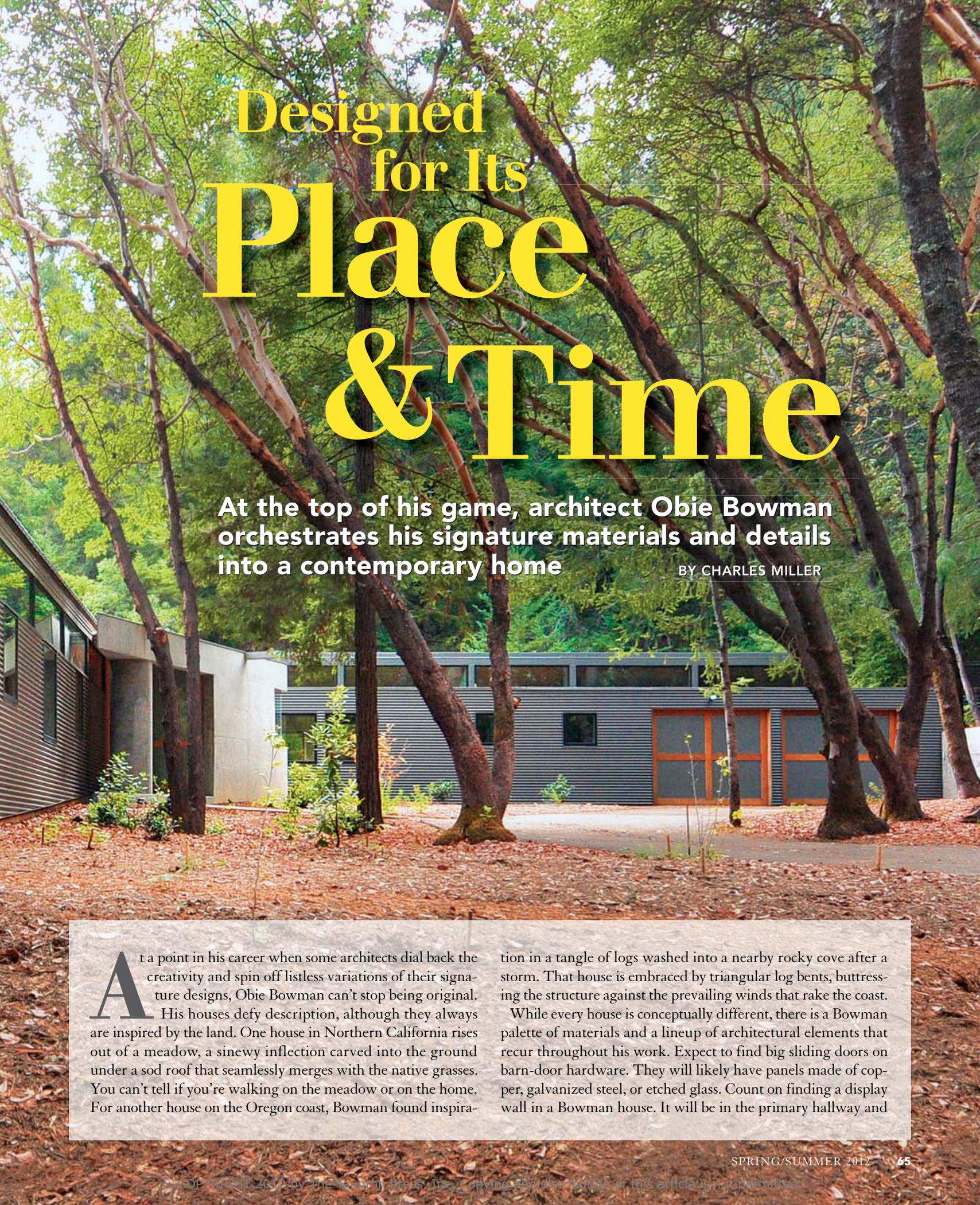




Fine Homebuilding
2012
HOUSES
AWARD

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Designed to fit both lifestyle and location, this Healdsburg, Calif., house is our editor's choice for 2012. The work of master architect Obie Bowman, the house contains all its creator's signature details: a structure that responds to and grows from its site, the use of metal as a structural and decorative element, and a crisply detailed interior. Glass and concrete play important roles, too. Tailored to its rural setting, the house nevertheless brims with ideas and inspiration that can energize any home.



Designed for Its Place & Time

At the top of his game, architect Obie Bowman orchestrates his signature materials and details into a contemporary home

BY CHARLES MILLER

At a point in his career when some architects dial back the creativity and spin off listless variations of their signature designs, Obie Bowman can't stop being original. His houses defy description, although they always are inspired by the land. One house in Northern California rises out of a meadow, a sinewy inflection carved into the ground under a sod roof that seamlessly merges with the native grasses. You can't tell if you're walking on the meadow or on the home. For another house on the Oregon coast, Bowman found inspira-

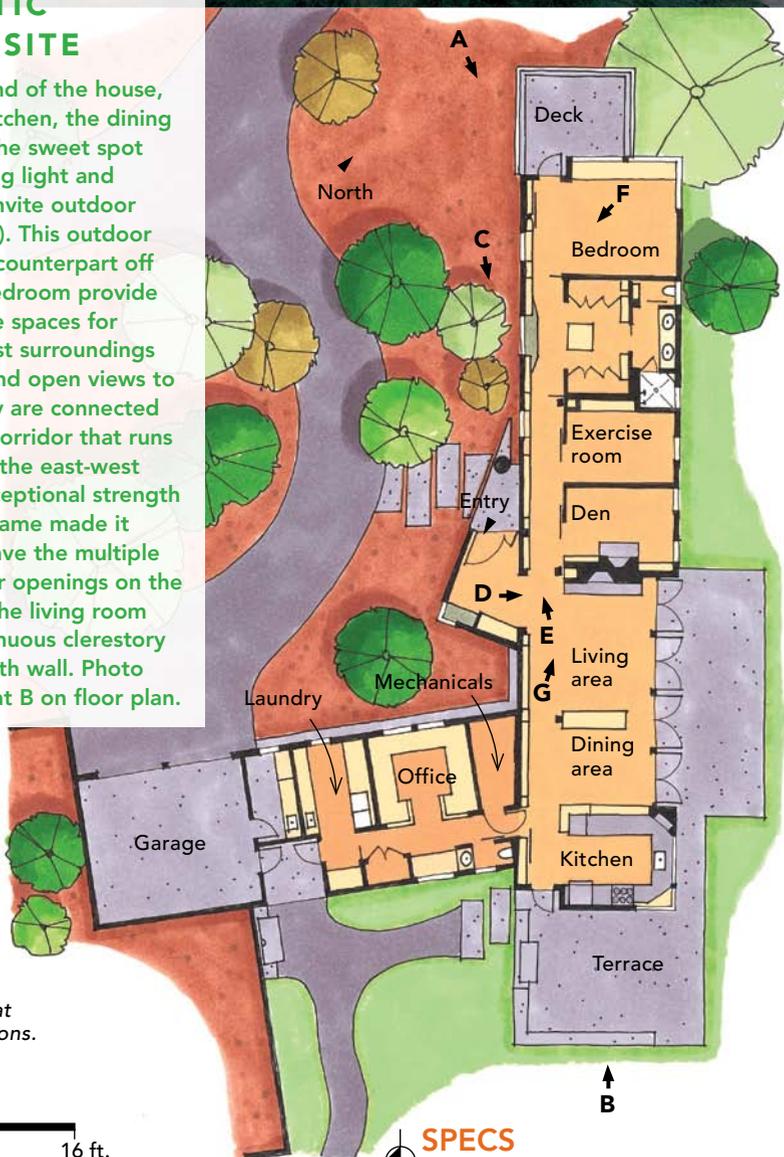
tion in a tangle of logs washed into a nearby rocky cove after a storm. That house is embraced by triangular log bents, buttressing the structure against the prevailing winds that rake the coast.

While every house is conceptually different, there is a Bowman palette of materials and a lineup of architectural elements that recur throughout his work. Expect to find big sliding doors on barn-door hardware. They will likely have panels made of copper, galvanized steel, or etched glass. Count on finding a display wall in a Bowman house. It will be in the primary hallway and



A PLAN AS DRAMATIC AS THE SITE

At the east end of the house, just off the kitchen, the dining terrace is at the sweet spot where morning light and valley views invite outdoor dining (above). This outdoor room and its counterpart off the master bedroom provide contemplative spaces for enjoying forest surroundings to the west and open views to the east. They are connected visually by a corridor that runs the length of the east-west wing. The exceptional strength of the steel frame made it possible to have the multiple swinging-door openings on the view side of the living room and the continuous clerestory along the south wall. Photo above taken at B on floor plan.



Photos taken at lettered positions.

0 4 8 16 ft.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 1 • **Bathrooms:** 1½ • **Size:** 2831 sq. ft. • **Cost:** \$650 per sq. ft. • **Completed:** 2011

Location: Healdsburg, Calif. • **Architect:** Obie Bowman, FAIA, Healdsburg, Calif.

Builder: Hawkes Construction, Ukiah, Calif. • **Project manager:** Chris Heath

will contain shelves, art niches, and a bench. Concrete likely will show up in more than the foundation. And you can be sure that the essence of the house will spring from its structure, with more than a whiff of exaggeration. If it needs a column, it will be a chest-pounding column. If a truss is in order, think train trestle. If a cantilever is in the cards, it will be a prodigious span. When it comes to finding the soul of a house in its skeleton, Bowman is a structural opportunist of the first order, which brings us to this project, the Johnson house (photo pp. 64-65, taken at A on floor plan).

At their first meeting with Bowman to discuss their new home, Ted and Diane Johnson told him about what had happened to their last house. It was in Inverness, on the California coast, in a forest of mature Douglas-fir trees. One morning as they were eating breakfast, one of the 100-ft.-tall firs dropped like Odin's hammer on their house, crushing its ridge, demolishing the entry, and setting off the sprinkler system. It would take the better part of a year to repair the house, and the Johnsons saw that as a sign to start looking for another place to build.

The site for their new home is on a north-facing 10-acre parcel overlooking the vineyards in Dry Creek Valley in California's Sonoma County. Most of the land is steep and laced with hiking trails. The best site for the house, where it can catch some winter sunshine and take in the valley view, is at the edge of a forest with, ironically, several tall fir and redwood trees. Not wanting to worry about another tree flattening the house, the Johnsons requested that their new home be built to withstand a tree falling on it without crushing it. That meant big steel, and opportunities for cantilevers found their way into Bowman's earliest concept sketches.

One end is in the woods, the other in the clearing

The approach to the house is from below, on a driveway that climbs a hill and passes through dense forest. Sited on a flat bench below the ridgetop, the house raises a westward salute with its arresting shed roof atop the master-bedroom terrace. The slope of the roof is designed to shade the terrace in sum-



Pointing the way to the entry. A prowlike cast-concrete step, echoed in the canopy above, leads to the entry vestibule. Its low ceiling gives way to the living room overlooking the valley view, framed in steel I-beams. Recesses cast into the concrete fireplace create hollows for firewood and a mantel. A sliding screen and a cantilevered hearth control the embers. Photos taken at C and D on floor plan.





mer while inviting winter sunshine to fall directly on the decking when the sun is low in the sky. The slots in the terrace roof make this a particularly Californian space. It's not quite a porch, which typically is sheltered by a solid roof. It's also not quite a deck, which usually is open to the elements. Instead, the slots balance the light and afford skyward views, while the solid parts of the roof offer shelter during the occasional rainy weather. At the opposite end of the house, a corresponding terrace in the clearing overlooks the vineyards below. The house has an L-shaped plan with the living spaces arranged on the east-west axis to offer each space access to light and views. A utility wing for the office, laundry, and garage heads off to the south and back toward the dense forest.

A metal frame and corrugated cladding on display inside and out

The steel I-beam skeleton that carries the roof sets the tone inside: This is a sturdy house. Equal in impact on its bearing is the Galvalume siding. Typically used as roofing, the weathered-gray metal has soft corrugations that emphasize the stretched-out, horizontal nature of the house. The gray is also a chameleon. It picks up the colors of the sky and the landscape and changes along with them, never looking out of place. While not required by code, the metal siding also contributes a level of fire resistance. Bowman takes the Galvalume inside, in the modernist tradition of blurring the distinction between inside and out and of extending sightlines on each side of the walls. Just inside the front door, the undulating metal wraps its way up the entry wall beneath a trio of light switches framed by folded metal corner beads (photo left).

Wood, drywall, and hardware accents tie spaces together

Crisp edges and a limited palette of materials are hallmarks of a Bowman house. Bowman favors this approach because, he says, "the fewer the materials, the more coherent the end result will likely be." They occur in a typical application in the hallway opposite the office, where straight-grained hardwood maple and Douglas fir come together. The drywall edges aren't covered by trim. Instead, each edge is finished with J-bead to create precise reveals around the beams, the casings, and the chain-mail pattern of the stainless-steel return-air grille.



South-side display wall. Reaching from the master bedroom to the kitchen, the long corridor that links the rooms of the house is daylit by a continuous clerestory that catches light filtered through the madrones. Bookshelves, drawers, cabinets, art niches, a bench, and a pantry are all a part of the wall. Photos taken at E and F on floor plan.



Safe and sound. In the living room, a canopy of rough-sawn fir planking is bathed in daylight from both sides. The doubled rafters over the sitting area provide discrete channels for sprinklers and lighting. The steel superstructure is insurance in case a tree falls on the house. Photo taken at G on floor plan.

from the lamps, and he paints the cages to match the color of other fittings in the room.

Concrete sets the stage for a choreographed experience

The entrance to the Johnson house isn't just a doorway. Like all memorable houses, it's a sequence. Compression and release, they call it in architecture class. Big concrete pavers lead to the landing, pointing west like the tip of a spear and doubled in the canopy above. It's like passing through a notch in a cliff before entering the foyer and being presented with the expansive and breathtaking view beyond the living room.

Houses like this will never be mainstream. They are too hard to build, and they cost a lot. But this home is bristling with ideas that adventurous designers, builders, and homeowners can apply to other buildings. In a vineyard valley dotted with Tuscan villas and Spanish colonial haciendas, it's refreshing to see an actual piece of regional architecture, designed for its place and time. □

Charles Miller is an editor at large. Photos by Obie Bowman, except where noted.

Design video: Scan here or visit FineHomebuilding.com for an inside look at this home and the architect behind its design.



At the other end of the house, the display wall in the master bedroom shows how this same palette works with the wide-flange I-beams, painted charcoal with a hint of green. It's the colors of the woods, brought indoors.

Glass used in creative ways makes lasting impressions

Foggy sheets of glass, acid-etched or sandblasted, turn up as cabinet- and passage-door

panels in Bowman houses. The effect is to make whatever is behind the misty glass into impressionistic color swatches. Cereal boxes lining a pantry or bottles of wine arranged in their cabinet become abstract pieces of art. The jar-in-a-cage Stonco light fixtures are ubiquitous in Bowman houses. Stock fixtures won't do when they can be improved upon. Bowman often sandblasts the jars to soften their glossy appearance and the light emitted

Precision built There's a reason houses have trim: It's to cover the unsightly gaps where the parts of a house come together. Not so in a Bowman house, where the parts come together, or don't, with exemplary precision. Materials that aren't exotic in any way become the fabric of the building and the embroidery that makes the house special.

