

# SPACES

A photograph of a modern building at dusk. The building features a large, multi-story glass-enclosed staircase tower that is illuminated from within, showing a wooden interior and a staircase with glass railings. The building's facade is composed of light-colored, rectangular panels. The sky is a deep blue, and the overall atmosphere is one of architectural elegance and modern design.

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DESIGNING FOR CHANGING CLIMES

# PARALLEL UNIVERSE

A MODERN ST. HELENA HILLSIDE HOUSE DEFIES WINE COUNTRY AND DIGITAL STEREOTYPES AND YET FITS IN.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY CESAR RUBIO



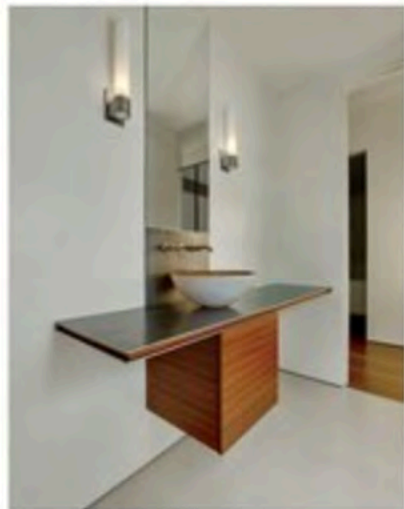
MIKE NEIL, A MICROSOFT EXECUTIVE living in Seattle, contacted San Francisco architect Jim Zack in part to prove how easy cloud computing — Neil's specialty — and the digital sphere make it for people to work together at a distance.

Hundreds of miles away, Zack was enlisted to visit a 15-acre St. Helena hillside lot Neil was interested in and vet it for a potential pied-à-terre for Neil and his wife, a Bay Area native who, like her husband, frequently works in Silicon Valley. The undeveloped property, although quite scrubby, had tempting enticements to build on its highest ridge and the architect soon devised some ideas to capitalize on its valley views.

"It was not a normal design process," Zack, of the firm Zack/de Vito Architecture + Construction, says. But Neil was an experienced client who had done extensive renovations in Seattle and knew how to read the digital drawings he received and then counter them with ideas of his own.

A wine country house by Zack/de Vito Architecture + Construction — conceived in the digital clouds, so to speak — is embedded in solid rock that is left exposed in the home's concrete back court. The naturalistic plantings are by landscape designer Randy Thorne. A lap pool abutting the house makes it seem like a houseboat.

Neil, an avid cook, asked for indoor/outdoor dining areas for family gatherings, so Zack designed several options: counter dining at the chef's table, formal dining at a custom table with a wood top sourced from Evan Shively; outdoor dining under a deep cantilevered overhang. Concrete floor tiles unify and cut into the spaces. Opposite Zack also designed custom features for the powder room and master bath.



The building's exposed steel structure is a design element that gets echoed throughout. A showy blackened steel and wood staircase on the south wall of the living room leads upstairs to two guest rooms and an informal open-plan area. There, custom steel furnishings selected by architect Lise de Vito, a principal in the firm (and Zack's wife), include Donald Judd-esque steel shelving and desks where the owners can both work from home.

Oddly, given what the owners do for a living, except for Nest cameras that monitor the exterior for fire danger, the home has few technological gadgets hardwired to connect them remotely to the building when they are away.

Zack is not surprised. "Mike and his wife plan to retire in this house and use it for a long time," he notes. "Like others in the tech world, they know that technology is the first thing that gets outdated." ■