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NATURAL



SELECTION

A home in Northern California marries high design and sustainability with the goal of inspiring a green living movement

BY ANYA GEORGIJEVIC
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BLAKE MARVIN

It's fitting that Tah.Mah.Lah, a sustainably-built home located in the small town of Portola Valley, California, takes its name from the Native American Ohlone word for mountain lion: perched on a gentle sloping hill, the elegant, solar-powered home isn't just camouflaged by its green surroundings, but blends in as though a part of the living landscape. Like a creature with a heartbeat, the net-zero, wood-clad house lives and breathes the environment, regenerating the energy it consumes.





“When Paul and Linda first came to me, they said, ‘We don’t really want a house. We want to live in a tent.’”

The 2.7-acre land on which the lion sits was the childhood home of Linda Yates, who, with husband Paul Holland and their three young daughters, decided to move back to the property after they outgrew their San Francisco townhouse. The couple felt the need to be more connected to nature. “We’ve always been passionate about environmental causes,” says Holland. “We wanted to take our family out of the oil-based economy, so there are no oil-based products associated with the house: there is no natural gas, no plastic, no PVC. Everything is powered by renewable energy sources, either solar or ground-source heat exchange.” The couple approached their friend, architect Bob Glazier, then of the firm HKS Hill Glazier, to create the ultimate sustainable family home. Intrigued by the challenge, the architect suggested the couple write a sort of a thesis for the house; the couple wrote a 28-page manifesto. “We outlined the main themes, which included global sensibility, outside and in, environmentally regenerative, multigenerational and others things like that,” says Holland.

“When Paul and Linda first came to me, they said, ‘We don’t really want a house, we want to live in a tent,’” remembers Glazier, who consulted with fellow architect Ann Edminster, one of the leading experts in green building design. Glazier took inspiration from William Wurster’s 1926 Gregory farmhouse near Santa Cruz, an early Californian ranch-style home prototype. “It’s a simple house with very modest materials, and a very simple approach to the architecture,” says Glazier. With that sense of modesty in mind, Glazier came up with the concept of a cluster of five barn-like, single-storey structures. The scheme was selected to maximize the natural light coming into the home, and to optimize the roof surface angles for photovoltaic panels that convert sunlight into electricity. “We angled the building’s roof so that the solar panels would sit flat—not to hide [them], but to make them look like they are integrated into the house.” The design not only allows for the 5,600-square-foot home to be entirely powered by solar energy, but also offers power to spare, which is then put back into the electricity grid.

When it came to selecting the building materials, the family was just as vigilant about sticking to their green ethos. The pitched roof structures were built with exposed crisscrossing Douglas fir truss beams, resulting in airy, lofty spaces. The exterior was clad with western cedar wood and the roof with recycled steel. Glazier teamed up with interior architect/designer Michael Booth of San Francisco-based BAMO to select the most sustainable internal treatments for the home, resulting in recycled oak wood floors, hand-troweled plaster finishes, and recycled limestone, which takes its most magnificent form in the couple’s en-suite circular shower with a glass roof. Booth’s team at BAMO scoured antique and vintage shops for quality furniture, giving the old classics a second chance. A few new pieces came from Antwerp-based designer Axel Vervoordt, who works with sustainably harvested wood, wool, and cotton.





The most challenging room to finish proved to be the grand 90-foot-long living room, which was Glazier's answer to Holland and Yates' original wish. Very much the heart of the home, the tent-like structure bridges all the other buildings, and features two glass sides opening up to the swimming pool on the east side and hills on the west. For the same space, the BAMO team designed a 12-foot custom sofa, ideal for a family gathering. Holland's favourite space, however, is the library, designed with Dutch sensibilities in mind—a nod to time spent in Europe. "We used to live in Amsterdam and there was an expression: *gezellig*. It doesn't translate directly into English but it means comfy, cozy, warm, and welcoming, which is very important in Dutch culture and environment."

The love of nature spills beyond the home's walls. Aside from the home's architectural beauty and LEED Platinum-certified features, the Living Willow sculptures by Patrick Dougherty are big visitor draws. The sculptor and his local assistants lived on the property during the creation of the intricately woven structures, which the couple's young daughters nicknamed the "fairy houses." These fairy-tale huts marry the traditional and the contemporary methods of green building, under the one roof of the Tah.Mah.Lah's ecosystem.

The chlorine-free pool uses filtered rainwater and recycled wastewater feeds the family's gardens. Holland and Yates cultivate organic fruits and vegetables all year long, from pears and nectarines to kale and broccoli. The orchard's fence protects it from curious visitors. "We keep camera traps out and we've captured packs of coyotes, bobcats, lots and lots of deer, and raccoons," says Holland. Sadly, no mountain lions have been spotted yet. "We assumed mountain lions would come through because we are just off of a creek that mountain lions are known to use." While they hope the home's namesake will make an eventual appearance, the family is busy welcoming hundreds of guests a year to the property. The couple hosts students, architects, and other green building enthusiasts as often as twice a week. "[When] you make a commitment to something like that, you know it's [an unspoken] design rule that the house be used for education." ♦



THROWING SHADE

Window blinds are now smarter than you are

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