

FROM THE LAND

*The Architecture of
Backen, Gillam & Kroeger*

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Foreword by Diane Keaton

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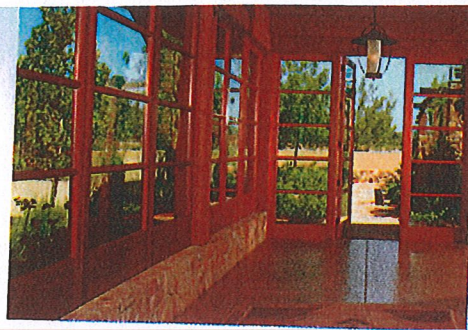


S O D A C A N Y O N R E S I D E N C E

The drive up Soda Canyon parallels the north-south line of Napa Valley's Silverado Trail, but the road is a few miles east and courses through rugged hill country. Here, deftly sited between an expanding vineyard and the edge of a long east-west running gorge is the weekend home of Nancy and Larry Probst. The Probsts lead a busy life in the Bay Area, where Larry is chairman of Electronic Arts, a leading global interactive entertainment software company, as well as the head of the U.S. Olympic Committee. They wanted a restful retreat that would take advantage of the views across the canyon and surrounding hills.

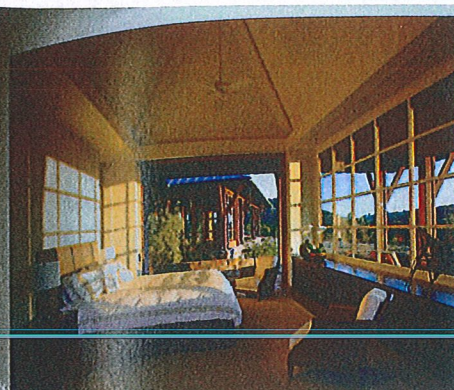
The Probsts found their architect by visiting some of his buildings. Nancy recalls: "We attended functions at the Constant Diamond and Harlan wineries, and we loved the scale, the style, the indoor/outdoor effect, and the overall feel of the homes. We visited the Napa Valley Wine Reserve at Meadowood and were drawn to that building as well. When I discovered that Howard was the architect of those three projects, I was sold."





Napa County codes allowed three structures for the Probst acreage—a house of any size, a 1,200-square-foot unit, and a 1,000-square-foot unit. The Probsts decided to start small and build the two latter structures, one as their main house and the other as a guest house. Backen used these two buildings to frame a dramatic pool terrace overlooking the canyon, part of an overall design that is about blurring boundaries between inside and outside, architecture and landscape.

The house complex is divided into three separate pavilions—the master suite, the kitchen–living space, and the two-story guest house—each under elegant “standing-seam metal hipped roofs that appear to float. Every major room is part of a much larger space—extending under the eaves—that becomes visible when the window walls, screens, or shutters slide away. The kitchen–living room, for example, where the Probsts spend most of their time, is at the intersection of three outdoor sitting areas—one faces east up the hill to a dining terrace, one south to the pool, another west toward the vines and distant mountain view. As a result, when all the sliders are open, the four rooms become one large lanai, as if the house has disappeared and only the floating roof and anchoring fireplaces—and hospitality—remain.



“We loved the scale, the style, the indoor/outdoor effect, and the overall feel of the homes,” —Nancy.

This series of flexible architectural layers is particularly ingenious and recalls similar devices in great Japanese landmarks like Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto, where structure and setting are extensions of each other. As at Katsura, when walls and screens are in the open position, the rooms not only expand but also become frames for nature. The master suite angles away from the rest of the compound for privacy and to take advantage of canyon views, the outdoor shower beside the master bath affords one of the best views of all. Sliding window walls in the guest rooms turn those spaces into nature-viewing venues as well.

