

# Second to Nature

A sun-filled home brings  
a suburban California site  
closer to its untamed roots.

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On a lot studded with old-growth oaks and redwoods and crossed by a creek, Ian and Krista Johnson asked Field Architecture to design a house that would defer to its natural surroundings.

Says Krista, "We needed to know that whatever we built would not take away from the landscape." Piero Lissoni's sofa for Living Divani joins a coffee table by Egg Collective in the living room.



Large sliders by LaCantina Doors bring ample light into the kitchen (below), which features a blackened steel pendant by the architects and counter stools by Fyrn. As elsewhere, the floors are concrete and the casework is crafted of reclaimed sinker cypress. A centuries-old blue oak stands near the intersection of the two wings of the house, which is clad in Alaskan yellow cedar (right).



**At night a full-throated chorus of frogs**

lulls Krista and Ian Johnson to sleep in their Los Altos, California, bedroom, and at dawn they're greeted by a symphony of birdsong—interrupted by an occasional off-key quack. For the couple, being immersed in the sights and sounds of nature is a radical corrective to their high-paced jobs in the tech industry—one that their previous home never quite provided.

Sitting atop a nearby hill with killer views of Silicon Valley, it had seemed perfect when they purchased it. “But in reality,” says Ian, “being up higher than the trees meant we had no protection from the blazing sun. We rarely went outside, never opened the blinds, and felt totally cut off from the natural world.” Avid hikers and campers, they vowed to do things differently should they ever build their own home.

They found kindred spirits in father-son architects Stan and Jess Field, whose experiences in their native South Africa (where among other projects they created plans for a wilderness center) have come to define their firm's land-first approach to architecture. The designers say nurturing and restoring a site's ecology dictates

what they build and where it is placed. When Ian and Krista spotted a grassy, one-acre parcel that they felt had potential, they invited the architects to weigh in before making a bid.

“Part of the challenge in the suburbs is peeling back all the layers to reveal the land's natural identity,” says Jess. Dotted with oaks and redwoods, the plot had been amended over the years with fences, a swimming pool, and a street-facing house, whose driveway, trash-collection area, and cinder block retaining wall were obstructing a debris-filled stream that had become infested with invasive plant species. Ian and Krista knew they wanted to make a fresh start, but the most suitable area for placing the kind of house the couple envisioned was an awkward triangle, in the middle of which grew a magnificent old-growth blue oak.

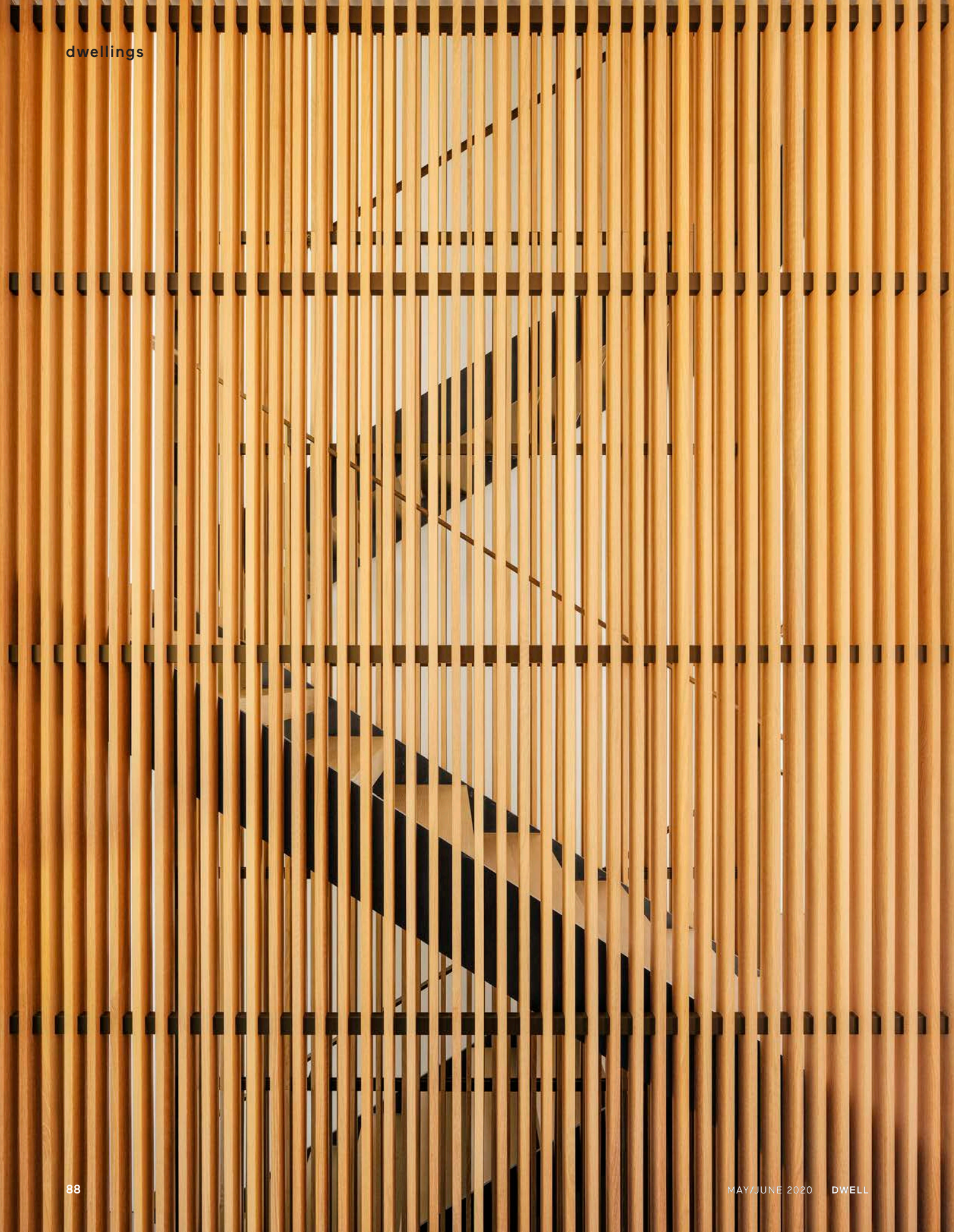
The architects devised a plan to work around it. Their design alludes to a typical hip-roofed ranch house, but one that has been split in two. “It's as if we carved through the middle and let the two sides wishbone away from each other to settle into the topography,” Jess explains. Nestled between the two structures is >



**“We decided to split the house into two volumes to let in light and allow us to be more nimble with where we placed the structures.”**

JESS FIELD, ARCHITECT





Architects Stan and Jess Field enclosed the steel-and-timber staircase to the master bedroom upstairs in cedar slats that filter the natural light (opposite). A gravel path leads from the dining area to a bridge across the restored creek

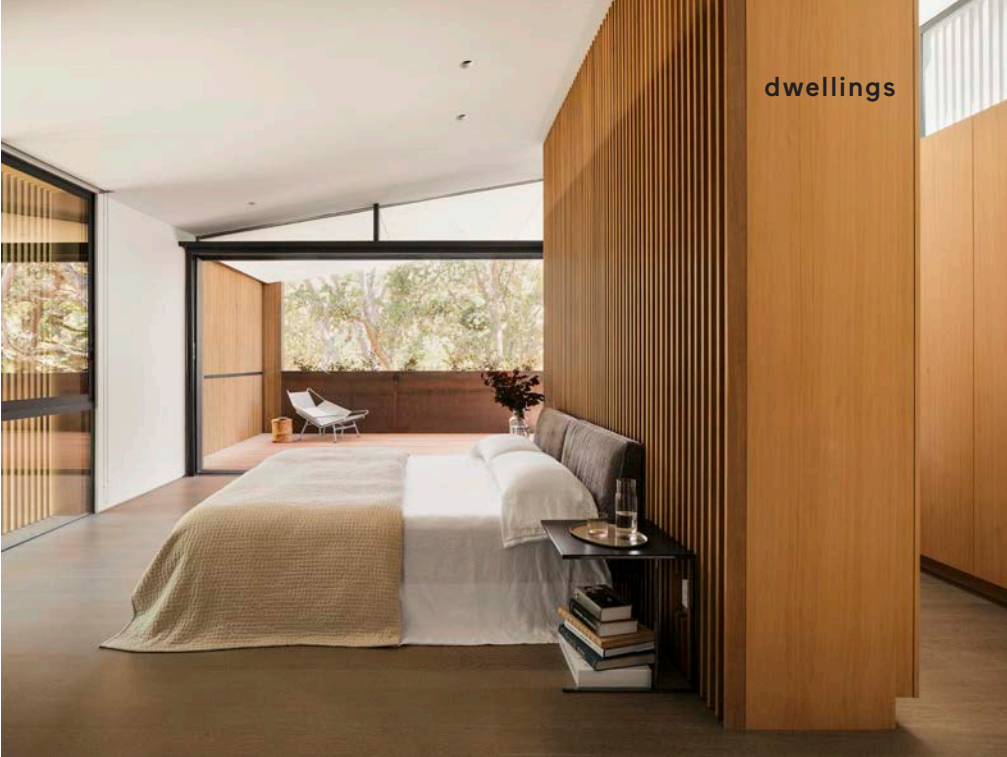
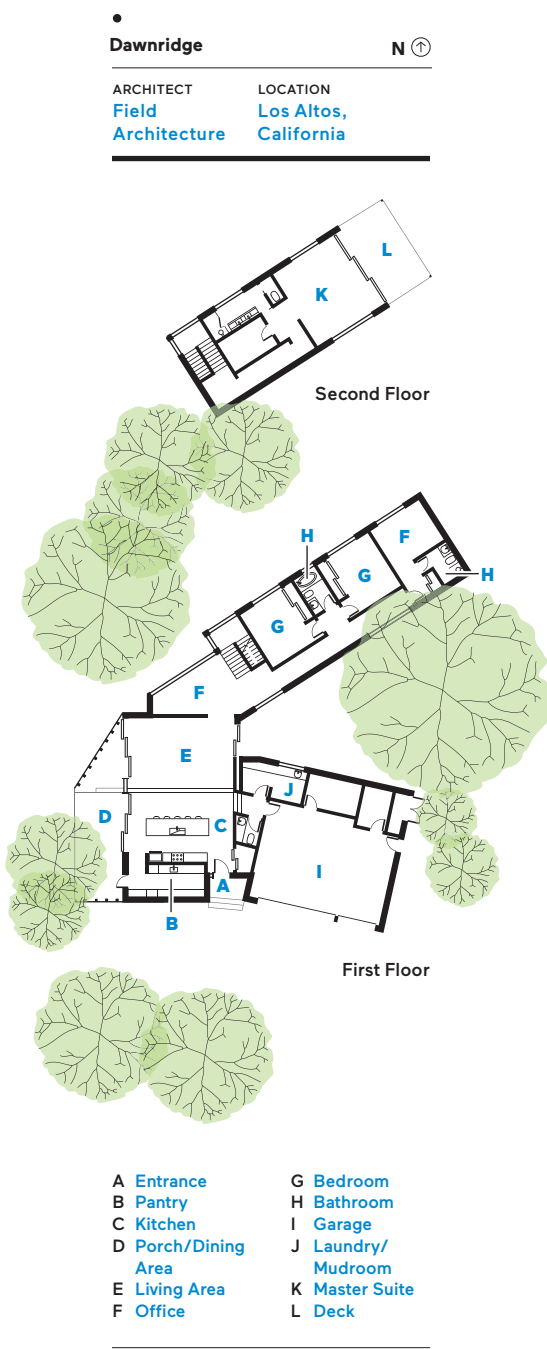
that runs along one side of the house (this page). "When we bought the property, the sale disclosures included a line stating that a pair of ducks have nested here every year for fourteen years," says Ian. "We see them every spring."





The dining area is completely open to the outdoors. “Ian and Krista wanted to celebrate their everyday routine and abandon things they don’t use, like a formal dining space,” says Jess. The chairs are by Fyrn and the grill is by Lion. Leger bedside tables by Minotti join a Lifesteel bed by Antonio Citterio for Flexform in the master bedroom (opposite), where sliders lead to a large deck.

ILLUSTRATION: LOHNES + WRIGHT



a courtyard where the old oak reigns like a living piece of art. The private wing of bedrooms and offices extends deeper into the trees, creating the feeling of camping out in one’s own home.

“Many would have deemed this house unbuildable,” says Jess, “but it worked because of Ian and Krista’s priorities. They wanted to remove fences, restore the habitat, and connect their land to the bigger regional landscape.” Jess, who like his father has gone on many safaris, envisioned the house as a kind of game hide—a place to observe wildlife without being seen.

The two architects liken the exterior cladding of Alaskan yellow cedar to a riff on traditional board-and-batten siding, with the boards narrowed to the same width as the batten, or, in the case of the windows and overhangs, eliminated altogether. Here the slender vertical louvers invite dappled light and airflow while reducing solar gain. The covered, open-air dining room is used year-round, so that brunch might be enhanced by the smells of flowering fruit trees from the orchard, the shriek of an owl, or the splashing of the restored stream. And the living room is bookended by sliding glass doors that open to the courtyard on one side and a rock garden on the other. Upstairs, the

master bedroom looks through the covered deck and into the live oaks, which are within touching distance of the railing. “It’s like being in the ultimate tree house,” says Krista.

The neutral palette—concrete and gray-washed oak floors, blackened steel, reclaimed sinker cypress casework—helps to create a calm and muted setting from which to observe deer, hawks, bobcats, weasels, jack rabbits, ducks, herons, coyotes, and a host of other creatures going about their business, now unimpeded by property-dividing fences. Before taking them down, Krista and Ian brought homemade chocolate chip cookies around to the neighbors. “We were afraid some people might object, but the response was just the opposite,” says Krista. “One older couple told us how beautiful it was having our yards blend into each other, and how it took them back to the time when this land was much more open and covered in orchards.”

But, she adds, “the project only worked because we were so in sync with our architects. I remember telling Jess, ‘You know, when a bird looks for a place to build its nest, it doesn’t knock down all the branches to find the perfect spot. It makes a home within the realm of what’s already there.’ And that’s what Jess and Stan did here.” ■

“When you get light filtered through the trees, there’s no better way to wake up or move through your day.”

KRISTA JOHNSON, RESIDENT