

A photograph of a modern house at dusk. The house has a large, multi-story stone fireplace in the center, with a warm fire burning inside. The house is surrounded by cherry blossom trees in full bloom, their white flowers framing the scene. The interior of the house is visible through large open spaces, showing a dining area with red chairs and a living area with a sofa. The sky is a soft blue, and the overall atmosphere is serene and elegant.

FROM THE LAND

*The Architecture of
Backen, Gillam & Kroeger*

Daniel P. Gregory

Foreword by Diane Keaton

RIZZOLI
NEW YORK



CLIFF LEDE WINERY

Howard Backen designed the Cliff Lede Winery as a large rectangular steel-and-concrete building divided into three parallel bays, each with its own hipped roof and ridge skylight. Small light monitors marking opposite ends of each roof create a distinctive profile that, from a distance, resembles a row of hop kilns. You can see most of the building from the Oakville Crossroad near the Silverado Trail on the floor of the Napa Valley. The structure tucks into the north side of a hill behind the public winery tasting room, which is in a farmhouse remodeled by Backen, closer to the road. Cliff and Mary Anne Lede's house, also by Backen, is up the hill.

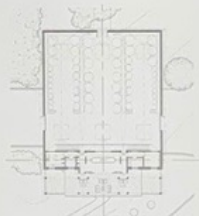
You approach the winery from the east and follow a winding path up a berm to a stately concrete-and-steel trellis over a terrace across the front of the winery. At the center of this terrace are the large doors to the private tasting room at the front of the middle bay. A small kitchen is to the left. The symmetry commands attention: enter the tasting room, and you face a magical wall of glass overlooking the main fermentation hall. It turns out that this room is actually part of a grand bal-





coney, like a modern version of the royal box in an opera house. Indeed, it feels cinematic: one's gaze is pulled inexorably through the glass and down along the rows of gleaming stainless-steel tanks on the floor below toward the barrel storage cave in the distance. I experienced this space during crush, and as I gazed over the busy scene, I felt I was watching a theatrical production.

If the building is evocative, it is also a factory: trucks and machinery enter the big space on the ground floor at one end and can drive out the other. This interior roadway is just below the tasting room, perpendicular to the long axis. So Backen's love of axiality has two purposes here: one is purely practical; the other is both practical and poetic. The dynamic symmetry here reinforces the ritual that wine making expresses and sharpens a visitor's sense of discovery.



Fermentation Plan of Cliff Lede Winery



YOUNTVILLE HILLHOUSE

It took four years of back and forth negotiation for vintner Cliff Lede to purchase the hilltop site near the Oakville Crossroad where he and Mary Anne aimed to build their dream house. The site in question was well worth the wait: behind and above the Cliff Lede Winery, which Howard also designed, it faces south and west across the valley. Indeed, the design is all about triumphant arrival after a suspenseful wait, or drive, up through the trees and around the edge of the hill.

Then suddenly you face the front facade, which is an architectural welcome in warm, buttery Texas limestone. Three tiers of steps lead up through long narrow planters to the front door. The planters create a plinth for the house and camouflage the garage, which is partly underground. On the left is the two-story bedroom wing; at right the living room pavilion topped with a trellised roof deck. The entry itself is a glazed gallery that opens to the south-facing pool terrace. So in classic modern ranch house fashion, the moment you enter the front door you are outside again.







"I like the lines of contemporary architecture, but we also wanted it to feel warm and comfortable," —Mary Anne.

—the modern twist here is that straight ahead on the terrace is the bright red LOVE sculpture by Robert Indiana.

Loren Kneeger explains the intent behind the design: "The site has 360 degree views and the goal was to capture the drama of the site from all of the major rooms. Corner pocketing door systems disappear into art walls, resulting in 'floating' planes that frame artwork with gardens and nature."



Main Floor Plan of Younville Hillhouse


Cliff and Mary Anne were enthusiastic participants in the design process and pushed Howard for a concept that matched the dramatic setting. Cliff recalls: "I had a book on Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, and I asked Howard: Can you create a similar feeling? I like the lines of contemporary architecture but we also wanted it to feel warm and comfortable." The house also needed to accommodate a growing modern art collection. Howard's solution was to put aside his penchant for gable roofs and embrace rectilinear geometry and, according to Loren, the firm interpreted the Fallingwater reference liberally "as a building composed of simple forms that merged with the landscape."

The hilltop site was lowered several feet to create a larger level building pad, allowing for a seamless flow from indoors to out and minimizing changes in level. "In a similar way," says Loren, "upper level rooms flow freely from the interior to cantilevered terraces, engaging the landscape and view."

The Texas limestone sheathing the walls is cut in a precise and elegant grid pattern—almost like a very large piece of cabinetry—to accentuate the horizontality of the design. And every major vertical surface inside that is not a sliding glass door is treated as an "art wall" to frame modern paintings.







"The site has 360 degree views and the goal was to capture the drama of the site from all of the major rooms."

—Loren Kroeger.

The kitchen-family room is the heart of the house and opens to a wide terrace through classic Howard Backen window walls that disappear into side pockets. "We love to cook and we love sports," says Mary Anne. The central outdoor sitting area near the kitchen includes its own wide screen TV behind a built-in cabinet so on balmy evenings Monday night football can be enjoyed outdoors. An especially dramatic space is the master bathroom upstairs with more walls that disappear and a freestanding oval tub that is a piece of sculpture in its own right. "I wanted to feel I was in a teacup," says Mary Anne.

All the lines of the house extend the eye into the landscape, from the cantilevered steel trellises shading each opening, to the glass railings on balconies and porches, to the way the large window walls frame vistas of the valley and surrounding oaks, to the pool itself, edging the hill in liquid blue abstraction. The wait was worth it.

INTERIORS BY APRIL POWERS

WORK BY BACKEN, GILMAN, & KROEGER ARCHITECTS



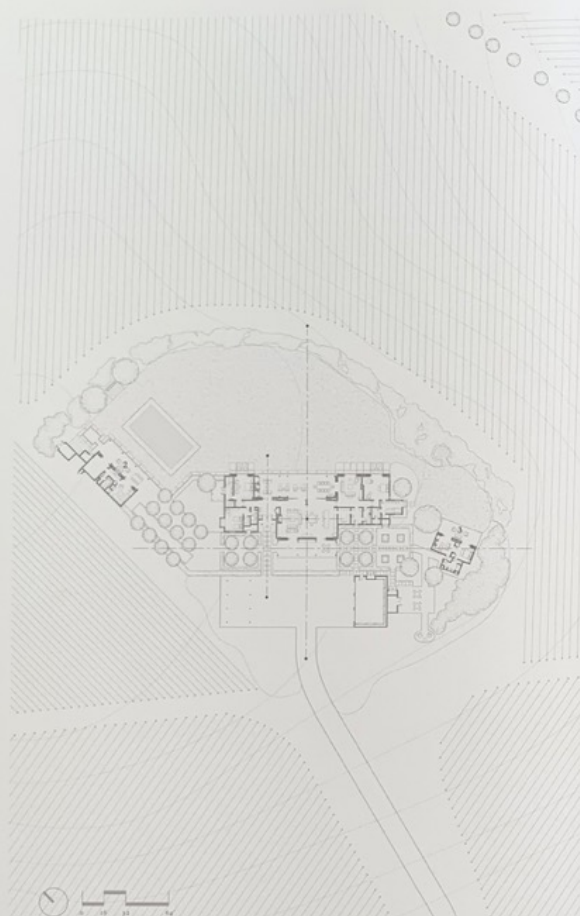


ALEXANDER'S CROWN RESIDENCE

The house on a broad knoll overlooking the Alexander Valley, a few miles northeast of Healdsburg, embodies a classic Howard Backen approach to a beautiful 18-acre vineyard site: sneak up on it from behind so that a breathtaking view unfolds as you open the front door. In this case, the one-story ranch house parallels the valley vista, lining up in a series of hip-roofed pavilions: master suite at the north, covered lanai beside the great room at the center, and children's bedrooms on the south. All rooms face east toward the valley view and the Mayacamas Mountains in the distance. A pool house and guest house are a short distance away at the north and south ends, respectively. The entry hall, between the great room and the master suite, pulls your gaze through the house to the lanai and the hills beyond so that almost before you greet your host, you meet the site itself.

The goal for clients Tom Klein and Kate Kelly was to build a house that could accommodate a large extended family of parents, children, and grandchildren, sometimes all at once. Occasionally, it would

- 1) Residence
- 2) Pool House
- 3) Guest House



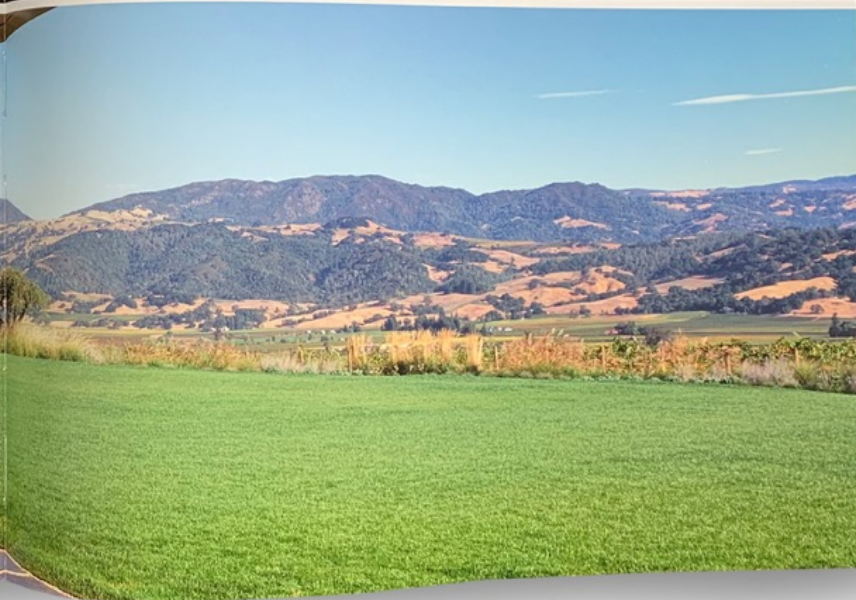
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also need to host corporate dinners, since Klein runs the family business, Rodney Strong Winery, which naturally involves a lot of entertaining. Klein recalls: "I wanted a big lawn for baseball and football games, and a patio where we could sit and enjoy the sun and watch the game."

With its outdoor fireplace, row of chaises, and long dining table, the lanai is the true heart of the house and where everyone wants to be. The great room's monumental window walls slide away to turn both spaces into an even larger lanai. "I love the openness and focus on the outdoors," says Klein. Here, on this knoll of prime cabernet sauvignon grapes, known as the Alexander's Crown Vineyard and part of a 180-acre ranch, the point of the design is, whether in a crowd or alone seeking solitude, simply "to be in nature." One especially evocative photograph captures the scene from the lawn at dusk: every room open, glowing with expectancy, suspended between land and sky.



Floor Plan of Alexander's Crown Residence



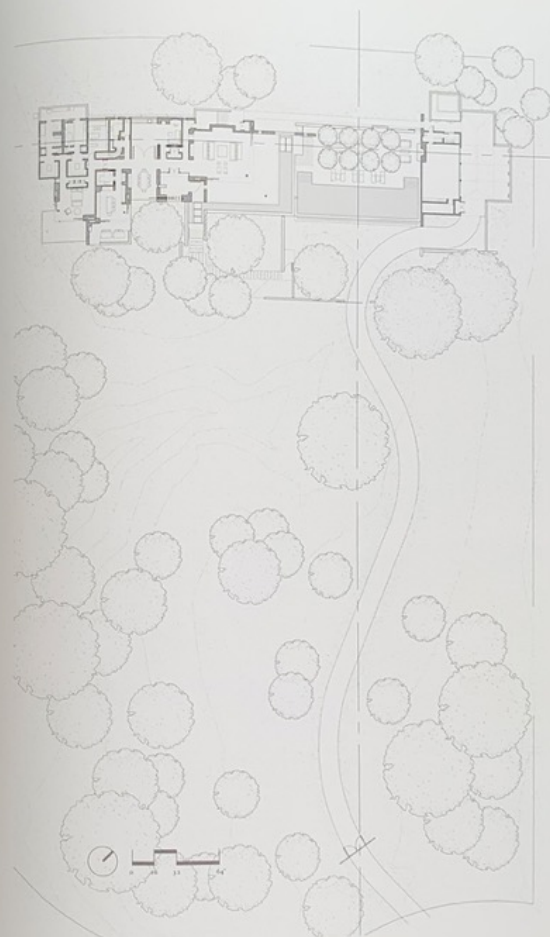
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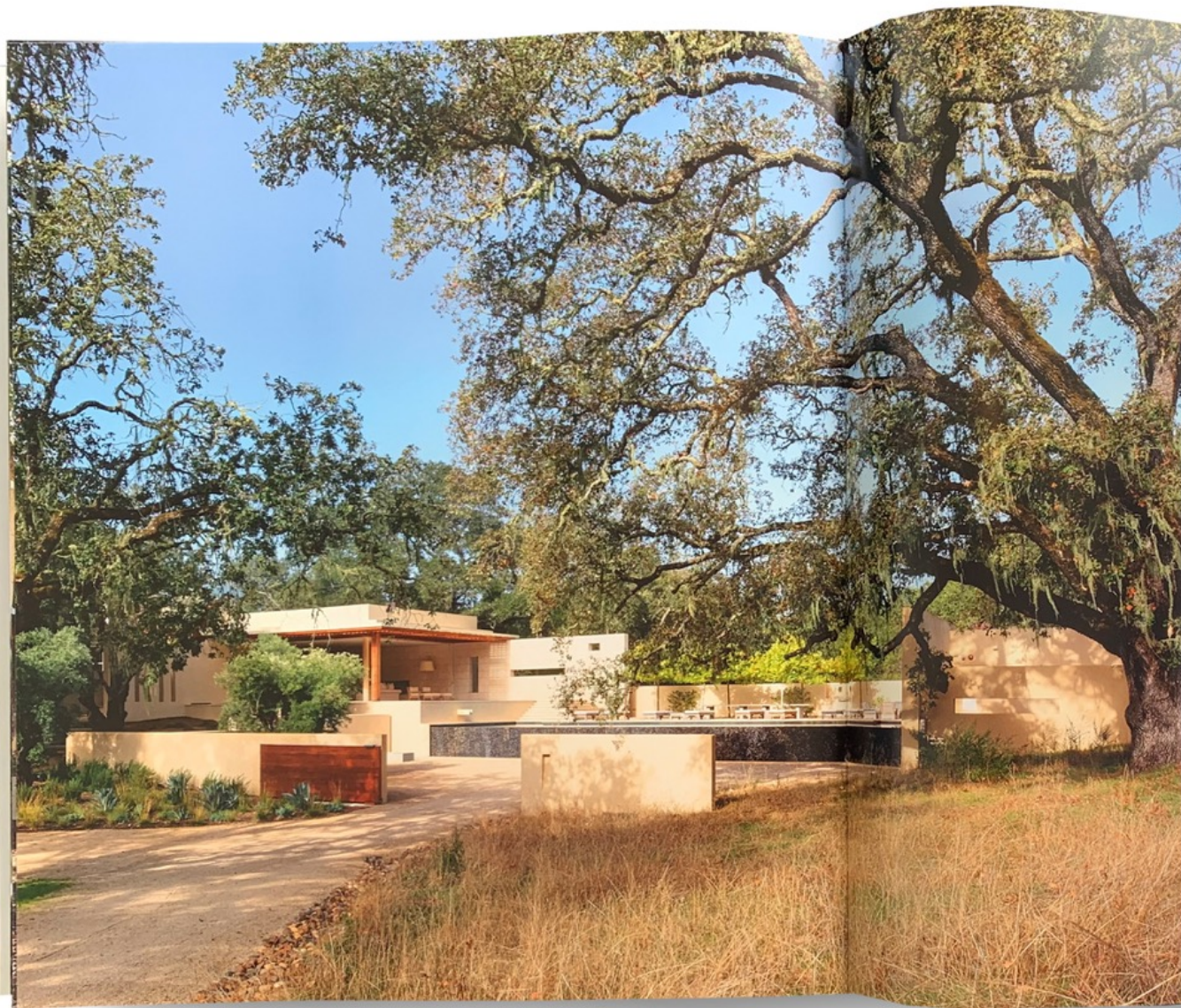
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WOODSIDE RESIDENCE

Ed and Ann Storm asked Howard to design their home on a rolling oak-studded lot in Woodside, on the San Francisco Peninsula, after becoming dissatisfied with a plan by a previous architect. Having lived in traditionally styled houses, the Storms were ready for something modern and admired the abstractions of Luis Barragan and Ricardo Legoretta, and especially Richard Meier's museum for the Ara Pacis in Rome – but as Ann explained, they wanted the house to be “warm modern.” They knew of Howard through Manuel Lozano (Howard's brother-in-law) and George Marcus, whose rustic-elegant Backen-designed restaurants Evvia and Kokkari they liked very much.

Howard thought the original site plan worked because it took into account the San Andreas Fault running right through the property and was far enough from the road for privacy. But the design cut the house off from the surrounding landscape, which seemed illogical: to interact with the landscape you had to go outside. Howard set about bringing the outside in while nevertheless maintaining a strong geometric outline.



With the rectilinear geometry he used at the Lede residence, Howard created an architecture of walls to shape but not necessarily enclose space. Loren Kroeger explains: "In some cases the walls are overlapped or cut away to allow access, frame a view, create a fireplace, or add a sculptural effect."

Indeed, the entire house forms a series of architectural sluice gates and stair-stepping platforms, where space flows down and out through walls that pivot open or slide away. The south and east walls of the living room slide into pockets turning the room into a grand lanai.

Loren says: "To eliminate the need for

"To eliminate the need for guardrails, the upper terrace is edged with a narrow pool of water. The reflected light adds a lively, dramatic effect and the floor appears to float on the water." —Loren.

The footprint is a long rectangle set at right angles to the driveway and divided into indoor and outdoor terraces set at different levels. Warm white walls made of large blocks of Texas fossil stone, along with some walls of Venetian plaster, and floors of Talilla limestone make the house glow against the gray-greens of surrounding live oaks, reinforcing the sense of abstraction.

One third of the rectangle is a beautifully proportioned outdoor room — between the garage on the right and the house proper on the left — containing a lip pool, outdoor fireplace, and an elegant allee of trees. The living room overlooks it, flowing out to a terrace and down a broad stone stairway to the pool. Howard made the long infinity edge of the pool spill over the rear wall of the motor court so that as you drive up you face what appears to be an elegant small dam straddling a shallow ravine.

guardrails, the upper terrace is edged with a narrow pool of water. The reflected light adds a lively, dramatic effect and the floor appears to float on the water."

Teak grids, recalling work by the Mexican modernist Ricardo Legoretta, are used both as trellises and vertical screen elements within walls and create constantly changing light and shadow effects. In the dining room, the window wall rolls behind a Legoretta-like wood screen edging the entry walkway and disappears.

The wall-as-sluice gate idea even appears in the media center, which is hidden behind panels in a wall of the living room, deftly expressing the Stones' desire to "make everything functional but not have it show."

INTERIORS BY APRIL POWERS



"Howard's houses have such
a respect for California,
but they never tipoe around,"

—Ed.¹⁸



Main Floor Plan of the Woodside Residence

