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Design Sparring

When brothers with different styles compete over architectural details, everybody wins.

BY EVA HAGBERG FISHER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW MILLMAN



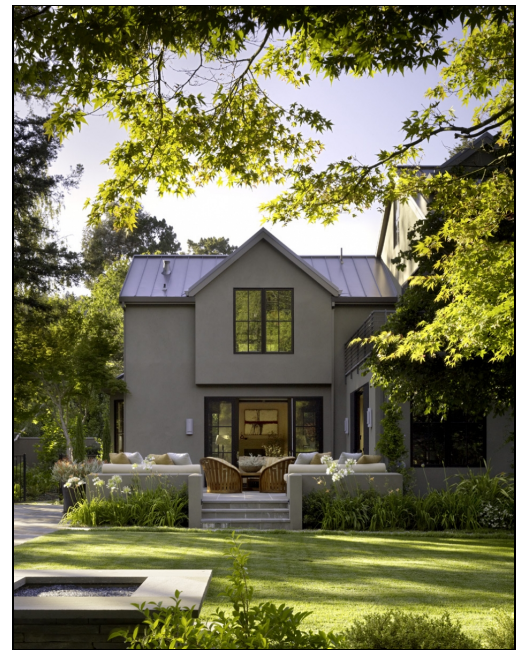
“MY PORCH IS BETTER THAN YOUR PORCH,” the owner of this Jared Polsky– and Paul Wiseman–designed Kentfield house says to his brother, every chance he gets.

The reason it’s worth arguing over? His brother’s got a Robert A.M. Stern–designed porch, something that in any context would be highly covetable. So there’s a little bit of laid-back California versus historically inflected East Coast competition going on. But this is more than a West vs. East architecture fight. It’s a testament to this porch, the owner’s favorite part of this house, finished seven years ago but still feeling as fresh and inviting as the day the family first walked on it.

“We wanted the house to be sophisticated but not fancy,” interior designer Paul Wiseman says. That description aptly reflects the West Coast design ethos, which comes through in the home’s bamboo kitchen — the first time the designer’s famed firm the Wiseman Group used bamboo as a kitchen product — as well as the cast-glass sink in the powder room (another technological advance, which Wiseman is now using in a Los Angeles project), along with the cantilevered shelf-like solid redwood buffet in the dining room and even the cast-concrete kitchen countertops made by Concrete Works in Berkeley.

It might seem from that list of materials that the look is rugged, more ’70s throwback Berkeley than the modernist chic currently in vogue in the Bay Area, but what Wiseman has done is use these surprising materials in a formal way, creating an unfussy, elegant style. “What we were looking to do was build a more contemporary house but with traditional references,” the owner says. “A softened contemporary house, with beautiful warm fabrics.”

It’s that mix of tradition and a soft touch that led the homeowners, who have been involved with the San Francisco Design Center for decades, to choose the San Francisco– based Wiseman Group, founded by





Wiseman 39 years ago and now with a team of 36 doing work “from Cambodia to Cape Town,” as Wiseman says by phone from his Dogpatch office. The company has its own in-house architecture firm, an unusual move in a world where architects and interior designers are often thrown together and asked to play nice. For this house, Wiseman was more than happy to collaborate with architect Polsky, as was senior designer (and former Wiseman firm member) Martin Young, the essential partner on the project, who now heads Martin Young Design.

A highlight of the home is the three-story chandelier that hangs from the center of the atrium, itself a sleekly outfitted mix of contemporary shapes and ecologically friendly materials (it was important to the clients that the house be designed and built as sustainably as possible, a goal their design business connections helped facilitate). Another is the new layout, particularly the third floor, which was transformed into an office and poolroom, and the lower level, where Wiseman expanded the kitchen and family room and incorporated them into one big area.

“I’ve been around design for 25 years and yet grew up in a very small, very [aesthetically] conservative house,” the owner says. So despite decades of acquaintance with the industry itself, the couple underwent a steep learning curve as actual consumers of design: “We didn’t have any personal experience.”

And how is it now, having learned so much? “We kind of take [the house] for granted,” the owner says. They’ve been living in their Wiseman-designed house for seven years, after all. Sometimes it’s the owner’s brother who’ll remind them how amazing their porch — and the rest of the house — is. And sometimes it’s just random visitors who, as the owner says, will “come into the house and say ‘Whoa!’” For now, West Coast wins.

