

Northern California Casual

A family's summer home in the Napa Valley fosters relaxation with its open plan and earthy materials

BY CASS CALDER SMITH

Many San Francisco residents who build second homes in the Napa Valley want a wine estate—you know, another Tuscan villa with fountains and arbors out front. My friends Terry and Peter just wanted a comfortable second home—a kind of summer camp—where they could escape the fog, where their kids could play without worrying over spilled drinks or muddy feet and where guests would feel comfortable taking off their shoes. Knowing that I'd be among those fortunate guests, I had a vested interest in designing the place.

Inspired by old California barns, I proposed dividing the house into at least two buildings: one for living and another for sleeping. Over dinners, car rides and site visits, Peter, Terry and I rounded out the program, which included the following items:

- Retain all trees (this became a dictum).
- Keep cars away. Park them a large but practical distance from the house.
- Minimal maintenance.
- No drywall. Peter was adamant about this condition because their very modernist house in the city had lots of it.
- Keep it horizontal. Establish one floor level as much as possible, in contrast to their city house, which has four floors.
- Use alternative materials. Peter and Terry had seen houses in the area that were made of rammed earth, and they wanted to incorporate this material in their home.



A summer camp. The bedroom building (left) and living building (right) define a giant outdoor room. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

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Room for cooks and guests alike. Inside, concrete floors, open shelves and a big island are clues to the casual nature of life here. Photo taken at G on floor plan.



A rammed-earth fireplace. Although the base is concrete, the walls of this fireplace are rammed earth, quarried locally. Photo taken at H on floor plan.

(and on who's using the outdoor tub, photo left, p. 115).

Earth walls anchor the house

Compacted earth was used for the walls in the living building and for the fireplace. Installed by David Easton and his crew at Rammed Earth Works in Napa, the 16-in. thick walls were formed on the inside, and the earth was shot into the forms, a process called PISE (pneumatically installed stabilized earth). The fireplace walls, built around a brick Rumford-style firebox, were made with the more traditional process of earth rammed into forms from above. Because of this rammed installation, the fireplace walls have a sedimentary look, while the shot-earth walls are smoother on the inside. Their tan color comes naturally from the local soil. Aside from the calming visual appearance, the earth walls' excellent thermal characteristics make them a welcome presence, especially in summer when temperatures often soar above 100°F.

Among details that complement the earth walls are the colored-concrete floors, which are hydronically heated. The wood walls are stick-framed with western red-cedar siding on both sides, left natural on the interior and stained on the exterior. This choice sets up an interplay between the cedar and the masonry that repeats throughout the house.

To keep the material palette from being too consistent, we used structural steel, painted a deep red, in a number of locations. Stainless steel was used for one kitchen counter and sink as well as for details in the bathrooms. Because the archetypical California barn was the house's inspiration, I chose corrugated galvanized sheet-metal roofing.

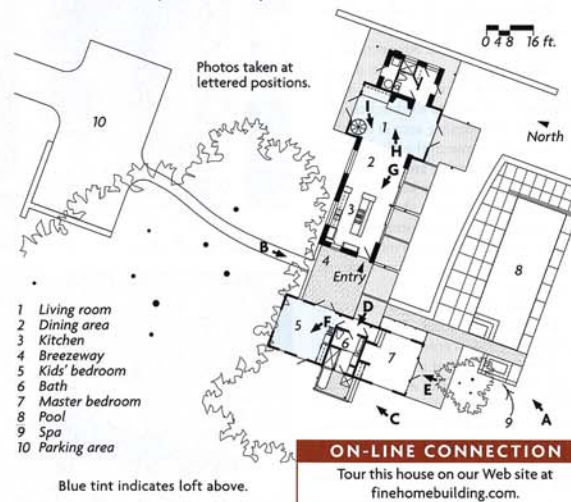
Big idea to small detail

Whatever type of building you're designing, the key is to keep track of how a place feels. This concept is simple, but it's often a complicated set of decisions that must come together for the desired result. How do you do it? I'm not sure, but I think it's a combination of using one's knowledge of buildings while being a poet and a juggler. Thinking of the largest ideas with the same passion as the smallest ones goes a long way. □

Cass Calder Smith is an architect in San Francisco, CA. Photos by Kevin Ireton, except where noted.

TWO BUILDINGS AND A BREEZEWAY

One building is for sleeping, the other for cooking, eating and hanging out, with a generous breezeway in between that serves as a covered porch. But the main room of this house is really the outdoor space defined by the two buildings, which, of course, includes the pool and the spa.



SPECS

Bedrooms: 2, plus 2 lofts **Bathrooms:** 2 **Size:** 2,500 sq. ft.

Cost: N/A **Completed:** 1999 **Location:** Napa, California

Architect: Cass Calder Smith Architecture Inc. **Builder:** Redhorse Constructors