

# METROPOLIS

## WELL-GROUNDED

by  
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Whether in a dramatic hillside home in California or an AIDS clinic in South Africa, Stan and Jess Field look first to the land.

### HILLSIDE HOUSE

Portola Valley, California

Father-and-son architecture team Stan and Jess Field stand outside the recently completed Hillside House, a building that skips down a California valley and frames views of nature.

The famous early-twentieth-century neurosurgeon Dr. Russell Brain had nothing on Stan and Jess Field in terms of a perfectly apt last name. The father-and-son duo—Stan the elder, Jess the younger—run Field Architecture, a firm that designs landscape-sensitive architecture in a range of scales. They work out of a small storefront office in Palo Alto, California, a town known mostly as the home of “West Coast Ivy” Stanford University and the former home of brainiac companies like Google and Paypal. It’s learning central, which is why it’s no surprise that the efforts coming out of the duo’s office are the work of some serious brains.

Jess and Stan refer to each other as “Jess” and “Stan,” and over the course of a long conversation at their office—which ranges from stories about Jess’s early-20s trek across Africa, to a discussion of their HIV-prevention Ubuntu Centre in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, to Stan’s early work as a student of Louis Kahn—it’s easy to feel the depth and ease of their relationship.

They opened Field Architecture in 2006, after operating independently of each other for a few years (for Jess) and 38 years (for Stan). Jess spent time working with Teddy Cruz and Tom Wiscombe, and then got his master’s



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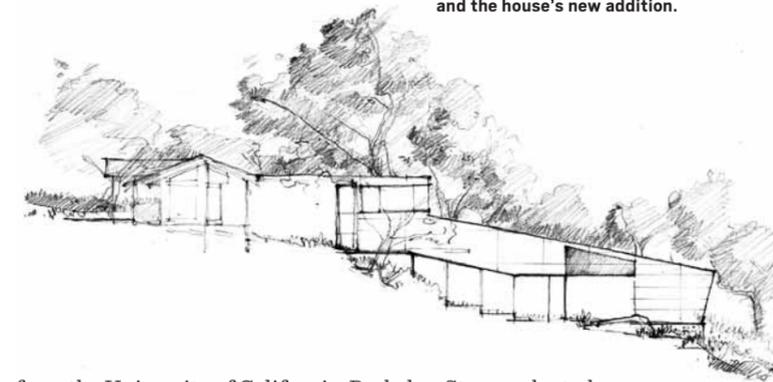
In the multipurpose room, reclaimed-koa-lined pockets punctuate a wall of eucalyptus cabinets that operates both as storage and insulation from western heat gain.



A yoga and meditation room slants out over the treetops, offering a moment of serenity in a spare yet playful treehouse.



Above: Jess Field calls the dappling of light and shadows upon the house a "dematerialization" of the structure by nature, blending building into landscape. Below: The sketch shows the relationship between the existing cottage and the house's new addition.



Below: Long stair treads soften the slope, and make it easily accessible for both adult- and child-sized legs, while a wall of windows extends the feeling of living just inside nature. Bottom: A band of open wall between the built-in seating and eucalyptus cabinetry offers display space for artwork by the owners' two children.



from the University of California, Berkeley. Stan graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, which is where he met Kahn, a picture of whom is displayed in the same frame as Stan's Master of Architecture diploma. Kahn's formal influence is clear in the geometric shapes and crisp cutouts that dominate so many of the Fields' projects, but at the same time, it's evident that the particular alchemy of this father and son has combined to create something new.

"I've been in Stan's office ever since I was little," Jess says. "Working my way up as a model builder and draftsman." A few hours later, Stan will talk about how, when they lived in Israel—where he served as the chief architect of Jerusalem—he would bring his drawings home from the office, unfurl them on the dining room table, lift Jess up, and hand him a pencil. Jess would sketch his ideas, rather than tell them to his father, and from that moment their collaborative process was born. The two talk to each other through drawings as much as through words, and it's that connection, and the sense of translation from one medium to another, that permeates much of their office's work. Flipping through a sketchbook, the two start off sure of which drawing was drawn by which Field, but then they start to get mixed up, and finally admit the identifying element: Stan draws mostly in pen, Jess mostly in pencil.

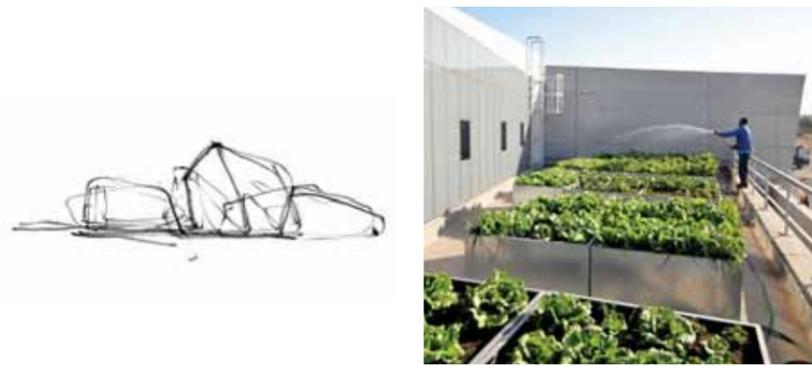




“We joined forces as a commitment to finding a way to take buildings and marry them with landscape,” Jess explains. “Not just in terms of landscape design, but in terms of the bigger context.” He cites the new awareness of greening and sustainability that has begun to permeate if not the entire construction industry, at least much of the conversation that the industry has with itself. But Jess isn’t just jumping on an eco-friendly bandwagon. Being the father of a daughter 12 weeks old on the day we speak, Jess is thinking about the future. “We want to be not only custodians of the landscape—so that my little girl can get to enjoy it like I did—but also to really put the buildings out there as an offering, in a pedagogical way.”

One problem with architecture—particularly residential architecture, which is designed to work both practically and rhetorically—is that so much can be lost by never leaving the exclusive world of those with the resources and inclination to build. A thoughtful and well-financed client might hire a firm like Field Architecture to build her a house. She might already be interested in landscape and nature and what those immensely complex words might mean, and so the transcendent work that the firm might produce—say a house in Portola Valley, California, that trips down a hillside, or a South African lodge that nestles in the landscape like a crouching lion—could solely reflect her worldview, rather than making the jump to public engagement and the larger sense of what architecture, when carefully considered, can do.

That is not what’s happening here, though. The Fields are exploring the ways in which a house can change ideas not only for the architect and client, but for the client’s friends or family—or son, who comes to visit, and then sees the treetops a little bit differently, and perhaps thinks about the ecological impact that his company has. Stan grew up



#### UBUNTU CENTRE

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Top: South African children pose in front of the Ubuntu Centre, a community and pediatric AIDS testing and treatment facility. Above: The center’s organic rooftop garden provides food for the neighborhood. Below: The building crouches on the dusty landscape. The clarity of its concrete-clad form is leavened by the thin wood slats that run across its windowed walls, providing both shade and a visual relationship with the existing architecture.



#### PRIVATE RESIDENCE

Napa, California

Above: The house serves as a vehicle for seeing and experiencing nature, from the hilltops in the distance to the controlled element of the swimming pool in the foreground. Below: The design for a barn on the same property takes its cues from the idea of openness, which is central to the Fields’ approach to the relationship between architecture and nature.



Both pages, courtesy Field Architecture

in apartheid South Africa, and the experience—and sense of social responsibility—has not left him. “South Africa’s got an amazing effect on anybody who grows up there,” he says. “We grew up in a terrible era—sometimes I look at myself and think ‘how come I’m normal?’—but the freedom struggle actually gained freedom.” For Stan, landscape is something much more than ground cover. It’s also political, social, and cultural. And so, when he says “architecture can be a vehicle for change and transformation,” you know he means it.

Specifically, Stan is talking about the Ubuntu Centre, a pediatric HIV testing and treatment clinic in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Jess left his home country when he was one and a half—he’s disconnected enough from his birthplace that he has to do the math, saying the year and his current age and subtracting in order to find out how old he was when he moved. But Jess spent his childhood returning to the country once a year—“each trip was so monumental”—and then passed eight months of his 21st year trekking through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Botswana, Mozambique, and, finally, South Africa. “I feel like I built an intimate connection with the place,” he says. A few days later, he sends JPEG scans of his sketchbook, and the pages of egrets, antelopes, zebras, and elephants feel alive, as though at any moment they could jump out of the blank background and hide behind a brand-new wall.



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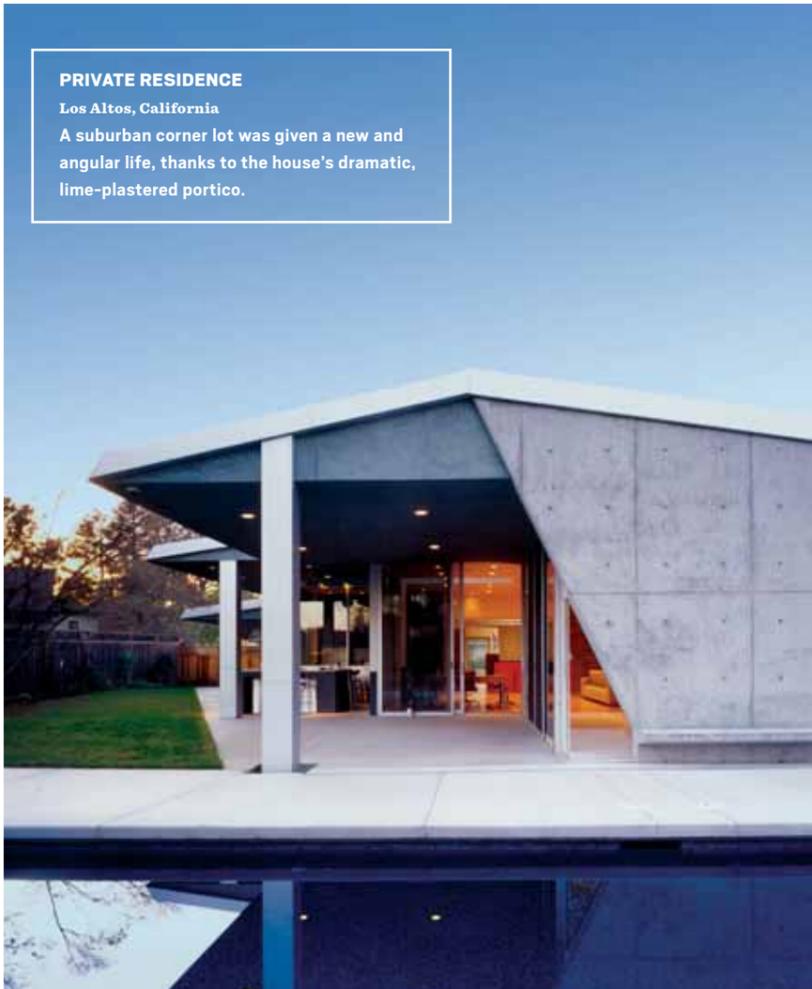
When planning the Ubuntu Centre, the architects looked at the way the townspeople used public space. “When we arrive on site, it’s all about a personal connection,” Jess explains. “People and land have an incredible chemistry, and when we go into any site—I don’t care if it’s an infill urban lot—we want to find out what was there before.” The driving questions for him are “What’s underneath all of these layers?” and “What does the land actually want to be?”

To answer, the Fields looked at the paths people took to walk, and saw the importance of meandering, of going somewhere, of being on the way. Siting a testing clinic in South Africa—where, according to a 2010 UNAIDS study, an estimated 20 percent of the population is infected with HIV but doesn’t feel comfortable seeking treatment—is a difficult task. Place the clinic too far from town, and no one will go there. Put it right in the center, and no one will want to be seen going there. But if one of the many small buildings that house testing services and community resources is placed along the way to somewhere else, such as at a busy pedestrian inter-section, the inhabitants of Port Elizabeth are more likely to find themselves wandering in.

It seems like a big leap to a hillside house in Portola Valley, but the sense of discovering what’s just beneath pervades. A couple, both in the technology industry, approached the Fields in 2008 to build a 2,000-square-foot addition to an existing cottage that sat at the top of a steep slope. Although

**PRIVATE RESIDENCE**

Los Altos, California  
A suburban corner lot was given a new and angular life, thanks to the house’s dramatic, lime-plastered portico.

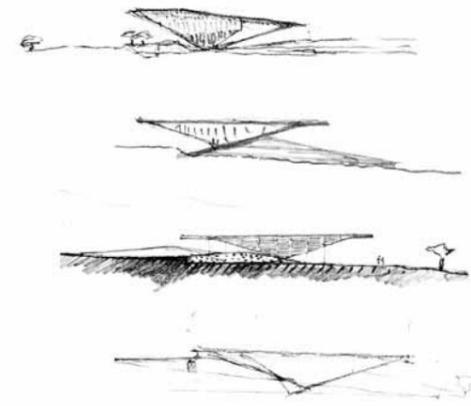


**KAROO WILDERNESS CENTER**  
Karoo, South Africa  
Below: Located in a semidesert, the Karoo Wilderness Center takes its formal inspiration from the functionality of aloe plants: depressions in the rooftop catch water from the area’s occasional, yet furious, storms. Bottom: The curved roof hangs down into a central observation room that provides respite from the area’s endless rolling hills of scrub.

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Left, Matthew Millman/courtesy Field Architecture

Courtesy Field Architecture



**BODEGA BAUER WINERY**

Mendoza, Argentina

This vineyard was conceived as a physical representation of the process of wine production—from underground roots to above-ground grapes and then back underground in barrels.



Courtesy Field Architecture



there was a pool at the bottom, “No one ever used it because no one could ever get there comfortably,” Jess says. “They were just going out on the deck and looking at the valley but were never able to access the forest below.” The solution was to go against the contours of the terrain, extending the house laterally down the incline, “so that the architecture actually descends the hill and inhabits the slope,” he explains. An easy stair, made of three-foot-long treads, operates like a series of landing platforms, bringing the residents down the otherwise-steep hill.

Inside the house, a meditation and yoga room leans forward into the treetops, providing a place for the Californians’ techno-weary minds to rest. Those treetops work on the outside of the house as well, as their shade changes over the course of the day, creating patterns on the exterior wall that enliven the wood laminate. “The light comes through the trees and it seems like it’s dematerializing the house, consuming it back into its own domain,” Jess says, citing the involvement of landscape architect Bernard Trainor as crucial to the way in which the structure becomes “subservient to nature, because nature accepts it back.”

It’s part of a philosophy the Fields call “groundscape,” based in part on an image Stan has of seashells in the sand on a beach. “When you

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look at a shell on the beach, and you lift up the shell, you can see the shape of the shell without it actually having to sit on the sand,” Jess explains. “We see that as a cue for how to design in the landscape, and how to use the ground.”

Stan claims that he’s the more philosophically oriented one, the one who ponders the big concepts and lets himself range, while Jess uses his technical expertise to tie it all down. But it’s clear that their work is a much more complex symbiosis, driven by the possibility of what might come if they just pushed this sketch or reconsidered that construction drawing. Their collaboration is a model for father-son relationships, and for how to approach the fierce, tenuous, and transcendent interaction between building and landscape. Step aside, Dr. Brain. The Fields have it. ■