



2017

Butler Armsden Architects

RESIDENTIAL
ARCHITECTURE
MORE THAN
3,000 SQ. FT.

WITH MORE OUTDOOR SPACE than there is indoors, this Wine Country home is all about enjoying nature. Butler Armsden Architects created a modern version of a classic courtyard dwelling, which maximizes light and natural ventilation while correspondingly decreasing its energy use. The Valley of the Moon Retreat looks simple, but it strategically shields occupants from the strong sun and brisk winds of Sonoma County.

"This was a special project—we were able to take a very holistic view," says Glenda Flaim, associate principal at Butler Armsden.

The project benefited from a close collaboration made possible by a longstanding relationship. The clients, who have two children and a large extended family, had previously worked with Butler Armsden to renovate their main residence in San Francisco. After the success of this initial project, they asked the architects to help select a site for their Wine Country retreat. Their final choice: a three-acre site within a 37-acre parcel of dedicated open space, not far from the cozy town of Glen Ellen. The secluded, hilly property was populated by native oaks and redwoods.

The design team took great care to maintain all the trees on the property, siting the house so that only one small oak had



OUTSIDE THE
VALLEY OF THE
MOON RETREAT.

PHOTO: JOE FLETCHER

“We didn’t want to have the architecture impose itself on the site, but rather to enhance it.”

—Glenda Flaim



to removed. Because of the weak soil in the area, the house needed to have a special foundation; the site was excavated in order to create a raised concrete podium. To allow the family to be continually outdoors while comfortably protected from the wind and sun, the architects organized the spaces around a central courtyard, with deep roof overhangs toward the south and west. “It has that big Californian feel,” says Flaim. The home’s 4,100 square feet of interior space is complemented by 5,600 square feet of outdoor space, including the courtyard and a bocce court; there is also a saltwater lap pool with an integrated hot tub.

The home is laid out so that it functions equally well if it’s just being used by the immediate family but is also able to expand with ease. The main volume contains an open kitchen/living/dining room and adjoining kids’ bedroom, which doubles as flex space; the master suite is upstairs. To accommodate relatives, a separate L-shaped wing contains three additional bedrooms, as well as the family room.

The feeling of being immersed in nature starts from the approach to the house; visitors arrive and walk underneath a canopy of venerable oaks. In keeping with the casual nature of the retreat, there is no formal front door. Instead, visitors enter through a square archway into the courtyard, where there are a number of access points to the interior (in the evenings, large barn doors are closed to protect the courtyard from curious wildlife). To have a minimal impact on the environment, the home was designed to meet LEED Gold standards and gets its electricity and hot water heated via solar panels.

To blend in with the gray bark of the surrounding oaks, the house is clad in Alaskan yellow cedar, a durable, low-maintenance wood that weathers over time to a light gray. To highlight the different parts of the house, the two-story volume has horizontal siding, while the one-story portion has vertical siding. The weathering effect varies on different parts of the house, depending on the degree of sunlight exposure—a visual reminder of nature’s potency. Says Flaim, “We didn’t want to have the architecture impose itself on the site, but rather to enhance it.” —Lydia Lee

PHOTO: JOE FLETCHER



OPPOSITE PAGE: THE RUSTIC DINING TABLE MADE OF RECLAIMED WOOD LEADS THE EYE TO THE VAST OUTDOORS. THIS PAGE, TOP: A WALL OF WINDOWS ALLOW NATURAL LIGHT TO FLOOD THE SPACE. BOTTOM, LEFT: AN EXTERIOR VIEW OF VALLEY OF THE MOON. BOTTOM, RIGHT: A POCKET DOOR CREATES SEAMLESS EXPOSURE TO THE OUTDOORS.

