



With rammed-earth walls and butterfly roofs that salute nearby foothills, a Napa Valley, California, house designed by Jim Cutler, of Cutler Anderson Architects, pays tribute to its bucolic landscape of vineyards, oak groves and meadows.

# CALIFORNIA WINE SPECTATOR

A Napa Valley house by Seattle-area architect Jim Cutler addresses its site with a vibrant language of rammed earth, wood and glass





# STRETCHING

**ALONG THE FOOTHILLS OF NAPA VALLEY WINE COUNTRY IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, THE VISTA AT METEOR VINEYARDS—A DIONYSIAN PLACE OF MOUNTAINS, GRAPES AND MEADOWS EMBOWERED WITH STATELY OAKS—HAS SPECTACLE IN ABUNDANCE.**

Architect Jim Cutler, of Cutler Anderson Architects on Washington's Bainbridge Island, believed the house he designed on the twenty-seven-acre site for a couple and their children should savor that bounty and distill the panorama into component parts. "I wanted to reveal the landscape and nature of this place," says the architect. "I don't tell myself to do anything else. It's what I do for a living."

The residents, who grow grapes used in their own wine, were looking for the right architect. "Napa is about agriculture," explains the husband. "It's managed to stave off what so many indistinguishable communities do—the same houses, the same stores. You can't tell where you are. We were looking for someone who was really an artist."

**above:** The main house, the pool house and the guest house (from left to right) look to Meteor Vineyards, where the residents harvest grapes for their own wine. Wood-framed glass panels flood the residence with sunlight. **opposite:** "I used rammed earth as a structural material," says Cutler. A terrace area off the main house is defined by a series of rammed-earth columns interrupted by cedar shingles and fir beams.





**left:** A B&B Italia sofa and a Flexform chair and ottoman are in the living room. Hinged glass doors open to a lawn shaded by oak trees.  
**below:** In the dining room, oak chairs from Casamilano are around an Antoine Proulx table with an aluminum top and black steel legs. A massive rammed-earth structure surrounds the fireplace and helps to section the area.



Cutler and his clients agreed on a framework of natural features that would embrace what the landscape had to offer: oak groves, small meadows and a flourishing vineyard. The architect designed an L-shaped plan of separate structures that anchor and relate to each of these elements. Rammed-earth walls and columns extending across bright and shady patches of the property define a string of butterfly-roofed pavilions—containing a studio, the main house, a pool house and a guest house—and thread through the oak groves and the cabernet grapes ripening in the sun.

The thirty-inch-thick walls combine contemporary technology and building techniques thousands of years old. Damp soil mixed with cement and sand was loaded into temporary steel-and-wood forms, pounded into place around steel I beams and compacted in layered eight-inch increments. Showing a smoky, marbled surface of undulating color, they became the

ramparts of the 12,316-square-foot house. “We were looking for something massive that would give a sense of solidity and be ‘of the place,’” says Cutler. “Constructing a building out of rammed earth for that environment was terrific, a great thing to do, given the scale of the project.” Contractors harvested soil, selected for its rich color range, from a quarry in nearby Nunn’s Canyon. “It was exactly the tan I wanted, exactly the dark grey I wanted,” Cutler says. The contractor was provided “veining” drawings to execute each serpentine layer in advance of construction, marking the intended thickness of each in chalk before adding and compacting the mixture. The walls and columns taper gently as they rise.

The two-story main house turns the corner of the L-shaped design, protecting a small meadow where the clients’ children play. The vertical rammed-earth surfaces are exposed on the inside of the house; placed adjacent to them are European steamed beech and Douglas fir

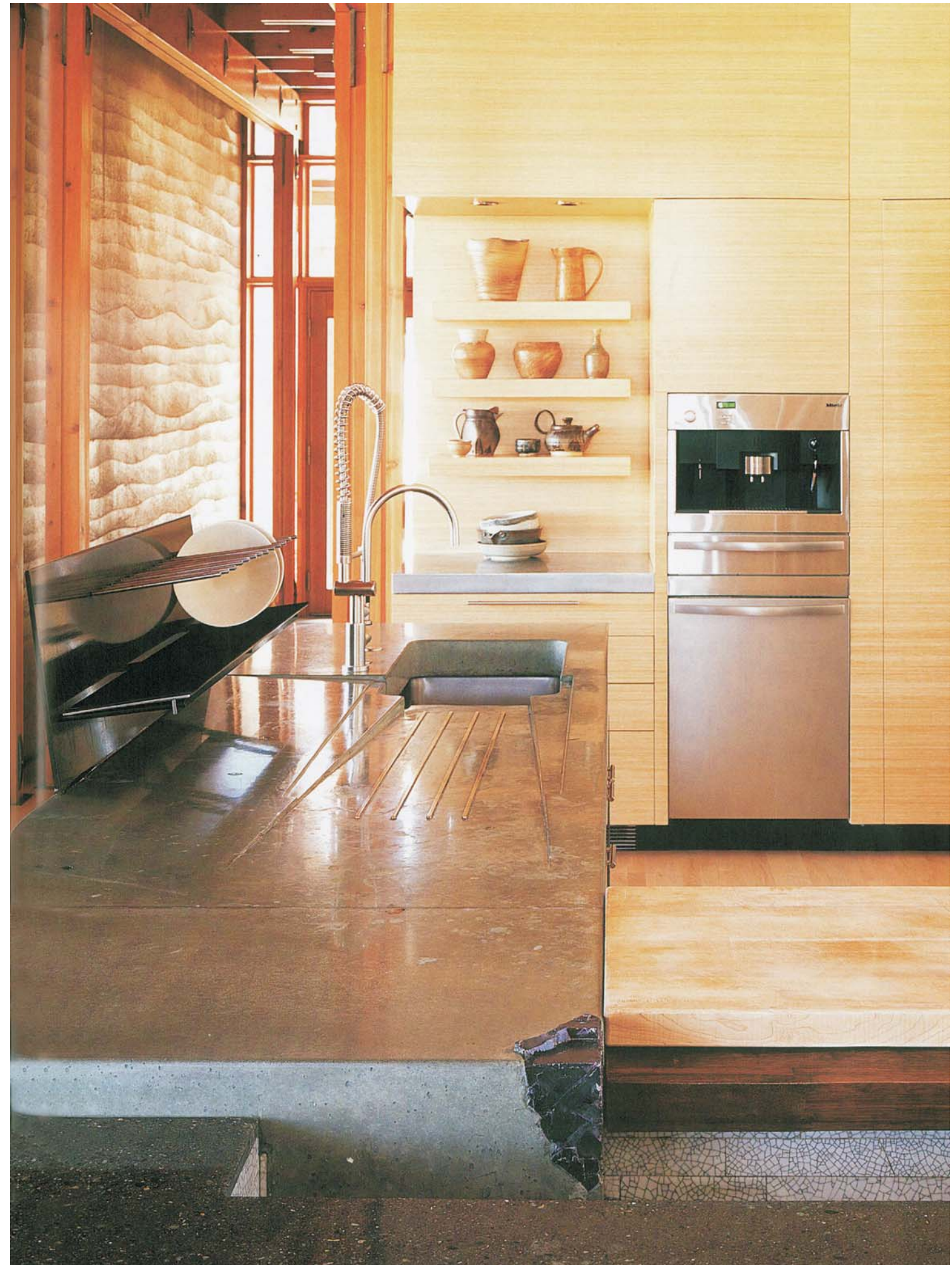


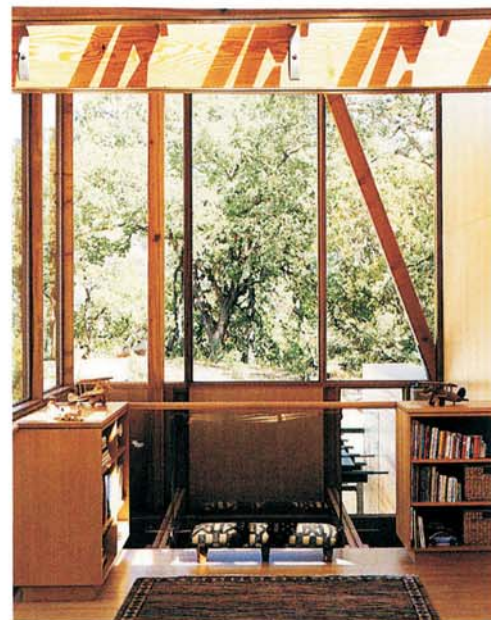
**above and opposite:** The open kitchen was designed by Fu-Tung Cheng, of Cheng Design, and is furnished with Gaggenau cooktops, Küppersbusch ovens, a Cheng Products Tidan hood and two Sub-Zero refrigerators. Decorative inlays in the Geocrete countertops emphasize a variety of textures and colors. **far left:** The family room and an informal dining area. **left:** A Flexform sofa in the family room.

elements, creating a radiant interior palette for the generous living-and-dining areas. “If you’re doing really elegant work, you try to limit the variety of things,” says Cutler. “Each one has its meaning. In this case, all of the wood structure is Douglas fir, and all of the finish is beech.”

On the ground floor of the house, the south end includes a formal dining room and living room, which is large and flexible. The west end encloses a family room and a dining and cooking area. At this heart of the home, designer Fu-Tung Cheng, of Cheng Design in Berkeley, California, devised a substantial open kitchen—including two Sub-Zero refrigerators, a microwave, Gaggenau cooktop units and two Küppersbusch electric ovens, all boxed in like a surround with three-eighth-inch-thick plate steel, and a Cheng Products Tidan ventilation hood—that supports the husband’s culinary skills. “My grandfather was a baker in Vienna,” he says. “I chalk it up to DNA.”

Geocrete countertops are weighty, task specific and highlighted with decorative inlays, which Cheng uses to create points of interest. At one corner a fist-size fluorite crystal breaks the surface, revealing translucent inclusions. Another corner features an amber urethane “bumper,” as Cheng calls it. “I wanted those surfaces to read as one large monolithic piece but





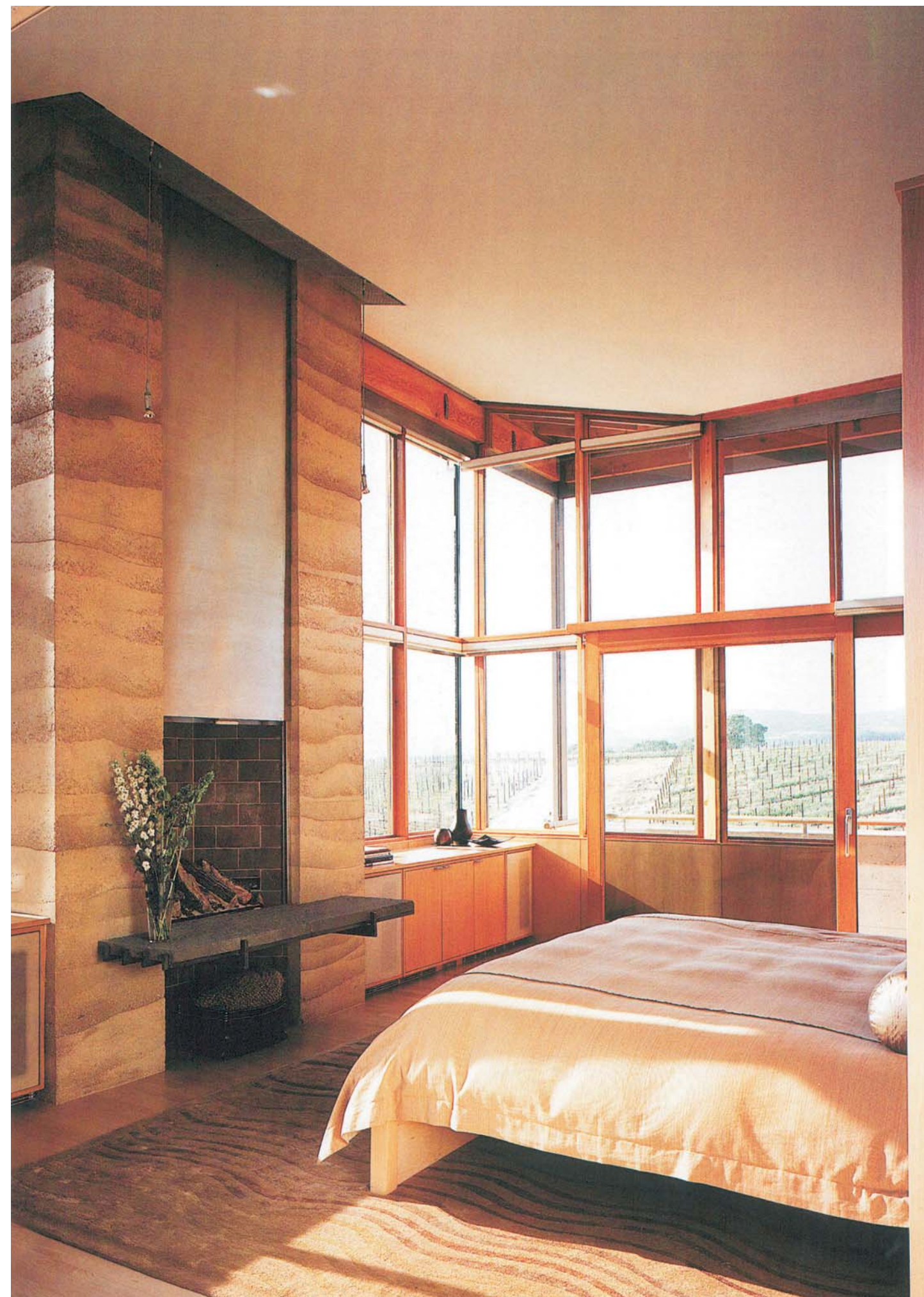
clockwise from above, far left: Wood beams and columns line a walkway that leads to the library. A Tufenkian rug in the children's play area. The master bath has a glass-enclosed shower. Light filters through Douglas fir rafters in an interior hallway. **opposite:** The master bedroom provides views of the vineyards. The fire surround is rammed earth and galvanized steel.

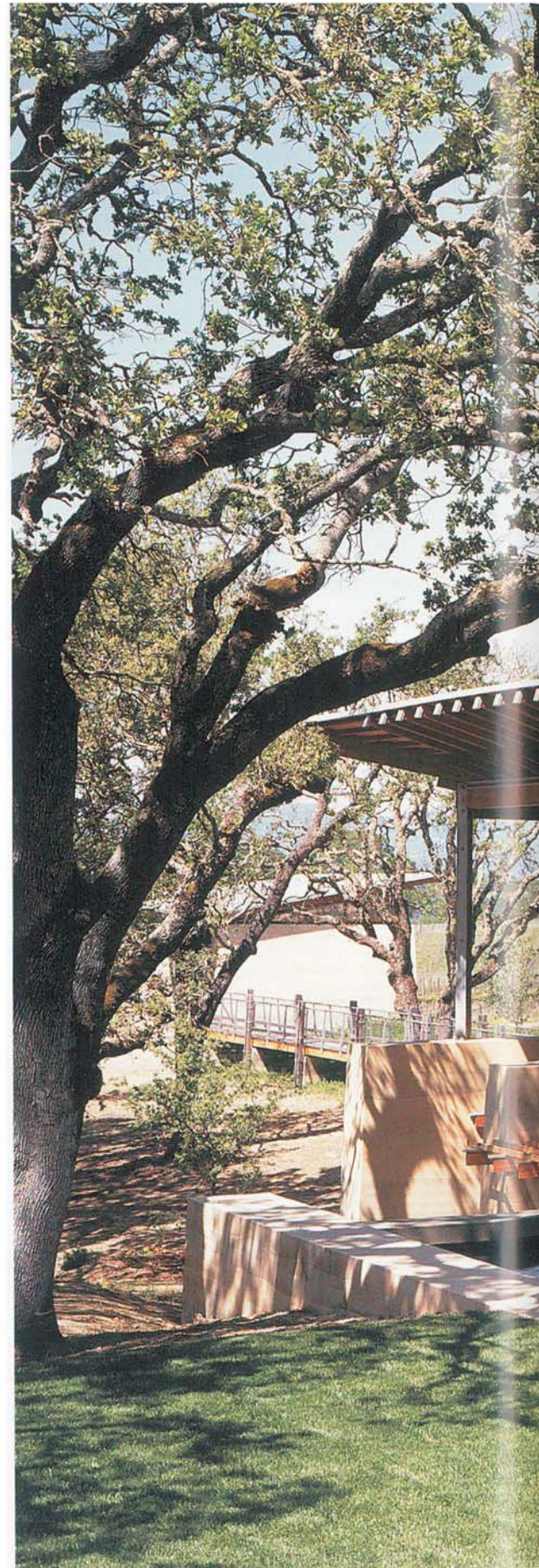
to be made of different materials." A quarter-inch reveal visually lifts the massive walls and counters, making them appear to hover above the wood floor.

The second floor includes private quarters with a commanding master suite that has a fireplace, built-in beech cabinetry and a sweeping view of the grounds.

The studio and guest house hold down the tendrils of the residence. A 124-foot trellised bluestone walkway extends south to the studio in an oak grove. There the husband can read or work at his potter's wheel. Past the pool house, Cutler elevated a 130-foot cedar boardwalk to the three-bedroom guest house. "You walk across this bridge where you're surrounded by vines that are knee-high," he says. "You're kind of in them and out of them at the same time, like you're a ten-foot-tall person. It's really cool. It's the same thing inside the guest building—you're in the vineyard."

"The house is large, and it takes time for it all to sink in," says the husband. "But if there's one part that really pulls it all together for us, it's the wine room in the main house. It's underground, with no windows and mostly rammed-earth walls—but it glows. And I think it summarizes the genius of what Jim did. He knocked it out of the ballpark." +





"You go out on that terrace, and you're in this oak forest," says Cutler. The metal butterfly roof of the pool house offsets its cedar-shingle siding. **opposite, from top:** Furniture from Crate & Barrel is on the bluestone pool terrace. A rammed-earth column bisects the exterior of the main house. A cedar walkway with cable rails guides visitors to the guest house.