

# SKETCH PAD

Aidlin Darling architects make a case for simplicity

**W**hen San Francisco architects Joshua Aidlin and David Darling completed a small city remodel four years ago for a banker and his family, they never imagined they would eventually design a masterplan for their clients' vast vineyard property.

A series of buildings are planned for the 140 acres near Glen Ellen, and the smallest, a 3,200-square-foot hillside cottage was completed last summer.

"The family needed a weekend place during the construction of the main house," says Aidlin, prompting his firm Aidlin Darling to include atypical, high-end solutions for a caretaker's house.

"In the year 2002, it couldn't be anything but modern," says the owner. And its details had to be refined because "it's a sketch of what's to come."

Aidlin Darling's modernist rectangle-shaped design replaces an L-shaped redwood house on the site. It has a commanding view of the undulating landscape. The new building has been pulled forward slightly and angles out from the hillside to allow for a new garden that can be accessed from the back.

Rustic materials are juxtaposed against more industrial, urban elements: rammed earth is combined with 1950s-style plate-glass windows, a steel armature and concrete floors with radiant cooling and heating systems. Redwood siding, recycled from the old house, also makes an appearance, and wide overhanging roofs reminiscent of Southern California's Case Study houses cut the afternoon glare.

"The quality of light also changes when you vary different materials," says the architect. No less than 25 different samples of rammed earth and 190 different concrete finishes were tried before settling on the right ones. Sand, concrete and earth are rammed together to create beautiful mottled textures on the walls.

Despite its material complexity, this house is an exercise in Miesian simplicity. Two parallel walls — an 18-inch-thick rammed-earth wall in the back and a north-facing glass wall in the front — are placed far enough apart to accommodate living spaces that are capped by a flat floating roof held down by steel piloti. Partition walls are suggested by floor-to-ceiling painted or polished anigré wood cabinetry. A central, skylit hallway is an open spine running the length of the house connecting living spaces to a master suite on the east end and children's bedrooms on the other.

Contemporary lighting, acoustics and ventilation systems within the building are combined with the native setting of its predecessor.

Top right: Architects Joshua Aidlin, (left), and David Darling. Above: The caretaker cottage perched between forest and vineyards wards off sunshine with generous overhangs held by Corten steel piloti; a mitered glass corner window in the master suite has vineyard views. Facing page: French doors punctured in the rammed-earth wall provide access to the rear garden and ventilation.



"The south earth wall demarcates the line between the rear garden and the shaded interior," says Aidlin. Perched at a spot where cool forest shade and sun-drenched vineyards meet, "the house can be ventilated naturally as well. On very hot days when you open all the doors, it is just like a cabana." The rammed-earth wall's narrow window openings let in little direct sunlight, making the wall an effective insulator.

This tactic results in architectural drama. When you cross the windowless earth wall through the rear entryway, you see the grandstand view for the first time. Solidity gives way to transparency and the cantilevered floor and roof planes — like hands shading one's eyes — bring a wide-angle vista into sharp focus.

For Aidlin Darling's clients this rustic modern ideal also echoes the qualities of brick and stone houses they had lived in before they moved out West.

"They wanted just such a sense of mass," says Aidlin, who is pleased because it seems quite natural for the area.

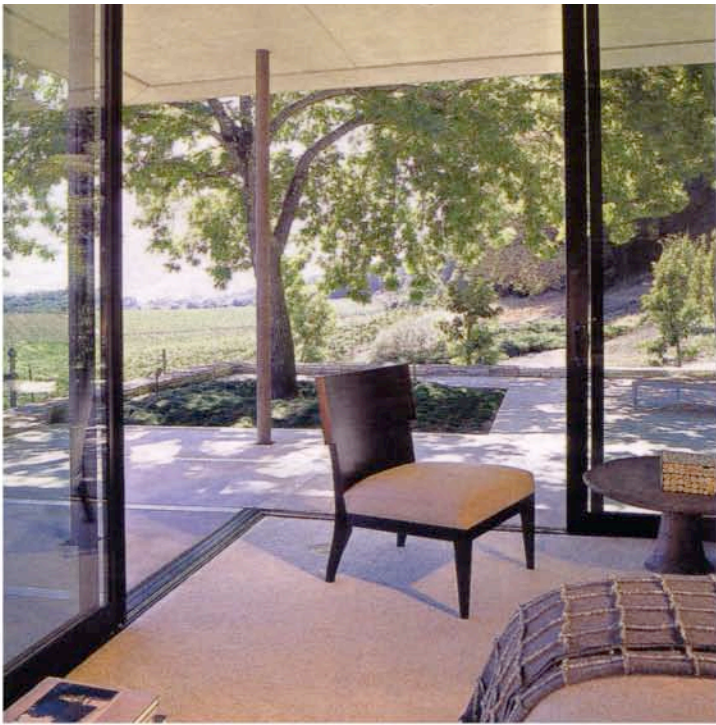
"In fact, the quarry from where this earth came is just across the valley," he says. "The house is modern but it has a sense of place."

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Top: Vineyard view from the master bedroom. Above: Bathrooms and the laundry are arranged along the south-facing rammed-earth wall with small window openings. Right: A central skylit spine connects the kitchen (foreground), an enfilade of living-dining spaces and the master bedroom. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and anigré cabinets double as room dividers.





