



Design for Living

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NATURAL BY DESIGN

A THOROUGHLY MODERN HOME

A COUPLE FROM CHICAGO BRINGS THEIR VERY CONTEMPORARY SENSIBILITY TO NAPA VALLEY'S LAND OF THE TUSCAN VILLA



A few years ago, a couple from the Midwest was building their retirement home in Napa Valley. When they stopped by to inspect the construction one day, they found a note tacked to a board. "Thank you," the anonymous letter read, "for not building another Italian villa in the Napa Valley." "We still don't know which of our neighbors left the note," the wife says, "but we were glad they were happy with what we were doing."

What they were doing was building a thoroughly modern house as crisp and clean as a stack of sugar cubes. Perhaps because they are originally from Chicago, a city intimately linked to the past and present of American modern architecture, these homeowners never considered building in any other style.

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contemporary house. They visited a dark-shingle house in Marin that I had contemporized, and they asked me to do the same thing for them.”

The three became fast friends, with a shared interest in modern design. When Scheiber heard that the couple had bought five acres of flat land in Napa, he began thinking about what they would build, taking inspiration from his own Eichler house and a Philip Johnson house in Connecticut. One night, he sketched his ideas on a cocktail napkin, the owners approved, and the three began working with Marin County architect Bill Wallace. Following Wallace’s sudden death in 2001, Napa architect Carlo di Fede continued with the project.

The exterior is coolly minimalist, a series of rectangles in stone and stucco with roofs of different heights. The front landscaping is a restrained geometry consisting mainly of evenly spaced tufts of ornamental grass. Enter the home, however, and another space reveals itself. Working with top custom Napa builders Grassi Construction, the couple was able to seamlessly blend the minimalist exterior with a more complex interior. Here, too, rectangles of varying sizes define the vast open room. They range from the towering windows facing south across a broad expanse of their neighbors’ vineyards to the narrow slot in the wall above the fireplace, where small sculptures are on display. The wife looks with particular







appreciation at a series of horizontal windows, placed precisely high on the east wall to reveal the crests of nearby mountains. Until the structure was completed, neither she nor Wallace, she believes, who died before seeing the window framing, had any idea that the windows would frame the landscape so dramatically.

A limited palette of materials and colors contributes to the peaceful feeling of the room. The warm stone of the exterior walls reappears inside as sturdy columns that punctuate the large space and differentiate its various living areas. To one side, a handsome kitchen is as subtle and elegant as the rest of the room, thanks to the balance of neutral shades of granite, concrete, translucent glass, and wood. High niches display ivory-colored pottery containers, each a different shape and all made by McCoy, an American firm whose extensive production has become popular with collectors. One of these enthusiasts is Scheiber's partner, Billy Lynam, who went on eBay to buy more than a dozen different shapes for the Napa house.

Living in Napa means, of course, living outdoors. Extensions of the horizontal roof lines both cool the house and create an area of shadow as a transition between the interior and the brilliant sun beyond. An outdoor living room, complete with sofa, chairs, and mat, is an inviting adjunct to the main house, as is the sycamore-shaded bocce court.

Since the completion of the residence, the property has become a complex buzzing with activity. A pool house and a guesthouse for the owners' adult children flank the swimming pool. Just north of the house is a larger building that the husband describes as his garage/gym/office/home winery. After moving to the valley, he decided to get involved with Napa's premier activity. He enrolled in viticulture classes at a nearby college and made plans for the half acre of vineyard in front of the house. Stainless steel tanks now fill the tiny cellar beneath his office, and he expects to produce about 1,000 bottles a year for the family's personal use.

While this homeowner presses his grapes and attaches the labels by hand, his wife is in charge of the gardens, including a thriving vegetable garden in raised beds. In contrast to the cool palette of the house, her gardens are lush with color and texture. Vines wrap the columns, native grasses billow along the lawn, and planters are filled with eye-catching combinations of pale green and deep purple foliage.

The owners of this house consider it the perfect backdrop for the varied activities of their new life in California.

