



PORTRAIT BY MATTHEW MILLMAN

Stanley Field

At age 63, an unheralded architect-cum-surfer-intellectual with a portfolio that spans four continents has finally found a quest to match his talent: reinventing the Northern California home one singular, unrecognized design at a time. **BY JOANNE FURIO**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW MILLMAN AND CESAR RUBIO

Heading south on Highway 1,

halfway between Half Moon Bay and Pescadero, Stan Field, architect and sexagenarian son of the African bush, is struggling to describe what it was like to venture into the wilderness as a child. "It's difficult to talk about that while being here, surrounded by this," he confesses, motioning to the surroundings from the passenger seat. Because his longish, shaggy hair is now gray, and his blue eyes are aided by round spectacles, Field simultaneously conveys the youthfulness of a lifelong surfer and the air of an erudite professor. In either mode, he has trouble concentrating when he has landscape to study. After he veers into another site-based discussion of the Northern California landscape, a bend in the road reveals a golden peninsula whose crisp edges seem recently shorn off by a glacier, and his focus is broken again. "Look at that—beautiful!" he bursts, as the waters of the Pacific shimmer below long cliffs.

Field's inability to ignore his surroundings is completely in sync with his journey toward a new Bay Area architecture he describes as emerging from this place alone. Field's great strength as an architect is his ability to connect with landscape. Virtually unknown in the region in which he has practiced for 17 years, he has lately completed a series of projects of stunning variety and embarked on his most ambitious work ever. As his Palo Alto firm expands, he's poised on the brink of great notoriety.

His firm, Field Architecture, is currently working on projects in three other countries: a synagogue in Israel, a community center in his hometown in South Africa, and a winery in Argentina at the foot of the Andes. Five houses are on the boards for the Silicon Valley suburbs. And in Pacifica, on a hill above a beach he has surfed for years—a hill he stared at for years before ever imagining homes on it—he's now in line to design a development called Harmony @ 1 (as in Highway 1). Stan Field having his way on 13 home sites spread over 65 acres would create a lasting architectural achievement. The project isn't yet approved, but it has a slogan: "In harmony with the earth and the community."

In contrast to the Bay Area's relatively conservative architectural climate, dominated by neotraditionalist takes on the Mediterranean, the shingle style, the Craftsman, and the ranch home, Field's breathtakingly

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FIELD ARCHITECTURE





Flat-lot home

Palo Alto

When Eli and Carmela Pasternak

asked for something contemporary that blended the inside and outside, Field decided to rebel against the flat lot and “almost anonymous” local architecture by creating appealing geometry. The home’s front features a flat roof with an elliptical shape that rises on the diagonal over various rectangular forms. Thanks to several sleights of hand—the house is set back from the curb, is 10 feet lower than allowed, and extends deep into the lot—the house judiciously hides its mass. And in the home’s center, he created a dynamic, light-filled space that runs from front to back. Says Field, “I’ve always felt good about connecting all architecture that I do here to how the sun tracks during the seasons. It’s easily read: the north-south axis of all the ridges and ranges serves almost like a sundial.”

LEFT: In Palo Alto the Pasternak home stands out in a sea of mostly revival styles from the post-World War II era. “A principal notion of mine is to fit in,” says Field. Though very different stylistically, the house is kept in scale with its neighbors.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Field likens the thrilling central space to a river going through the house. He says, “There are two hills, a canyon in the center.” The soaring corridor finds curved walls—“the hills”—joining with large panes to send light rippling through the building.





Hilltop compound Palo Alto

The Tramiel house is a collection of four buildings, each with a barrel roof that echoes its hilltop site. Field's concept of a single-family residence made up of clustered buildings was based on his previous home and his interpretation of a small Jerusalem enclave. His choice of materials, however, was thoroughly Californian. In Jerusalem, the required building material was the local stone. Here, in one of his first Bay Area homes, he revels in the exploration of redwood and zinc. He also takes advantage of the location. "I normally wouldn't build on the top of a hill," he says. "That's where it's windiest and the most exposed. We had no choice here." So, adopting the Northern California tenet that "hill equals view," Field opens up the side of the home facing the mountains.

Field clad the exteriors in zinc and wood pulled from old-growth redwood wine vats because "redwood belongs to this region and just feels so indigenous." The intricate nailing pattern lends a handmade quality.

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daring structures stand out—even from one another. No two are alike. Rather than referring to his past work or that of other architects, he finds his references on the lot itself.

On a flat Palo Alto lot nestled between a bland Mediterranean and a shingle-style home with obligatory Palladian window, he's concocted an appealingly mad geometry of overlapping shapes into a large sunlit home instilled with a rolling topography lacking in the neighborhood (previous spread). Ten years ago, Field designed a single-family home on a hilltop lot in Palo Alto by linking four redwood-exterior buildings; together, the buildings (left) resemble a small Jerusalem village, and each has a barrel roof resembling the hill itself. In a 1950s Los Altos subdivision, Field has reinterpreted the California ranch with a striking concrete-and-glass home (next page) made of three low-lying wings meeting in a communal core, with extra square footage hidden underground to keep the home in scale. And on the coast near Año Nuevo, Field produced a wing-shaped cedar home (page 116) with a vaguely agricultural feel that inside features two stories of long hallways with shoji screens. By using completely different materials, vernacular, and scale on every project, he makes his work unrecognizable and thoroughly contemporary. "Stan starts with a clean slate," says John Lucchesi, 2006 president of the San Mateo County chapter of the American Institute of Architects, which awarded Field its highest honors in two categories in its 2005 competition. "He's looking at a place and a house in a fresh new way that's different from people who are entrenched here."

To Field, lack of constraint makes perfect sense here. He is a late bloomer who was stuck in controlled architectural environments—South Africa and Jerusalem—for 20 years before landing here. In his mind, there's no good reason why homes near the epicenter of high-tech culture can't be singularly contemporary, too. "Until now a lot of the architecture here just borrowed from existing form," he says. "And so it is this breaking down of that preconception and opening up to an architecture that belongs here—that's what I'm trying to do."

Field's bond with coastal landscape was nurtured

during his childhood on the Indian Ocean in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. He began surfing at 10. "We were very connected to the ocean and the country itself, the wildlife," he says. After college in Cape Town, he won a scholarship to study with Louis Kahn at the University of Pennsylvania, where he spent two years—1968 to 1970—earning his master's. Field describes those years as a turning point in his thinking and his career. He credits Kahn, his greatest influence, with his use of light, "a driving force in all of my work." Also at Penn was Ian McHarg, who pioneered the concept of ecological planning in his celebrated 1969 book *Design With Nature*. "He made us realize that unless we understood that everything was connected, we were not going to design or

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Open-plan ranch

Los Altos

An upscale version of the

"many Levittowns" Field has seen in the United States—this one with 1950s ranches that blur by on block after nondescript block—is an unlikely place for Field's striking concrete-and-glass reinterpretation of the California ranch. The home's three small low-lying wings meet one of the homeowners' requests: that the layout should draw their two children into common areas every morning. "The idea of the single-family home is for people to find their own private space"—in this case, a small wing for the parents, another for the two sons—"but also be able to connect as a family," he says. The key to the project? The homeowners were fellow minimalists and rejected the typical choice of upsizing. "I didn't want to go up," says the wife and mother of two. "You deprive yourself of privacy and your neighbor of backyard privacy." So Field designed nearly half the home underground, leaving less than 2,000 square feet aboveground.

Concrete Y-shaped walls define interior spaces, creating separation between the master bedroom and the home's communal core. (To allow more openness, Field eschewed a door into the bedroom, instead designing a sliding wall—unseen, far right.) Outdoors, deep overhangs (opposite) help delineate and put a roof over a second "dining room."





Open-plan ranch

Los Altos

“He’s so creative and out-of-the-box it sometimes doesn’t get fully appreciated by the community.”

To lessen the barriers between indoors and outdoors, Field gave all three wings—here, the one containing the master bedroom—access to either the pool or the backyard and lined the rear of the house with glass.

FIELD ARCHITECTURE

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plan a sustainable environment.”

But as Field marvels at the many great teachers who converged at Penn during those heady years, he also remembers struggling to understand the suburban architecture of the United States. “Somehow the spirit of adventure that permeated so much else—for example, the design of the motorcar and aircraft—was so far ahead of what was being done in architecture. It just amazed me that people would be content to accept it.”

Returning to South Africa, Field set up practice in Johannesburg, also teaching at a local university. His first commission caused a stir in architectural circles because he left the large outcroppings of rock undisturbed inside the home. “Capturing nature in man-made forms that complement the site—that’s really his preoccupation, even today,” says Sacramento architect Etienne Louw, who was “among the sea of admiring students” at the same university. But Field grew frustrated with South African conservatism and packed up his wife and three children for Jerusalem, where he was named the city’s chief architect. Field headed an important highway project and designed some innovative synagogues and housing, but after 12 years of working with the requisite Jerusalem stone, in a codified style, he says, “I began to long for the modern world again.” Seeing in Silicon Valley the world’s most fertile ground for new ideas (with great nearby surf), he clinched a teaching position at UC Berkeley’s architecture school and threw up his shingle in Palo Alto.

On the face of it, Silicon Valley is not Stan Field country. “It’s an incredible anomaly,” says Lucchesi. “We’re in this high-tech capital with a huge population of people who are involved with groundbreaking technology, yet they want a house that looks like it’s 300 or 400 years old.” But with his uncompromising vision and lack of ego in a field predisposed to megalomania, Field has found exceptional clients—many from the tech industry—and read them well enough to give them the house they never realized they wanted. He has designed homes for Eli Pasternak, chief technology officer of the wireless company Bridgewave, and for Tzipi Tramiel and her husband, Sam, former longtime president and CEO of Atari. Another couple currently having a house designed by Field works for Google.

It hasn’t always worked out so well. In 1998, he designed 30 homes for a controversial 268-acre development in the Peninsula hideout of Portola Valley. The project languished in the review process for more than a decade due to open space and seismic concerns. Field came up with the idea to divide the property into geographical zones such as woodland and grassland, each with its own type of housing, which eventually helped the project get approved. But then the developer sold lots to individual homeowners, who appointed their own architects. Now the subdivision is a mish-mash of mostly revival styles in which Field had no part. Says Town of Portola Valley planning manager Leslie Lambert, “He’s



Live-work home Pescadero

On a beautiful lot a mile

inland from Año Nuevo, Field's clients David Lee and Cheryl Mos wanted large interior spaces for dogs and friends to mix it up and a layout that allowed each of them to work comfortably at home. (Lee is managing partner in a boutique Menlo Park law firm specializing in high-tech start-ups, and Mos is senior manager at law firm Morrison & Foerster.) Field's solution: a floor plan of two symmetrical, two-story corridors with a series of shoji-screened spaces that spill directly into communal portions, so one of them can work or exercise alone while the other entertains guests or associates. (A home office, conference room, and workout room, as well as bedrooms, are behind the screens.) Obsessed with finding an exterior form to fit the environment, Field designed deep overhangs reminiscent of a Craftsman and a unique winged shape inspired by the monarch butterfly native to the site. The cedar interspersed with bands of copper and glass completes the surrounding landscape, which is carpeted with strawberry fields.

Copper overhangs (right) weather gracefully at this home a mile from the Pacific. The large and small winged sections represent the home's private and public areas. Shoji screens in the larger portion (opposite) can create complete privacy—or not.

“Is it possible to work in a pristine landscape without marring it? If it's done sensitively, I think you can.”

so creative and out-of-the-box it sometimes doesn't get fully appreciated or understood by the community.”

Field's son, Jess, who recently joined the firm after graduating from Berkeley with a master's in architecture, says the firm is now seeing more adventuresome Valley clients for a reason: they're being influenced by the increasingly flexible use of space in work environments. “At places like Google or Yahoo, people now feel connected to work in a way that's less strictly programmed, where one activity spills into the next and the transitions are more fluent,” he says. “Clients want residences that explore that model of living.”

Far from Silicon Valley, on the other hand, Field is trying to develop a coastal architecture that emanates from a very different ecology. He has seawater in his veins. After Loma Prieta, Field proposed redesigning the San Francisco waterfront by skimming a low bridge around it and creating a new waterfront habitat. Streets dove into the water and became canals. Blocks became islands. At the edges, the land dissolved into the water. (“Anyway,” he says, “they decided to plant some palm trees instead!” and laughs heartily.)

He's lived with his kids and wife in Half Moon Bay for years; Jess won the prestigious Eisner Prize at Berkeley last year for his proposed redesign of Half Moon Bay's Romeo Pier into a marine rescue station. For father and son, the Pacifica subdivision would be a culmination of all this history and experience. Working with developers Taiten Cowan and Stuart Newton, Stan is doing early designs for Harmony @ 1, and sees this as his chance to correct the mistake he felt he made in Portola Valley of not retaining total control. “If I was going to design a subdivision, I vowed I was going to design the site plan *and* the houses.”

Newton, a former management consultant, and Cowan, who owns a local surf shop, hired Field after

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he visited the property with them. “He said one thing: ‘We want to be part of nature, not apart from nature.’ That became a guiding principle,” Newton says. Although the property is not waterfront, it has ocean views and is severely sloped, making it a likely candidate for controversy. Pacifica is notoriously growth-phobic, and planning director Michael Crabtree says drolly, “It wouldn’t take anything special to make the project *interesting* to people.” As it winds its way through an elaborate review process, look for Field to direct all his intensity on convincing the town it has a large-scale chance to settle a longstanding argument.

“Are we part of nature or separate from it?” begins Field excitedly. The sun is setting in Half Moon Bay on what was a glorious day. Sitting at the Ebb Tide Café, Field is completely consumed by the discussion. “Is it possible to work in a pristine natural landscape without marring it? Some people say the only way to do that is by not doing anything, but the area is built up all around it. If it’s done sensitively, I believe it can actually enhance the situation.” Plus, he says, “I’m a surfer, so this is a very sacred spot for me.”

Suddenly, his surfer’s eyes scan the beach, where land and water converge, and he is gone again. n

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