



MODERN LUXURY

Silicon Valley

THE HOME DESIGN ISSUE

Nature Meets Modern Architecture
New Builds Where Even the Stairs Are Art
One Enormous House—Dozens of Designers

Plus
A Yahoo Founder Takes His Art Collection
Public, VIP Dining in the Valley & More

N A T M A D E

A Palo Alto-based firm
excels at homes that feel
one with the landscape.

By Laura Mauk



Field Architecture
situated the modernist
design for a Portola Valley
home in a natural clearing
among the towering
trunks of mature oak
trees; the home appears
as a series of pavilions
enmeshed with the
wooded surround.

PHOTO: TREV GOLDMAN



Father-and-son architecture team Stan and Jess Field on the rear terrace of a home they designed in Portola Valley.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN FLAHERTY



INTERIOR PHOTOS BY JOHN MERKL

From left: The living room in a Portola Valley design features glass walls that display countless oak branches, providing a treehouse experience; a partial height concrete wall sections the kitchen in the home.



Stan put a pencil in my hand and said, “Talk,”” says Jess, whose way of calling his father by his first name intimates a friendship that’s as fluid as the duo’s familial and working relationships. “I felt like, if I could draw an animal, then I’d really know that animal,” Jess adds. “I was like any South African kid who’s enamored with the bush and the wildlife that lives in it in such an integrated way, where the inhabitant isn’t separate from the environment.”

A lack of separation between land and inhabitant inspires stewardship of the environment for Stan and Jess. It’s a sense of responsibility that grew out of their South African experience, but for Stan, it was stoked when he studied under architect Louis I. Kahn at the University of Pennsylvania and earned his master’s in architecture in 1968. “Kahn was a brilliant man,” Stan says. “He designed architecture so he’d be able to teach. A lot of people copied him and thought his work was all about his geometries, but it’s not true. He was discovering what he said was a latent order that exists in terms of architecture design. His philosophies got me thinking about the ground as a base from which all inspiration can come. It’s as if we pull the architecture out of the ground of a [particular] place.”

In 1990, Stan was appointed visiting professor at the UC Berkeley—where Jess would later earn his master’s of architecture—and the Fields made the Bay Area their home. They engaged the Northern California landscape in the same way they engaged the South African surround. “The Silicon Valley is an incredible hub of innovation and possibility, but is part of a bigger region,” Jess says. “What’s often overlooked is its natural environment. We are bordered between the ecosystem of the Bay and the Santa Cruz Mountains, which fall off to the coast.” The area’s varied topography means the Fields are almost never bored when it comes to design. “The overall expanse is amazing,” Stan says. “Each piece of architecture needs to be an extension of its place. We read the land closely so that no two projects are similar.”

Architects always study a building site, but the Fields take study practice to another level. “We’re rigorous in terms of our analysis of hydrology, geology, topography, flora and wildlife corridors,” says Jess, who also surveys the course

While some architects design houses to connect with the outdoors, Stan and Jess Field, of Field Architecture (fieldarchitecture.com), create buildings that look and feel like they bloomed out of the very earth around them. The father-and-son team’s intensely organic designs—imagined in an unassuming office on Commercial Street in Palo Alto—are knitted into the Silicon Valley landscape, and plenty of settings beyond, in a way that surpasses traditional ideas of inside-outside connection. “For us, design opportunities come from discovering the uniqueness of a place and then nurturing it,” Stan says. “It’s almost like the way a windblown seed finds itself deposited in the crack of a rock and then suddenly there’s growth from that condition.”

With a land-first approach to architecture and a name like Field, one can’t help but theorize that never before have a pair of architects been so appropriately named. And then the discovery of Stan and Jess’ South African roots make the notion evermore poignant. “I grew up in South Africa,” Stan says. “Everything there is connected to nature, which became like a classroom for me. I found that no one could teach me more than what I could learn from nature.” And as fathers do, Stan passed his knowledge on. “When I was little,

of the sun and the wind in a particular location. “We often place camera traps on a site,” he adds. For a Bay Area project they completed, Stan and Jess mapped the migratory patterns of the red-legged frog near the building site. “We saw that the frogs were migrating between three different ponds that were off of the immediate site,” Jess says. “The triangle formed by the ponds and the migratory pattern gave us the building site because that’s exactly where the frogs were not.” The starting point for any Field-designed house is the recognition that people are part of the natural environment. “We’re going to develop, but that development doesn’t have to be at odds with nature,” Jess explains.

In the case of a Portola Valley home that stands among the dark-green canopies and silvery twisted trunks of a cluster of mature oak trees, the Fields created a narrative for themselves, a way to think about how to site the house. “We acted as if the oaks invited us into their domain,” Stan says. “That became the sensibility that every design decision was filtered through.” They tucked the residence into a pocket of negative space between the oaks, which remain as they were before the home was built. “The dining room cantilevers out into the trees above natural deer trails,” Jess says. “The owners are privy to this spectacular procession that journeys underneath the house on a daily basis.” The architects planned the forms of the house as pavilions that echo the presentation of the trees. “The concrete walls are like the trunks and the steel roofs horizontally project on either side of the walls like the branches of the oaks,” Jess says. “The projections create shaded areas in the same way the trees do.” Glass walls intersect with the concrete, flooding the house with sunlight and giving the effect of being in a treehouse.

The architecture Stan and Jess designed for another home climbs a steeply sloping site that’s also located in Portola Valley. “The house inhabits the hillside and becomes like a fallen log in the forest,” Jess says. And sunlight that’s filtered through treetops casts patterns on the structure’s wood laminate siding, creating a dynamic visual presentation. “Here, we are depending on the site and those leaves to complete the material palette and give that building skin its richness,” Jess says.

For a site in Napa on Howell Mountain, the Fields used architecture to join two very



PHOTOS BY MATTHEW HILLMAN



From left: A partial wall delineates the kitchen in a Napa Valley house, where bright-white cabinetry counters the reclaimed wood—of the ceilings, beams and walls, as well as the poured-concrete island; the structure is sited at the intersection of vineyard terrain and a forested setting, linking the two topographies; the dining area in the residence is outfitted with plaster walls that catch sunlight that pours in through clerestories and massive sliding doors.



In their Palo Alto office, Jess and Stan Field view and discuss a model of one of their current residential projects.



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN FLAHERTY

INTERIOR PHOTOS BY MATTHEW MILLMAN

different topographies—a vineyard terrain to the north and a wooded scene on the south side of the property. “There’s an underground rock shelf between the vineyard and the forest,” Jess says. “And that’s exactly where we put the house.” The residence is clad with reclaimed Douglas fir, and its understated design and clean details references both modernism and Napa’s agrarian history.

The public buildings Stan and Jess design are as closely tied to the landscape as their residential designs, but they also embody ideas about culture and social change that are specific to their locations. The Ubuntu Centre, an HIV testing and treatment clinic in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, was devised to help support the community it serves. “Ubuntu is an African philosophy that means ‘I am because you are,’” Stan explains. “It’s a saying about helping one another.” Stan, who grew up in South Africa’s apartheid era, wanted to help reduce the stigma that came with HIV and testing for the virus, so he cited the building at the crossroads of many different public walking paths. “People can pass through versus enter the structure,” he says. “They can go to the library or the computer center and then slip in to get tested.”

Like Ubuntu, the Karoo Wilderness Center in South Africa supports its environment. “During the apartheid era, the incredibly fragile land was designated an agriculturally productive area, which brought it to the brink of extinction,” Jess says. “When we built the center, the area was being reestablished as natural landscape.” Wildlife was reintroduced and the center—which processes its own waste, harvests its own water and generates its own energy—was designed as a place to educate and foster environmental stewardship. “The sculptural roofs have a bowl shape that mimics the form of an aloe plant that grows on the site, and act as a water catchment system,” Jess says.

Each time Field Architecture devises a design, the land dictates what and where it should be. “Imagine living among the trees or in a house with walls that are so open it feels like there are no barriers,” Jess says. “You feel like you’re outside without having to actually go out there. This is when our craft becomes really exciting.” Stan’s enthusiasm is equally as infectious. He believes Silicon Valley residents want to invest in more than just technology. “People here want to contribute to and be part of something that’s meaningful,” he says. “And that’s where we come in.” ■



From top: A headboard made with salvaged elm slabs, provided by Evan Shively of Arborica, in the guest room of a Napa Valley residence; walls made of reclaimed wood and finished with plaster add warmth and texture to the master bath.

