

The large entry door to Jill and Brian Conn's St. Helena weekend home leads to an open-plan interior with kitchen, dining and living spaces defined by furniture. A wall of doors reveals a spectacular valley view. The deck steps down toward the swimming pool.



COUNTRY AIRS



A REFINED YET DURABLE WINE COUNTRY RETREAT BELIES ITS RURAL SETTING.

BY REED WRIGHT PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL DYER



Karen Jensen's simple architecture is accented with easy-to-care-for potted plants and an entry garden, which gets shade and is the coolest spot for a late afternoon cocktail. In the living room, right, a stone fireplace flanked by custom storage cabinets complements the exposed wood ceiling beams. Interior designer Jennifer Macdonald's palette of blue and green upholstery enhances the natural materials, which won't go out of style.

WHEN JILL CONN, a former advertising executive, and her husband Brian, a hedge-fund professional, enlisted San Anselmo interior designer Jennifer Macdonald and Calistoga architect Karen Jensen to design their St. Helena-area weekend home, it proved a fortuitous match.

The designers each know the area well. And because like the Conns they have school-age children, they knew exactly what was needed: a tough, no-nonsense space that could still be glamorous enough for cocktail parties with guests and friends.

Conn is a practical, sports-loving Midwesterner whose move from Chicago to a Mediterranean-style home in Tiburon was marred by just one thing: Bay Area summer fog. "We love living on the water," she says, but on weekends they yearned for California's proverbial sunshine, a tennis court and a pool with a view.

So in 2015 they found a 5.5-acre lot off the Silverado Trail with just the kind of valley views they craved. Its existing 1970s bungalow, pool house and pool, however, were all too small and had to go. The site was too wooded and steep to affordably build a tennis court, but Jensen and Macdonald (who came on board after the building was designed) found ways to capitalize on the location. And so last summer, the Conns finally got their dream space — an understated U-shaped 5,800-square-foot home that incorporates a variety of spaces.

Inspired by vernacular agricultural buildings, it has vertical stained cedar siding and stucco walls. It appears at first glance to be just one story but





Window seats add extra lounging spaces in the living areas as well as in the upstairs bedrooms. Facing page: A window seat designed with storage overlooks the swimming pool and the view.



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in fact has multiple levels. Only the central section is one level; wings on the west and east sides contain several less visible levels that step down toward a double-infinity-edge pool.

In the central section, a wide steel-and-glass front door opens to a small foyer, and just beyond that comes a stunner: a 1,300-square-foot great room with 17-foot cathedral ceilings and exposed rafters under its gabled roof. It’s jaw-dropping not just for the scale and loft-like open plan but also the uninterrupted valley views — punctuated by a 36-foot-wide bank of retractable French doors that pocket away — from the north wall.

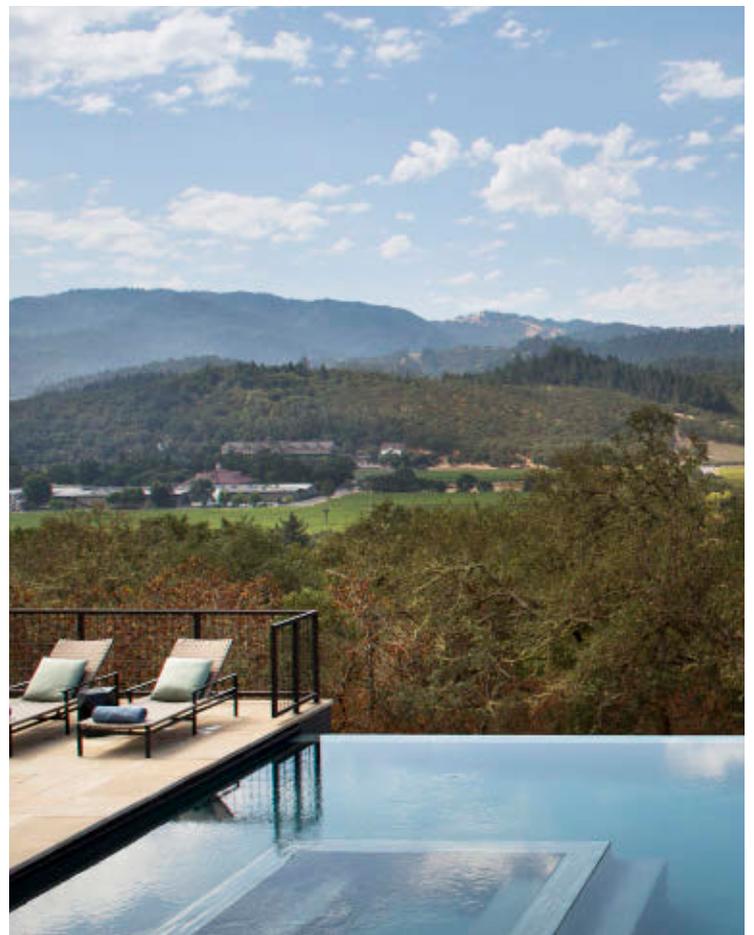
Built-ins flanking the entrance appear symmetrical, but are slightly different and serve different purposes. On the west side, a window seat above storage cabinets is where the Conn boys (Henry, 8, and Oliver, 6) sit and watch their mother at work in the open kitchen. On the east, similar cabinets house a wine refrigerator and a bar with a pass-through window to the shaded entry courtyard, for enjoying cocktails on a hot day.

A formal dining area separates the soapstone kitchen island — which Macdonald, whose firm, Jennifer Robin Interiors, is known for casual style, designed as a large farm table with lathe-turned columnar wood legs — from the family room on the east end. There, more wood cabinets, with beveled fronts concealing entertainment equipment, flank a limestone fireplace centered on one wall.

The great room’s elegant but hardy French oak floors, laid in a herringbone pattern, flow out seamlessly to a wide tumbled-limestone-covered patio, where the boys can play with the two family dogs under their mother’s watchful gaze. Steps descend from the patio to the pool, aligned with the northeast corner of the building.

The west wing has a garage, a mezzanine guest suite and, just below, a pool house that doubles as a rumpus room, with trundle beds for extra guests. In the east wing, doorways along a fireplace wall lead to the boys’ bedrooms and the main-level media room; a short flight of stairs makes a turn to the master suite, which overlooks the pool.

For Jensen, making the hillside building safe for the children was one goal; another was to be cognizant of view corridors for neighbors above, below and adjacent to the site. The fire-resistant stucco and cedar add to the safety factor. Landscape designer Frederika Moller planted low shrubs close to the house, but in the distance left the wooded site as natural as possible. Windows on all sides open to varied views, and thanks to the unspoiled wooded setting, “sometimes, the house feels like a treehouse,” Jensen says.







Seating big enough for a slew of friends makes the den a perfect hangout area. The room can be darkened by drawing the curtains across the windows to watch movies. Macdonald's firm, Jennifer Robin Interiors, created a desk that provides a spot for work, more storage and a spot for lamps that are placed low so that they do not obscure the view.

Macdonald, who grew up in the Bay Area and was a protégé of the wine country firm Backen Gillam & Kroeger Architects, was equally resourceful in materials use; she felt all she had to do was “layer on to what Karen had started.” She detailed all the cabinetry to cohere with the home’s informal elegance and chose hardy finishes and furnishings. “We did not need to add walls or make any structural changes,” she notes: to make the large spaces visually and literally comfortable, she went for a kind of spatial alchemy, mixing textured surfaces with smooth.

Along with the herringbone floors, she introduced tactile notes with design features like smooth troweled-plaster walls, three-dimensional Ann Sacks tiles for the kitchen backsplash and a heavy jute Christopher Farr rug for the living room. “To blur the lines between inside and outside I also tried to create a color palette of greens and blues that matched the view without overpowering it,” she says.

Large wagon-wheel-like chandeliers from Restoration Hardware likewise help anchor the lofty space and enhance the farmhouse aesthetic, and stain-resistant fabrics — Perennials outdoor fabric on the sofa, for example — can handle heavy wear. “We’ve mixed off-the-shelf and custom pieces and old and new things to stay within a budget — but it also helped make this home feel less formal,” Macdonald adds.

One other trick: for “a more calming effect,” materials such as woods for cabinetry and vanities are repeated. For visual continuity, even the Taj Mahal granite Macdonald specified for a waterfall countertop in the master bath reappears in the kitchen and powder room. Such elements “are not just long-lasting,” she says. “They don’t quickly go out of style.” ■