

At Home on



Straddling a Sonoma ridge, this contemporary house is an edgy mix of weathered boards, corrugated metal, and a plan that invites outdoor living

BY CHARLES MILLER

Here are two ways to decide where to put a house on a piece of country property: One, find the perfect picnic spot, and build the house there; or two, find the perfect picnic spot, and build the house next to it, where the picnic spot can be appreciated from both inside and out.

Architects call the second approach “site repair.” It recognizes the wisdom of preserving the qualities that made the site attractive in the first place rather than burying them under a building. In an unusual twist on the site-repair approach, a retirement home designed by architect Obie Bowman turned a sheared-off hilltop into a garden courtyard bordered by a lap pool (photo taken at A on site plan).

House and garage corral the courtyard

Hal and Mary Weber retired from their careers in the airline business and left Atlanta to live in one of their favorite vacation destinations: the wine country of Northern California. The 40-acre parcel of land they acquired is hilly terrain between taller ridges to the east and west.

The developer of the eight lots in the subdivision cut roads along the crests of the hills, then lopped off the hilltops to create building sites. This precious commodity—a flat pad where much of the surrounding land approaches the angle of repose—became a de-facto picnic spot. Many

a Hilltop



people simply would follow convention and build a house on the level area. The Webers, though, chose to encircle the flattened hilltop with a house and a garage, creating a courtyard. The house spans the hill from one side to the other, in some measure restoring the hilltop's original profile (drawing p. 105).

When visitors pull up the drive, the first thing they see is a long, one-story outbuilding—part garage, part storage shed, part woodworking shop—that shields the house from view. This part of the compound stakes out the eastern boundary of the courtyard (photos below). A portal through the entry building is framed in part by one of architect Bowman's signature elements: a stout tree-trunk lintel held aloft by heavy brackets. A V-shaped trough let into the top of the log is

the rain gutter. The impact is that of a torii gate gone Western, an effect amplified by one of Hal's bonsai ginkgo trees flanking the tunnel-like passageway.

The house, which forms the western boundary of the courtyard, projects two distinct personalities. The courtyard side faces northeast, where its shed roof drops low to the ground, deflecting prevailing breezes (photo pp. 100-101). This caplike shed roof gives the house an almost contemplative quality, amplified by the broad shoulders of its simple triangular shapes. Weathered redwood siding, along with gunmetal-gray corrugated-steel siding, echoes the muted hilltop colors.

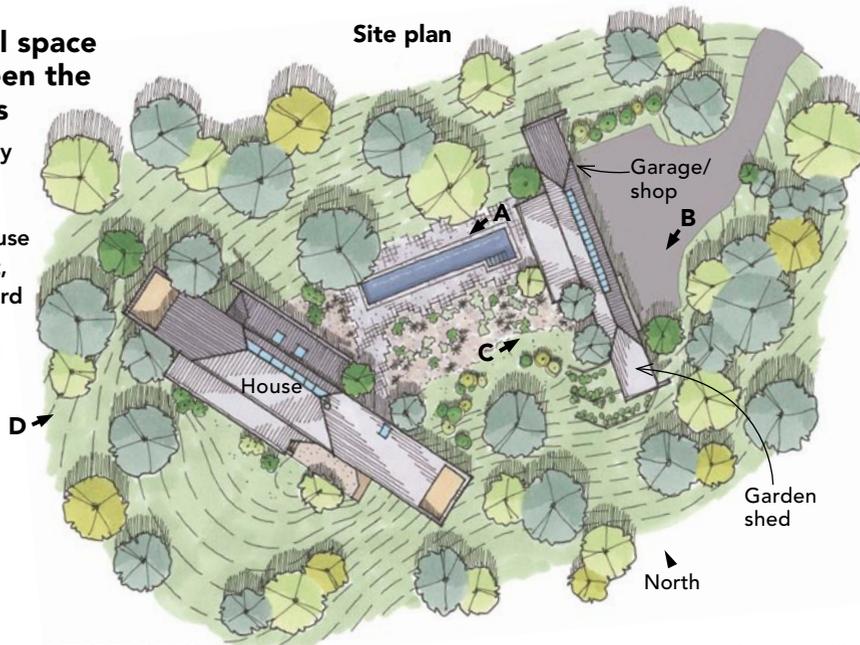
Exuberance is the disposition on the sunny side of the house. It's two stories tall, with a long porch off the living room that is open to

Part garage, part gateway. Long and low, a wall-like building that contains a garage, a woodshop, and a garden shed flanks the east side of the courtyard. A hefty log lintel marks the passage into the courtyard. Photos taken at B and C on site plan.



The level space is between the buildings

Bordered by the garage to the east and the house to the west, the courtyard includes a garden and a lap pool.





views of sunsets and distant vineyards. This is the kind of place that can take the sting out of all those 401(k) contributions.

Passage to the sunny side leads through a timbered breezeway separating the main house from the guest quarters. The breezeway spills into an outdoor dining area that includes a cooking alcove carved into the corner of the main house (photo left). Lined with corrugated steel over a thick concrete counter, the alcove is home to Hal's built-in gas grill. The noncombustible metal lining adds a measure of safety to a built-in outdoor grill with an exposed flame. For nighttime cookery, the reflective lining of the alcove bounces light onto the grill from a pair of non-sense jelly-jar sconces (Roughlyte; www.stoncolighting.com).

Inside, it's mostly one room

This house doesn't have many doors dividing the interior. Instead, lots of dedicated corners are sized to fulfill their functions without wasting space. A sitting area for watching movies or the fire shares a low-ceilinged space with a dining area and an alcove for the piano (photos pp. 104-105).

The center hall is a cathedral for book lovers. Hal and Mary are avid readers, and even though they were ruthless in weeding their library before the move, they knew that ready access to a wall of books had to be part of their new home. The 11-ft.-tall bookcases include a sliding ladder that rides



Porch, patio, and a place to cook. Stretching along the southwest side of the house, a covered porch overlooks an outdoor dining area and layers of hills and vineyards receding into the distance. A gas grill is tucked into a metal-lined alcove carved into the corner of the house. Photo above taken at D on site plan; photo left taken at E on floor plan.

on a rail for reaching the top shelves (www.putnamrollingladder.com).

The kitchen is on the courtyard side of the hall, overlooking the pool, and includes alcoves at each end for a home office and a pantry. Spotless black-granite countertops set the tone in the kitchen. Like a freshly waxed black town car, they are the gold standard for timeless elegance. Conversely, black-granite counters that bear witness to meal preparation need constant attention, like a town car let out of the garage. Although it's not quite a love/hate situation, Mary admits she wonders if she would choose black granite again.

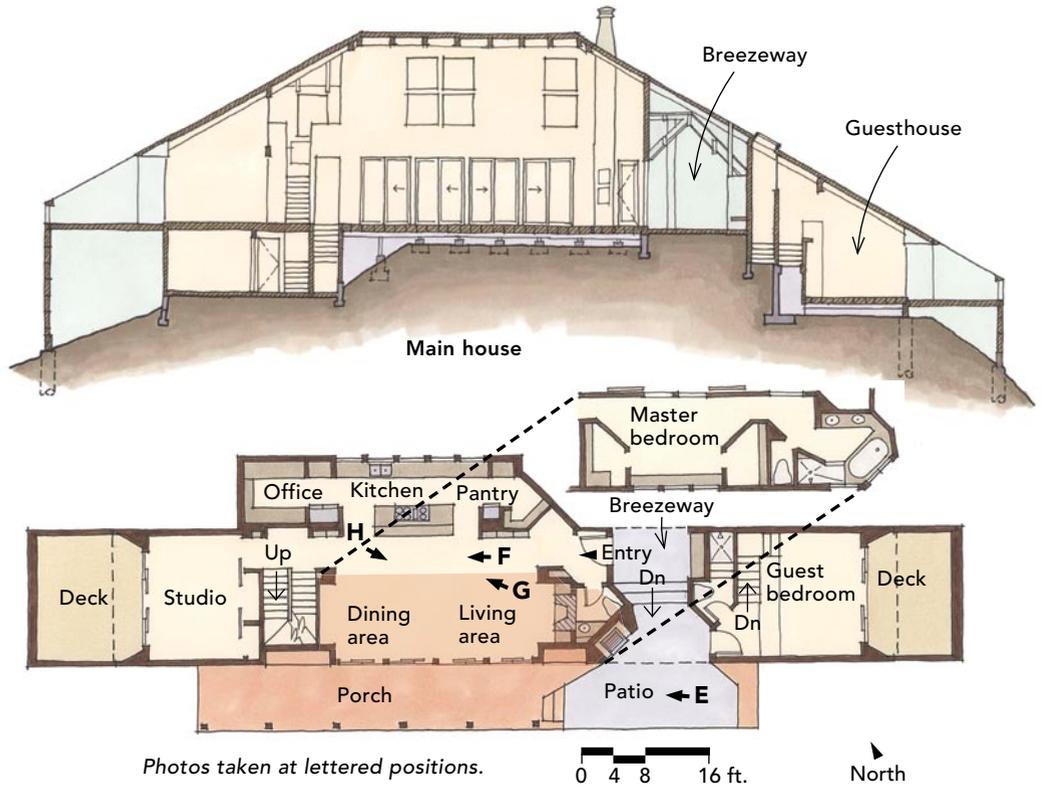
Pool covers all the bases

Sonoma County requires rural houses to have enough water for fighting a fire. The minimum is 5000 gal., typically contained in a holding tank. The shape and size of the Webers' building site made it tough to find a spot for a holding tank that wouldn't be an eyesore. Hal and Mary had been harboring a wish for a lap pool all along. It was the perfect convergence of need and desire: At 13,000 gal., the pool solved both. □

Charles Miller is special-issues editor.
Photos by the author.



The crystal inside the geode. As the sculptural centerpiece of the house, the stainless-steel hood over the kitchen island draws both stovetop exhaust and attention. Bookcases made of 2x10s carry the library and the weight of the beam spanning the kitchen. A library ladder rides the track affixed to the beam. Photos (left to right) taken at F, G, and H on floor plan.



A SIMPLE SHAPE THAT SUITS ITS SITE

Recalling the profile of the original hill, the main house and the guesthouse are joined at the breezeway. Decks, a patio, a covered porch, and a courtyard to the north face all points of the compass, providing sunny or shaded places to suit the weather or the mood. The main house—with its high-ceilinged hallway, long interior sightlines, and views to the outside—feels larger than its 1838 sq. ft. would suggest.

SPecs

Bedrooms: 2, including the guest room

Bathrooms: 2½

Main house: 1838 sq. ft.

Guesthouse: 340 sq. ft.

Cost: \$400 per sq. ft.

Completed: 2002

Location: Cloverdale, Calif.

Architect: Obie Bowman

Builder: Hawkes Construction

FineHomebuilding.com

See additional views of the hilltop, the house, and its built-in details on our Web site.