BURIED IN THE VALLEY

An exploration into the history and layout of traditional Spanish haciendas informed the design of this weekend retreat

Words: Eleanor Rice Photography: Joe Fletcher

Total seclusion and tranquillity are afforded by the flourishing surroundings of the valley. This peaceful atmosphere provides a place of refuge where the family can escape the chaos of life

"THE HOME ADOPTS A COURTYARD MODEL POPULARISED BY THE EARLY ARCHITECTURE OF THE AREA"

California's Mission-era saw an influx of Spanish haciendas. Characterised by their courtyard layout, these grand estates sparked the inspiration for a new family getaway burrowed in the Sonoma Valley. The clients had developed a level of trust through a previous collaboration with Butler Armsden Architects which allowed this innovative firm a broad creative remit. As a result, the design focuses on achieving a sense of tranquillity by embracing the outdoors and ensuring the house is pertinent to the context in which it sits. Shadowed by a neighbouring herd of native oaks and towering redwoods, the family of four enter the home through an enclosed passageway that leads straight to the central courtyard. Evocative of the early vernacular architecture, the courtyard adopts a range of roles. "It acts as a living room, foyer, central hallway and outdoor yard," lists the project architect Glenda Flaim. It also features a bocce court, a salt water lap pool and endless vistas that guarantee to take anyone's breath away. This wide open space creates a platform for socialising and entertaining, which was essential for the family who often host large gatherings. For these events, guests are able to stay overnight in the single-storey guest house which is distinguished from the main building by its vertical cladding. When it is just the family visiting, the separation of the two volumes means they only need to open the main house. While this may seem trivial, it's a purposeful design decision maintaining a much-desired sense of intimacy, a contrast to any intimidation felt in larger extended spaces. On the other side of the cedar walls, a neutral palette lets the enchanting view sing and it brings the interiors to life.

"WE WANTED THE SURROUNDING VIEWS TO BE ONE OF THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE HOME"

HOME PROFILE

PROPERTY DESCRIPTION
A courtyard, reminiscent of Spanish haciendas, homes two volumes that form a weekend getaway on a three-acre site. The retreat features two separate buildings: one volume contains the main, open living spaces and bedrooms for the immediate family and a secondary, smaller volume is used to accommodate staying guests. A sheltered external passageway provides the main entrance and leads straight out to the central courtyard where visitors are greeted by a bocce court, a salt water lap pool and stunning views of the valley. The cedar-clad home is also responsible for generating its own electricity and hot water.

LOCATION
The charming village of Glen Ellen nestled in the Sonoma Valley, California.

PROPERTY SIZE
381 sq. m

BUILD TIME
Four years

ARCHITECTURAL BRIEF
With an extensive knowledge of the clients' needs, wants and style acquired from a previous project, the brief for the architects was less restricted. They needed to design a flexible weekend home which could host the family of four and be suitable for accommodating extended family.

architecture | case study

architecture | case study

"THE SINGLE-STOREY GUEST HOUSE IS DISTINGUISHED BY ITS VERTICAL CLADDING"

"MARRYING THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY WITH THE OLDEST SUSTAINABLE METHODS EARNED THE HOME A LEED SILVER DESIGNATION"

architecture | case study

Individual vistas are beautifully framed by expansive glass panes which appear in a range of shapes and sizes. One window in particular stands out as it wraps around the corner of the building to offer a wider view of the outdoors

architecture | case study

"INSIDE, THE VIEW REMAINS OMNIPRESENT BUT IS CURATED BY A RESTRAINED MATERIAL PALETTE"

The majority of the main living spaces, including the living room, are contained in the two-storey volume on site. This building has been specifically designed for the family of four and has been clad in horizontal cedar planks to differentiate itself from the separate guest house

"WOOD IS A MATERIAL
THAT CHANGES OVER TIME
AND IS IN TUNE WITH THE
PATTERNS OF THE LANDSCAPE"

architecture | case study

"HORIZONTAL CLADDING ANCHORS THE HOME TO THE LANDSCAPE"

architecture | case study

Eventually the Alaskan Yellow Cedar will weather into a light grey colour to seamlessly blend in with the grey bark of the native oaks of the region. Cedar is low maintenance and oozes a rustic aesthetic which sits in harmony with the setting

MEET THE ARCHITECT

Glenda Flaim was the project architect responsible for the mindful design of this family weekend getaway.

How did you experiment with levels in the design of this property?
We set the house on a concrete podium which allowed the home and courtyard to sit above the more natural terrain below where there's a bocce court, fire pit and orchard. The house exists mostly at one level, except for the master suite, in order to grant equal access to the courtyard from every room.

What challenges did the site present and how did you overcome these?
The chosen site was a three-acre, hilly property populated by native oaks and redwoods. Weak soil required a particular foundation; the site had to be excavated to create a raised concrete podium, on which the whole home and courtyard sit level and slightly elevated. This allows for the entire living space to occur on a single plane, with the exception of the master bedroom and it also gives the home a sense of pronounced altitude, emphasising its long view of the valley.

What are the benefits of a courtyard layout such as this particular one?
We conceived it as an active room; it's a place for congregation, where the family can come together. But it also is an outdoor space and it works to give a sense of private retreat to each of the interior sections, where each section opens onto the courtyard independently. All the spaces for the four of them are housed in the main wing, which also holds the living areas and kitchen. So when they arrive on the weekend, just them and the kids, they can open up only that section.

"WE WANTED THE EXTERIOR TO AGE TO THE COLOUR OF THE OAK TRUNKS"

PROJECT NOTES

ARCHITECTURE & INTERIOR DESIGN
Butler Armsden Architects
butlerarmsden.com

BUILDER & CONTRACTOR
Thompson Suskind

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER
Summit Engineering

DOORS & WINDOWS
Fleetwood Windows & Doors

FLOORING
Custom by Amber Flooring