spaces and retail stores. The article re-

ports on a feng shui consultant, Alex Stark, who counsels commercial building developers on how to make their future buildings more conducive to financial success. According to Stark, he did feng shui consultations on the Conde Nast Building in Times Square and he said he is developing the country's first credit-bearing course for a major architecture school (though the school was not named).

However, some commonly accepted principles of feng shui are not favored by architects. An article in the *Feng Shui Times* lists the feng shui principles that annoy architects most. Examples include ceiling beams in bedrooms (which are said in feng shui to cause relationship problems), high ceilings (which can make concentration and sleep difficult), and views from the front of the house to the back (which feng shui theory says will allow the energy of the house to escape and make it hard for inhabitants to save money).

For Sun, feng shui is not a theory, but a real force in her life. When she met remodeling contractor Brian Koh, she felt he had an intrinsic sense of feng shui and the flow of chi. "Chi is a very powerful thing," Sun says. "Feng shui is an art that must be felt and followed."

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