

# At Home in the Wine Country

ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN IN THE CALIFORNIA VINEYARDS



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# Forest Aerie

"This house is full of soul."

— JUANCARLOS FERNANDEZ, PARTNER, SIGNUM ARCHITECTURE

**This is a story of a magical property and uncommon relationships.**

It is also a tale about the soul of a place, and how a house can become the physical manifestation of that soul, bringing joy to its owners and design team in equal measure to the love and care they put into creating it.

The owners, a husband and wife from Southern California, had searched for the perfect home in the Napa Valley for three years before discovering their exceptional site. Set high in the hills of the upper Napa Valley, the forested parcel is filled with boulders, pines and oaks, with a glimpse of vineyards in the distance. The forty-acre site is graced with layered views and four miles of walking trails, which the owners stroll regularly.

Until they discovered this site, the owners were uncertain whether they would buy an existing home or build one. But if they were to build, they knew they wanted Juancarlos Fernandez, cofounder of Signum Architecture in St. Helena, to design it. Unsure whether the architect could fit the project into his schedule, they invited him to come walk the site. When Juancarlos arrived, the look in his eye told the owners all they needed to know. The site's magic affected him as well.

Early in the process Juancarlos recommended interior designers Shawback Design, while the owners brought on board landscape architect Jack Chandler, cementing a team that would work in sync through several years of design and construction. For Jack, a local legend who would pass away as the project neared completion, this project became his swan song.

The team began by trimming back the pines to expose the oaks and boulders. A single, majestic live oak that now occupies the central courtyard became the home's organizing principle, and a symbol of its relationship to the site. The structure comprises two pavilions linked by a glassed-in breezeway, which Juancarlos envisioned as a lantern in the forest. The breezeway showcases the views of the valley across the infinity pool while protecting the courtyard from the heat and wind from the west.

Wrapped in glass, the house is incredibly transparent, ushering in views of nature from every angle. This is a large house, yet the pavilions allow a real sense of privacy and the house feels intimate. "You can stand anywhere in the valley below," says Juancarlos, "and you can't see the house." The owner calls his house "an homage to what was there before us."



**PREVIOUS OVERLEAF:**

To create a house that lives up to the unique character of its astounding site, the owners brought together a close-knit group led by Juancarlos Fernandez, Partner at Signum Architecture. In a deeply collaborative process, design decisions were made over long lunches, and the result is a home that resounds with emotion.

**ABOVE:**

Anchored by a single majestic oak, the courtyard acts as the organizing principle for the design. For landscape architect Jack Chandler, a local legend who would pass away as the project neared completion, the home was his swan song.

**OVERLEAF:**

Set within a forested site with deeply layered views, the home cannot be seen from anywhere in the valley below.





**OPPOSITE ABOVE:**  
The rustic finish of the stone walls provides a counterpoint to the clean lines of the floating cabinet and an Oberon pendant by Fuse Lighting.

**OPPOSITE BELOW:**  
The master bedroom feels as if it is floating amidst the trees. A Lohja Single chandelier by Cameron Design House hangs above a custom headboard from Kroll Furniture.

**ABOVE:**  
The team used the same stone, mined and hand-chosen from a single quarry in Italy, throughout the house, in finishes varying from polished to highly rusticated.



Throughout the house, clerestory windows bathe the interiors in light. The dining room's custom steel fireplace surround was designed by landscape architect Jack Chandler. Fully upholstered Nobile Soft dining chairs from Draenert pull up to the Draenert Atlas dining table, topped by the Lohja Four chandelier by Cameron Design House. Commissioned artwork by Brigitte McReynolds is designed to reflect the seasons.

Inside the main pavilion, a single, three-level space—cantilevered over the hillside—merges living dining and kitchen areas into a welcoming gathering place for family and friends, with his and her offices, and guest quarters tucked below on a lower level. Huge doors slide back, opening an entire wall of the kitchen to the courtyard, which, filled with the sounds of nature and water from a fountain custom-designed by Jack, is perfect for entertaining.

The second pavilion houses the couple's private spaces: a master suite, as well as rooms for exercise and meditation. The master bedroom—transparent on two sides and tucked into the hill, entirely surrounded by trees—feels like a secret tree house. From the master bedroom and bath, there isn't another building to be seen anywhere.

Visual simplicity was the key to creating the serene environment, and every detail was carefully considered. To extend the views and create a sense of balance, Juancarlos meticulously aligned openings and designed seamless and orderly connections between spaces (three stairs separate the lower living room from the dining room, and another three steps connect the dining room to the adjacent kitchen). Details are spare and materials are carefully edited. The team used the same stone, mined from a single quarry in Italy, throughout the house, in finishes varying from polished to highly rusticated. The kitchen cabinet system by Bulthaup is free from hardware and disappears when not in use.

The furnishings are quiet and restrained, an understudy to the views. "Our goal was to balance the strength of the architecture and the intense beauty of the site with interiors that had a softness about them," says Penny Shawback. Clients and designers chose furnishings jointly, even traveling to Sun Valley, Idaho, together to visit one of Penny's favorite sources.

Searching for an artistic way to create a sense of separation between the kitchen and dining room, the husband showed Penny an island that incorporated a sinuous curve. The team found a local artist to create a similar design in a soft white composite of marble and resin, its feminine curve juxtaposed with the trio of stairs that separate the two spaces. The solution, as always, lay in collaboration.

Throughout the project, decisions were made over long lunches, and deep relationships took root. "Every project has its own personality and holds its own set of values," says Penny. "This project was warm, gracious and full of trust and purpose." Juancarlos puts it simply, "This house is full of soul."



**ABOVE:**  
Perforated steel doors slide apart, fully opening the kitchen to the sheltered courtyard, forming a perfect space for entertaining. When closed, the perforated panel, backlit with light from the kitchen, washes the courtyard in a soft light.

**OPPOSITE:**  
To separate the kitchen and dining areas, a local artist reenvisioned a design found by the owner, using a soft white composite of marble and resin to create the island's sinuous curve. The kitchen cabinet system by Bulthaup, free from hardware, disappears when not in use.

**OVERLEAF:**  
The effect of the pavilion design is ethereal, invoking the image of a lantern set comfortably within the forest.





# Downtempo

"We called the house 'Downtempo' because we felt it captured the rhythms of the house, and the goals our clients were hoping to achieve."

—JARROD DENTON, PARTNER, SIGNUM ARCHITECTURE

**Set in an isolated valley in the Mayacamas Mountains between the** valleys of Sonoma and Napa, this unique home lies just ten minutes by car from the town of Calistoga yet feels as if it were a million miles from anywhere. The owners envisioned a retreat where they could build lasting memories with their two children, entertain friends and enjoy the slower pace of life in the wine country.

Unsure whether they wanted to buy or build, the owners reached out to Jarrod Denton, cofounder of St. Helena-based Signum Architecture, to help them explore the possibilities. After visiting numerous potential building sites, they were brought to a site in Franz Valley. An avid biker, Jarrod was familiar with this hidden valley from regular bike-riding excursions in the area. Comprising two small knolls with a gentle swale in between, the building site backs up to the woodlands, with a creek running below and sweeping views in multiple directions. In one direction lay views down the valley, in the other lay views of a 3,000-acre nature preserve.

"Within this sensitive terrain, adjacent to the preserve and prone to forest fires, sustainability and fire resistance were critical," says Jarrod, "but the site was spectacular."

In order to build quickly and sustainably, Jarrod and his team designed the home using a combination of prefabricated modular units and on-site construction, working with prefab manufacturer Method Homes and local contractor Fairweather & Associates. Using eleven prefabricated modules (five downstairs and six upstairs), the team ended up with a ratio of roughly 80 percent prefab to 20 percent site-built construction. The living room (which occupies the center of the ground floor), pool, terraces and foundations were built before the modules arrived on site. After they arrived, the modules were stitched together, then custom elements—roof, utility spaces and parapets—were built in place. "The day the modules arrived was like Christmas," Jarrod says with a smile.

"We knew this project was going to encourage us to push the envelope of what we could do, both in terms of construction and delivery," says Brian Abramson, founder of Method Homes.

Working with prefabricated modules resulted in a design process that was anything but familiar, upending the decision-making process. "We were working on excavation and foundations while looking at fixtures and





**OPPOSITE:**  
 Signum Architecture worked with Method Homes in a unique collaboration that combines prefabricated modular units with custom construction, pushing the envelope of what we expect to see from prefab construction. The entry pivot door leads to the custom-constructed living area, set amidst eleven prefabricated modules.

finishes," says Jarrod. "It was a completely different way to approach design, but it really brought the team together."

The resulting structure is lean and bold, with a restrained palette of materials. Bands of black aluminum surround fields of clear cedar and shou sugi ban (a charred wood finish that is naturally resistant to fire). The siding is recessed within the thick perimeter borders, opening up areas for shade and balconies. Conditioned, ventless attic space, fire-resistant materials and a defensible landscape space around the home help temper fire risk.

Within the bold architectural envelope, designer Alison Damonte created an environment of what she calls "maximal minimalism." Having worked with the clients to design their primary home in urban Berkeley not far away, Alison knew her clients well. Her eclectic but highly curated interiors are a natural extension of the vibe they had created in their first project together—a nod to the earthy, textural geometric aesthetic of the 1960s and 1970s. The mix of vintage and contemporary pieces in saturated hues of blue and green mix comfortably with earthy rusts and browns, bringing personality and depth to the home. A neutral palette "just isn't me," says Alison, and it didn't fit her clients either.

She knew, for example, that the couple had come to love wall coverings in the design of their Berkeley home, so she felt comfortable suggesting bold choices for their Calistoga property. "I'm not one to shy away from a bright color or a bold pattern," she asserts. Patterns and colors are biggest and boldest in small spaces, where the couple can immerse themselves, then retire to the larger living spaces where the volume is turned down a bit. The kitchen backsplash is a perfect example: bold and geometric, the pattern stands up to the bold architectural envelope and hints of vintage vinyl records in a subtle reference to the husband's work at the intersection of music and technology. Vintage cassette wallpaper in a small bath near the media room does the same.

The clients have been building their collection of contemporary photography and video art for several decades. "I wanted to give them furniture that stood up to the art," Alison confides. Each piece of furniture is bespoke, collected and tied to the client in some way. The living room feels like a real life representation of the collage piece by Laurie Simmons (mother to actress Lena Dunham), that hangs above the long, linear fireplace. The eclectic collage the designer has created on the interior comes together with the home's gallery-like white walls to create a balanced vessel for the couple's art collection, and a perfect country escape for this highly creative family.



**RIGHT:**  
In the living room, vintage Brazilian Rosewood chairs and a single chair by Pierre Paulin surround a custom sofa facing the open wall to the pool terrace. A collage piece by artist Laurie Simmons (mother to actress Lena Dunham) hangs above the fireplace.

**OVERLEAF:**  
Architect Jarrod Denton pulled the shou sugi ban finish into the dining room to create a sense of cohesion. A chandelier from Lindsey Adelman hangs above an Egg Collective dining table and vintage chairs by Matteo Grassi; sconces are from Chen Chen & Kai Williams.





**ABOVE:**  
A custom bed covered in Romo Fabric sits atop an area rug by Mark Nelson in the master bedroom. Recessing the siding within thick perimeter borders allowed the architects to create inset balconies where the owners can sit and enjoy the view.

**OPPOSITE ABOVE:**  
Vintage cassette wallpaper by Rebel Walls in a small bath near the media room is one of numerous playful references to the husband's work at the intersection of music and technology.

**OPPOSITE BELOW:**  
In the son's bedroom, a bed by The Inside is topped by pillows from Seven Sundays Studios. Nightstand is from Schoolhouse Electric, artwork is *Buckaroo Motel, Tucumcari, New Mexico* by Ed Freeman.





**ABOVE:**  
Bands of black aluminum surround fields of clear cedar and shou sugi ban. The siding is recessed within the thick perimeter borders, opening up areas for shade and balconies.

**RIGHT:**  
"From the earliest sketches, one theme that continued to play out was the horizontality of the structure, and the simplicity of working with just three exterior materials," says architect Jarrod Denton.



