 BETWEEN THE LINES

STEEL AND CONCRETE ANCHORED BY RAMMED EARTH AND RECLAIMED WOOD MARK A FAMILY’S MODERN RETREAT DESIGNED TO MERGE WITH ITS RANCHLAND SURROUNDS.

WRITTEN BY TATE GUNNERSON / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE FLETCHER
Positioned on the San Andreas Fault just east of Monterey Bay is a 500-acre walnut tree ranch distinguished by dramatic forested hills, a bubbling creek and a smattering of old distressed barns and small cabins originally built for the ranch hands. Also nestled into that landscape is a more recent addition designed by architect Jonathan Feldman—a spacious modern home constructed of rammed earth, steel and concrete. “Our clients were excited about having a property that would be both a family retreat and a working ranch,” Feldman says, noting that the owners grow organic walnuts, olives and grapes along with raising cows and sheep. “We sited this house in a beautiful place where you can commune with nature and take in the views.”

Indeed, the house, which sits at the base of a prominent hill, has been designed with a spine of gently curving rammed-earth walls that hug the contours of the site. “It’s very subtle, but we feel like this places the building more delicately into the landscape,” explains Feldman, who, along with project manager Bridgett Shank, pulled apart the structure to create three primary courtyards framed by both the main living areas and ancillary spaces such as the lower-level bedrooms, a media room and a bunkroom. “The rooms that flank the courtyards get surrounded by light in multiple directions. They pull you outdoors while also bringing the landscape into the interiors.”

Integrating the architecture and landscape was a key goal of the design, and Feldman is quick to credit landscape designer Bernard Trairor for the seamless connection. “I thought I had the building figured out before he started, but Bernard tweaked it in some really dramatic ways that made it work twice as good,” Feldman explains. For example, Trairor suggested extending the 2-foot-thick earthen walls far beyond what the original design called for. “This landscape is especially large-scale, and we didn’t want people to feel overpowered by it,” explains Trairor, who also scaled up the pool walls in length and height. “Basically everything moved in unison. The house looks like it’s grabbing the earth.”

Building the walls, however, was its own exacting endeavor. To arrive at the precise look, Feldman requested samples of different mixtures in varying colors and textures. The project’s builder, David Stocker, worked with rammed-earth specialist Rick Green of Benchmark Development putting layers of rammed earth in glass jars to visualize the different appearances. After the design team and owners agreed upon a composition, Stocker and his crew built wall forms on-site, and Green executed the rammed earth. “Inside the forms, there were people ramming the earth with hand-held hydraulic pounders,” says Stocker. Their efforts resulted in organic stripes of dirt that look as if they might have been deposited over eons. “The walls are almost an art piece,” Feldman adds.
Trainor created a natural aesthetic by incorporating native trees and grasses around the house, which is nestled at the base of a hillside. Langhoff Masonry built the property’s exterior granite walls.
In addition to being drawn to the natural look of the rammed earth, the owners also felt strongly about sustainable construction and environmental stewardship. The structure implements these values as the earthen walls, together with strategically placed overhangs, help to passively heat and cool the house. The overhangs shade the windows and doors to keep the house cool in the summer, and “by allowing the light to come into the house in the winter, the walls start storing and radiating heat,” says Feldman, who also reduced the home’s energy usage by pulling the ceiling short of the walls on both sides, effectively creating continuous skylights. Slatted screens made of reclaimed wood—crafted by Stockey—over many of the windows also help to keep the house cool, and when used inside on parts of the ceiling, they disguise the sound insulation. “The slats on the ceiling gave us this really beautiful texture throughout the house,” Feldman explains. “The wood softens the hard surfaces and adds warmth.”

Although the height of the main living area is 22 feet, a catwalk that connects to the bedroom suites on the second floor tempers the effect and helps define the living and dining areas. “There are the tall dramatic spots and then more compressed spaces,” Feldman says of the layout. “The owners wanted big communal spaces for everybody to play games, listen to music and eat together.” In appointing those spaces, the architect turned to woodworker Ben Loeser to create a buffet for the
left: Thick rammed-earth walls, built by Stocker and Benchmark Development, curve along with the landscape and act as a central spine for the house. A hallway is marked by concrete floors.

opposite, top: A Bocci pendant hangs in the breakfast area, which offers floor-to-ceiling views of the verdant surroundings. A Twilight sleeper sofa from Design Within Reach sits in an upstairs bedroom.

opposite, bottom: The home features a TPO roof from Carlisle Synthetics. The reclaimed wood of the ceiling screens complements the organic striations of the rammed-earth walls.
dining area and bookshelves for the living room, which
the owners furnished with a comfortable low-slung leather
sectional that faces both the wood-burning fireplace and
the pastoral vistas outside the room’s sliding glass door.

“The home opens onto the landscape at many points,
which are essentially these extensions of the house,” says
Trainor, who devised seating and entertaining spaces off
the main rooms. “The accumulated effect of sympathetic
materials paired with design lends to the project having
a poetic and grounded California feeling.” To further
strengthen the relationship between the house and its
site, Trainor planted native grasses and trees around the
structure. “We brought the trees down off of the hillside,
so the house would appear to be more nested,” he explains.
Although it took 2 1/2 years to construct the house, the
result was well worth the wait for the owners. “The clients
are continually appreciating the house more and more,”
Feldman says. “Their vision was to revitalize this land both
as a business venture and as a family retreat, and I think
we accomplished that.”