



SETTING THE STAGE FOR DISCOVERY

Scott Lee, Principle, SB Architects, Discusses The Design Of Calistoga Ranch

What was your overall vision for the design of Calistoga Ranch?

The original vision sprang not from the question, “What should we put here?” but from our response to the questions, “What does the guest want?” and “What does this place want to be?” The design was entirely a response to the concurrent needs of resort guests, the developer, the operator and the site itself.

Our charge was to create a private retreat, a sanctuary celebrating what Napa Valley is all about: food, wine and Nature. In Wine Country, the bulk of the living is really done out of doors. We wanted to blur the line between what’s inside and outside, inviting guests to participate in that tradition of outdoor living.

If there were one phrase that describes the vision for the property, it would be “site-sensitive.” Our goal was to disturb the site as little as possible by literally building around trees and contours to make every undulation of the land and bend of the trees a part of the design. Set upon pilings, rather than traditional slab or perimeter foundations, the structures literally float above the landscape, often connected by raising decks and bridges.

How greatly did Calistoga Ranch’s natural setting influence your architectural concept for the property?

The primary defining feature of the design is the intimate connection between indoor and outdoor spaces, offering a direct experience of the natural surroundings. The design for Calistoga Ranch doesn’t emulate any existing architectural style, but is an entirely unique response to its surroundings. The design is intimate, casual yet sophisticated, and offers a continual sense of discovery. The resort doesn’t reveal itself right away.

Every guest lodge is its own structure, with no common walls, giving the design a very residential scale and feel. We created a hierarchy of spaces within each guest lodge, using the indoor/outdoor spaces to greatly expand the living space. Thirty percent of the usable space within each guest lodge and residence comprises of an outdoor living area.

We designed and individually placed each of the more than 200 structures on the site, not only to avoid cutting down the 100-year-old heritage oak trees, but also to integrate them into the design itself, using the trees to provide shade and drama that might otherwise have been accomplished with built elements. This fits with our vision of a resort that is one with its natural surroundings and allows Nature itself to be the resort’s primary amenity.

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What was your interpretation of the campground legacy of the original land, and how did you incorporate that into architectural design of the Ranch?

We interpreted the campground legacy through both the placement and design of the guest lodges and residences. As with camping, where campers seek out prime spots near lakes, streams, under trees and in clearings to set up camp, the guest lodges are carefully placed in these key areas around the property. They are not placed in a pre-determined grid or site design, but in a way that takes advantage of these key natural elements, just as if we had “set up camp.”

Each guest lodge or residence is its own “camp,” made up of a cluster of spaces centering on the outdoor living space and fireplace, just as in a campsite. Elements such as outdoor showers and fireplaces augment the reference to the campground legacy.

We also took care to select natural materials that reflect the surroundings and will patina naturally over time, such as cedar shingles (chosen for their mottled appearance), copper trim, moss-covered rocks and local fieldstone (which ties the design in to the Napa Valley). These materials are punctuated by modern elements, such as black steel doors and stainless steel airline cable deck railings, which lend a sense of sophistication to the design.

What were some of the challenges posed by the site?

The important heritage oaks throughout the property, the density of these trees, and the steep slopes posed the greatest challenges to this site. We looked at the site both horizontally as well as vertically. Trees don’t just grow straight up; so the areas we actually needed to work around were larger than they might have seemed. It was important to the overall design vision to not only preserve those trees, slopes, rocks and stream, but to also make them an exciting part of the design itself.

We also faced the challenge of delivering as much as we could to the guest within the limited square footage available for construction, making the guest spaces the priority, yet providing for the level of service expected at five-star resort.

How has your experience designing other resorts helped you during the design process for Calistoga Ranch?

While every project has a series of challenges that are unique to their setting, most successful resorts share a common thread in that they are in locations that are exceptionally beautiful, environmentally sensitive and important to both the community and developer alike.

Our work on challenging sites around the world provided us with practical understanding of how to successfully create designs that not only respect, but also work hand-in-hand with the sites themselves, to provide an exceptional experience for resort guests.