

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF DESIGN

JUNE 2007

## SPECIAL ISSUE: COUNTRY HOUSES



# A Thousand Acres

IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, A FOURTH-GENERATION FARMER  
BUILDS A THOUGHTFUL HOME THAT SPEAKS TO THE PAST



Architecture by David Morton and Kurt Melander, AIA/Interior Design by The Wiseman Group  
Text by Patricia Leigh Brown/Photography by Matthew Millman

**T**he Sacramento Delta is a world within the world of California, a place where land and water do an intricate dance. An inland sea engineered into an agricultural Eden by human toil, it remains a workingman's landscape, a backwater of Netherlands-like flatness crisscrossed by channels, drawbridges and levee roads. In the delta, scruffy bait-and-tackle shops and outboard-motor joints supplant Bay Area day spas, and time tends to feel like an eddy in the river.

A mutual attachment to their unsung native ground was the launching point for two unlikely childhood friends—Chiles Wilson, a fourth-generation delta pear farmer, and interior designer Paul Vincent Wiseman, of The Wiseman Group, doubtless the only member of the AD 100 to grow up on a pear farm driving a tractor. Over the years, the two ran for high school class offices together, hitchhiked across Asia together, shared a decorated-to-the-hilt college dorm room. But their most profound collaboration has been the vernacular farm complex that Wiseman, along with conceptual architect David Morton and principal architect Kurt Melander, designed for his beloved friend and his wife, Leslie, amid 100 acres of Bartletts and Boscs, some 120 years old. “Paul always said he wanted to build a house for me,” says the farmer. “I was nervous, because I wanted to get it right. I wanted to come up with a house worthy of his talents and this site.”

The pear, its blizzard of white blossoms a hallmark of spring, is the comely queen of the region's prodigious agricultural bounty. It is queen both figuratively and literally, with a Pear Fair Queen crowned in Courtland, Wiseman's hometown, at the Pear Fair each July. The pear orchards rise on alluvial soil fanning out from the river. But Wilson's reach extends far beyond the riverscape immortalized by the artist Wayne Thiebaud: His pears are shipped nationwide, as well as to Canada and Mexico.



A 1930s California agricultural labor camp inspired three simple white farm dwellings on Chiles and Leslie Wilson's pear orchard near Sacramento. OPPOSITE: The porch of the guest cottage has views of the main house. ABOVE: Chiles Wilson's childhood friend San Francisco-based Paul Vincent Wiseman decorated the interiors, choosing, for the living area, an ancient Chinese carved horse for the niche in the fire surround. An antique Indonesian barn door serves as a low table.



The site was chosen with the guidance of Morton, who was handpicked by Wiseman for his sensitivity to landscape. The architect divined the perfect spot, situated beside those sentinels of California rural civilization—a stately row of palms. On a clear day, the Sierra Nevada hovers in the distance. The back porch faces Mount Diablo, the topographic landmark upon which legions of skippers lost in a maze of levees depend. The mountain “looms over the Delta like Mt. Fuji in a Japanese painting,” writes Jane Wolff in her book, *Delta Primer*.

On the property were three red buildings from a 1930s camp for Chinese laborers, then the backbone of the delta workforce. Morton had in mind a contemporary version of that vernacular, constructed of corrugated steel, plaster and other humble materials. Four months into the design,

however, the architect was diagnosed with a terminal illness. As his health failed, he continued to work on the project. In his final hours, Morton sketched the residence's extraordinary ceiling on tracing paper—an origami-like sequence of folded planes designed to capture indirect light. The Wilsons have framed that fragile yellow piece of paper. “It was extremely emotional,” Wilson says. “Paul, David and Kurt had put so much energy into the project.”

Melander, the young architect Morton brought into the project, took over, bearing in mind his mentor's words. “He said, ‘Kurt, don't make this an homage to me,’” Melander remembers. “If the residence is going to be alive, you have to bring your ideas into it and let the house grow organically.”

And that is exactly what Melander did. Consisting of a main house, a guesthouse

and a chic live-in barn for the eldest of Wilson's four children, the residence is notable for its restraint, befitting a landscape where a sense of style and muddy boots must coexist. Plaster walls are cool and practical, the radiant-heated concrete floors allowed to develop natural cracks. The open redwood kitchen aligns with the angled ceiling. “Leslie, an accountant, was concerned about making the house work for four kids and the farm. Chiles was more conceptual, asking, ‘Where will the breeze come from?’” Meander recalls. “Both contributions were incredibly important.”

Wiseman was after simplicity, designing a teak table for the dining area and adorning it with church candelabra he admired for their “clean lines, drama and rusticity.” The furniture is mostly linen, a nod to life in the floodplain (“The levees do break, so you never know,” he says).



“The design is all about practicality—linen fabrics, concrete floors, teak furniture that can take anything,” Wiseman says. ABOVE: The late architect David Morton, who conceived the house, designed the living area's dynamic, geometric ceiling to accentuate natural light; Kurt Melander completed the project. Rogers & Goffigon fabric on chairs, sofa and kidney pillows. Stark rug.

OPPOSITE: A pair of 1950s church candelabra on the dining table “are the key to the whole aesthetic of the house,” says Wiseman, who found them long before the residence was built. “They have a strong angularity, and for me, that's what the house is all about.” The painting of the orchard is by Ning Hou. Janus et Cie dining chairs, with Glant cushion fabric.

"The house will age very well," says Wiseman. "The concrete floors were designed without expansion joints to encourage random cracking for texture." OPPOSITE ABOVE: "In the cool winter days and summer nights one can warm oneself by the exterior fireplace of the guesthouse," Wiseman says. OPPOSITE BELOW AND THIS IMAGE: The rear porch of the main house is used as an outdoor dining area. Perennials cushion fabrics.

