

Building

# hilltop



Tied to the land by its barnlike simplicity, this new getaway home proves that a family that builds together stays together.

BY JOHN RIHA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL HOLT

PRODUCED BY CARLA BREER HOWARD



# homecoming



This weekend house relies on a network of fir beams and trusses to create a barnlike atmosphere, comfortable for housing a multigenerational clan. The 14-foot-long communal table, flanked by chairs brought by each family member, serves as headquarters central. Children scamper up the ladder to reach the loft play area. *Opposite:* Interior designer Jonathan Staub served as a project advisor for his family's weekend home in northern California wine country.



# "The idea was to build a place that would accommodate a few or all of us at once."

—Jonathan Staub

To find the ideal property for a shared weekend cottage, seven members of Jonathan Staub's family pooled their resources and dreams. Their criteria were simple but exacting—the land must be beautiful, near their home base of San Francisco, yet well-insulated from possible future development. A five-year search led to a 225-acre parcel some 50 miles north of the city, where the rolling wine country tumbles into forested foothills.

Cherished memories of past gatherings led Jonathan and his family to design an extraordinary house. Jonathan fondly recalls their idyllic get-togethers while growing up in Hawaii—cavorting in the surf with cousins and siblings while older relatives relaxed in the grass-roofed cabanas of his great-grandmother's beachfront property.

"We have a large network of family that is very close," says Jonathan, a San Francisco interior designer. "The idea was to build a place that would accommodate a few or all of us at once; a place that was flexible and comfortable."

"The site was emotionally overwhelming," he says. "It was so pristine, we felt humbled. We realized that to build on it with true understanding, we would have to live there first. So before we even touched the soil, we put a trailer on the property. That way, we could take our time and not have to worry about getting a roof over our heads."

Surrounded by such fertile ground, ideas began to take root. The house would have to express their respect for the landscape as well as satisfy the complex issues of accommodating get-togethers that might include anywhere from four to 40 family members. Eventually, memories of grass-roofed huts in Hawaii offered inspiration.

"What was needed was more of a compound, a central

house with other living spaces around it. A place that could expand and contract as needs arose," Jonathan says.

Working with architect Dirck Bass of Guerneville, California, the family designed a 2,800-square-foot communal pavilion including both indoor and outdoor quarters. Its main house shelters a simple but spacious state-of-the-art kitchen with a scullery, a cozy living room with a fireplace, a library for personal book collections, a dining area, and an airy loft where nieces and nephews can establish headquarters.

An open floor plan banished partition walls in favor of flexibility, allowing the outer walls to embrace a reunion of the entire clan or to permit a quiet gathering of two or three in an intimate corner. Big sliding doors open to covered porches that extend around the house's perimeter, nearly doubling floor space and creating outdoor rooms with sweeping vistas.

"We wanted a building that had agrarian overtones," notes Bass, "so along came the large, sheltering roof, which is of course the grand theme of all barns."

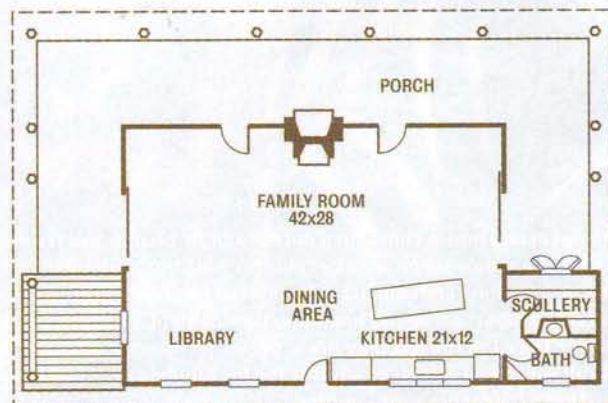
To provide private bedrooms, Jonathan devised a series of semipermanent camp tents—light nylon shells over sturdy wood frames built on wooden platforms. All are simply but comfortably furnished with beds, nightstands, dressers, and chairs. Although the tents are impermeable to wind and rain, they often are filled with the sounds and light of the forest.

"The tents are an incredible thing to live in," Jonathan says. "They've changed our whole (perception of what a house could be) and the way we are able to live on this space."

More importantly, the homestead's uncomplicated plan builds strong family ties. Says John, "A good structure brings families together and allows them to find the company of each other to be strengthening and beneficial."

## Family plan

The heart of this family-oriented plan is the 2,800-square-foot main house. Dividing the interior with furniture groupings rather than interior walls creates cozy nooks for two and large, shared areas for catching up with dozens of relatives. The simple kitchen is supported by a walk-in scullery with open storage. The wraparound porch and permanent sleeping tents (see page 120) built 50 yards away add generous outdoor living space.







Clockwise from top left: A glass-faced gable gathers western light at the end of the day to bathe interiors in the fading sun's reddish hues. The Asian-influenced entryway formalizes the passage between the landscaped area around the house and the larger natural environment beyond. Jonathan bought the 100-year-old temple gate doors in Bali and the metal lanterns in Thailand. In the family room area, the hearth is flanked by futons that fold out for fireside snoozing. The library corner's walls display Jonathan's grandfather's collection of cast-iron Japanese teapots and surround his grandmother's antique *pūne'e*, or Hawaiian lounging bed. Windows are deliberately low for views of the horizon. The large central fireplace was designed to be double-sided so that the porch could function as an outdoor living room.





Soaring spaces and cozy corners  
offer this family the perfect place in the country.







A pair of painted windows and shutters found in Mexico, *above*, punctuates the pass-through from the scullery to the porch with brilliant color. The old bench came from the same Mexican house. Pigment-colored concrete floors, *opposite*, add a burnished glow to the space while the radiant-heating system provides a comfort zone underfoot. (For more about radiant heating, see "Building Country" on page 45.)

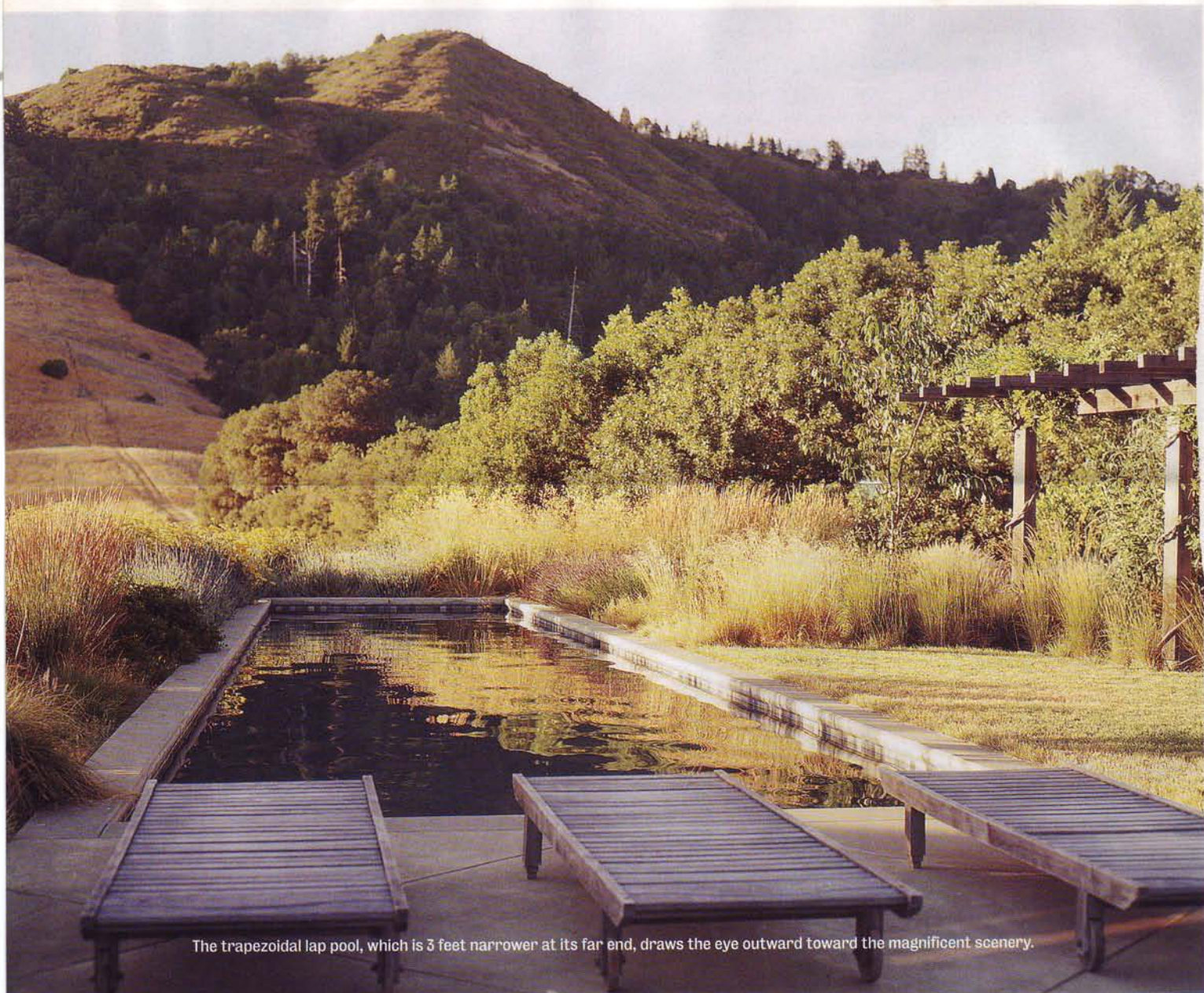
## Making a material difference

These building materials provide rustic appeal and fire resistance in dry climates: **Concrete floors** complement the house's rocky setting. These floors run through the main building and pave the outdoor porches. Integral pigments, added during the mixing stage, provide rich, muted tones. Labor-intensive burnishing

with a steel trowel just after the concrete was leveled produces a permanent shine. **Wide wood battens** nailed on top of non-combustible fiber-cement board siding recall classic barn construction. **A skim coat of drywall compound** applied over the interior drywall creates the appearance of plaster on walls and

ceilings. Pigments mixed directly into the compound yield especially deep colors. **Porch supports** made from 8-inch-thick redwood posts are exquisitely beautiful and have a superior fire rating. **The standing-seam steel roof** has a brown enameled finish to blend with the landscape.





The trapezoidal lap pool, which is 3 feet narrower at its far end, draws the eye outward toward the magnificent scenery.



Snuggled under a tin roof and featuring a radiant-heat concrete floor, the outdoor shower, *left*, is connected to the main house by an arbor walkway. An enclave of sleeping tents, *below*, sits 50 yards from the main house. Their environmentally sensitive, low-impact wood foundations don't interfere with trees' root systems.







Inspired by tents used by miners during the Gold Rush, these sleeping quarters are constructed of a high-tech rip-stop nylon that is both translucent and durable. An extra exterior layer of nylon helps shed rain to keep the interior dry. □