



If you watched "Sideways," the 2004 movie with Paul Giamotti and Thomas Haden Church, you've seen the Santa Ynez Valley in its tawdry close-up. The winery road trip had plenty of quotable moments—"If anyone orders merlot, I'm leaving. I am not drinking any fucking merlot!"—and caused sales of that varietal to plummet while anointing pinot noir the next "it" wine. The film has spawned "Sideways" wine clubs, and movie location and winery tours—the "Twilight" phenomenon of its time, albeit for a boozier, older audience.

Near the towns of Solvang (Giamotti and Haden Church terrorized a golf foursome there) and

text Michelle Gringeri-Brown
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An Architect's Riff on a Custom Ranch

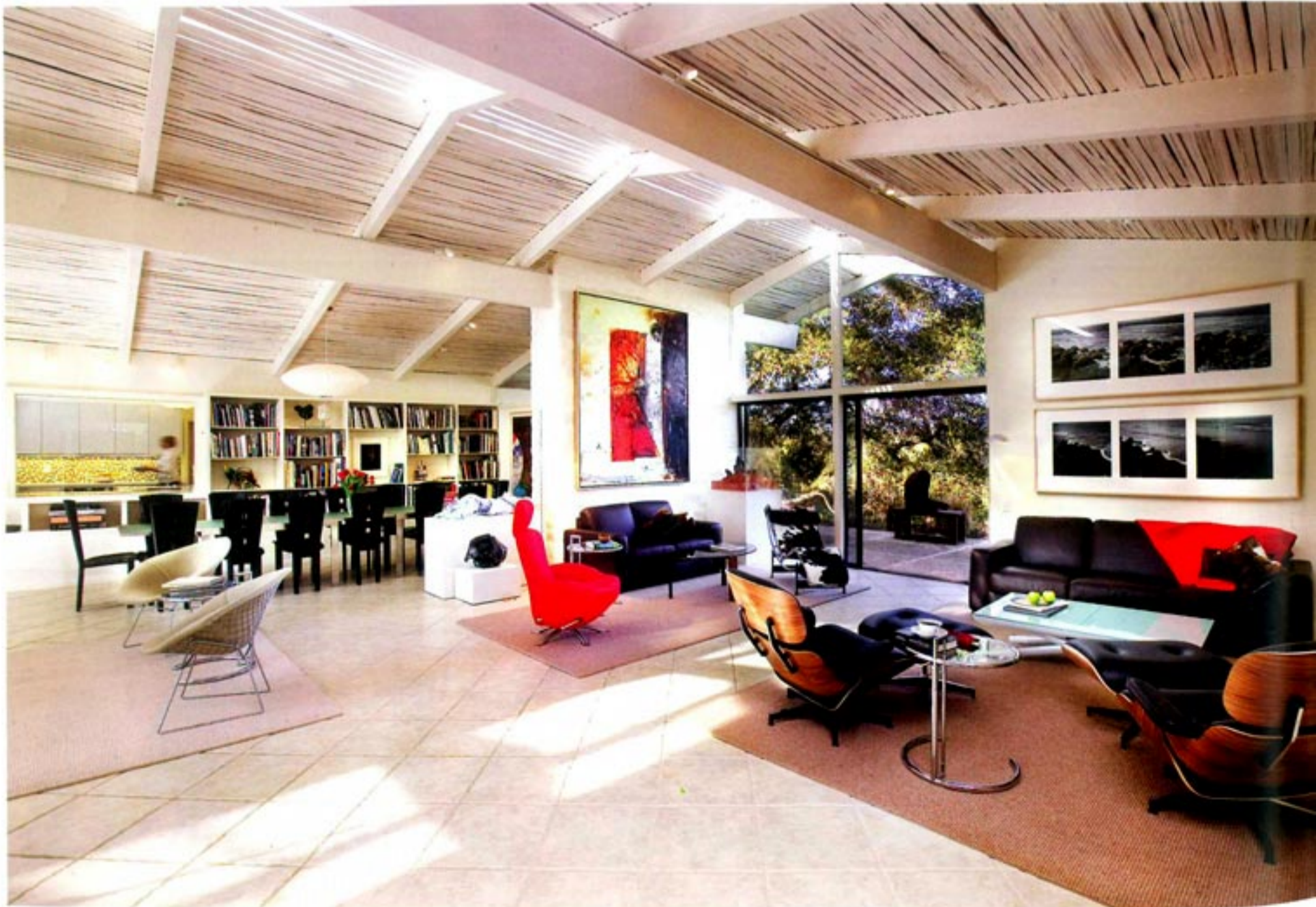
Midcentury Roots:

Before



Buellton (home to the Hitching Post restaurant where Giamotti's love interest, Virginia Madsen, waitressed) is a far classier area, Alisal Ranch. Historically a working ranch and now a luxurious 10,000-acre dude resort, its hills are dotted with live oak and sycamore, and horses and cattle still graze there. Some 40 years ago, a development of 60 homes went up, mostly builder houses, but one, an expansive Cliff May dating from 1968, was built for the owner of Pea Soup Andersen's, a nearby kitschy restaurant and tourist destination.

The fourth owner of the 4,600-square-foot home, Santa Barbara architect Barry Berkus, found it structurally intact but in need of some TLC. Although he'd built or remodeled five or six personal residences in his nearly 50-year career, Berkus wasn't put off that May was a designer and not a licensed architect. The classic single-





The kitchen now has a pass-through to the dining room, which has a table that seats 14 or more. "The house lives very well for two people: the room at the center functions with different seating arrangements that are fairly intimate within the larger room," homeowner Barry Berkus comments. "The volume's not too tall; it's correctly proportioned—May was good at that."

Photography by Jim Bartsch

"The structure is very evident and the glazing tucks itself behind that, almost like a high rise," the architect/owner says. While the home has double glazing in a few areas, he didn't consider changing out all of the windows. "That would have been a tremendous effort. The house does adapt to the cycles of energy in the valley by air movement, shading and the filtering of light. The most important thing to me is the indoor-outdoor relationship of the great room to the pool. You can sit in the Knoll chairs and look at the mountains and the deer on the lawn. It's such a tranquil place that you know you're in another world."

Photography by Jim Bartsch

“As an architect, **it’s fun**
exploring other people’s work
—trying to understand
why they created what they did.”





level home resonated fully with his own early training.

"At USC [School of Architecture] I studied with Buff, Straub and Hensman, who were post-and-beam architects," Berkus says, "and we had Bruce Goff and Frank Lloyd Wright come to talk to us. It was a period of time that was great for anybody who had modern bones."

"My practice started by taking a brown bag lunch and sitting and talking to Cliff May and John Lautner on their construction sites. We were hands-on because we were in the field when the Case Study houses were being built by Pierre Koenig and John Entenza, and all that."

Although Berkus' two firms—B3 Architects and Berkus Design Studio—are responsible for more than 600,000 residences as well as resorts, land planning and commercial and institutional work—and plenty of them are of *Architectural Digest* scale—he says his interests are still down to earth and sustainability is important to him.

"I liked the idea of a ranch—the fact Cliff May was able to evolve the ranch house into something that was relatively contemporary, but still had the character of ranch houses that surrounded courtyards and engulfed landscapes. They gave you the ability to move from inside to outside with ease.

"Early in my career I wanted to make a house more than shelter," he explains. "I was interested in giving people

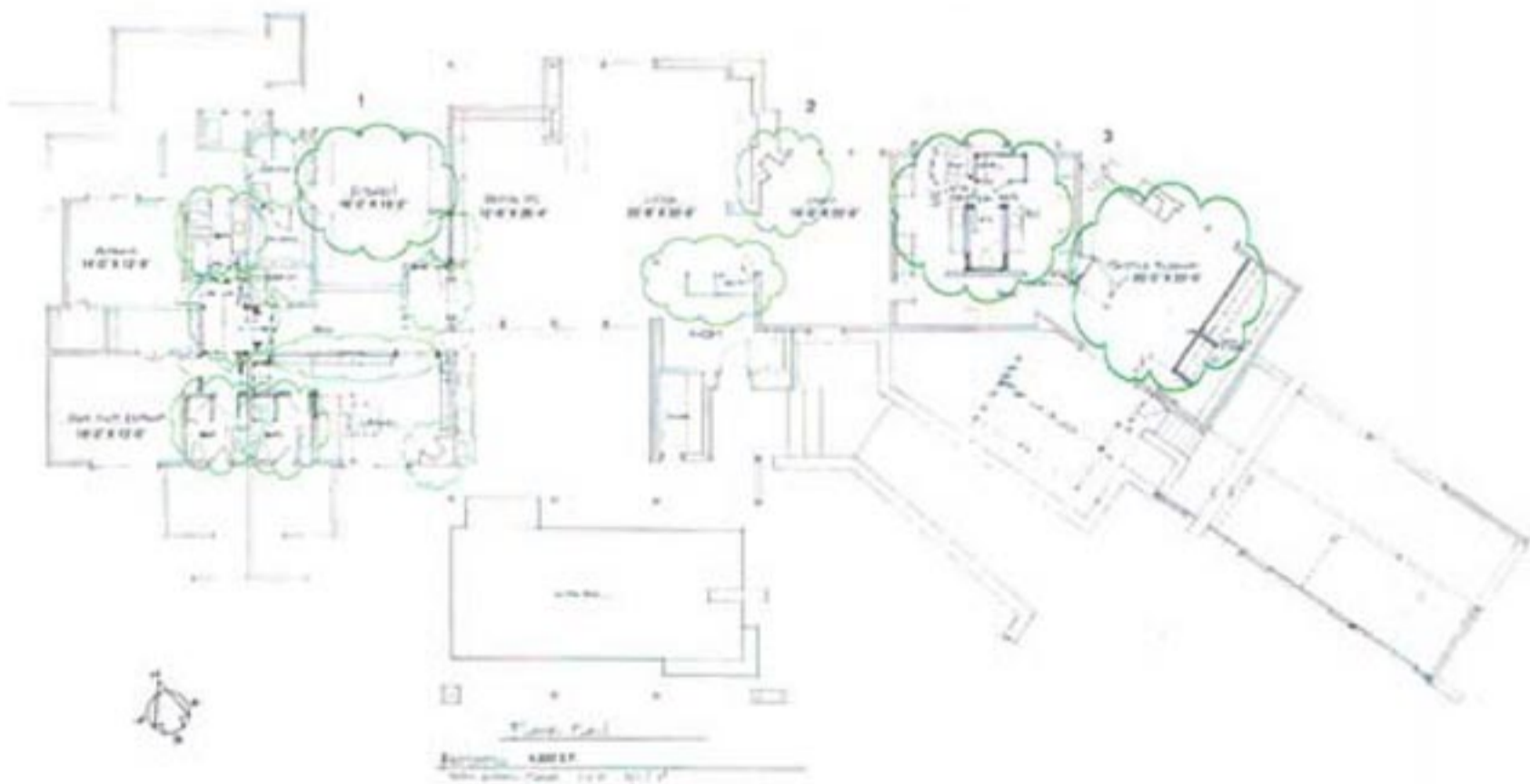
The renovation involved rebuilding the roof for a higher R-rating so the homeowners use less radiant heating. Now, the roof sandwich consists of grape stakes, hardboard, soft insulation, plywood, rigid insulation, another layer of plywood, then shingles. "The main idea that the house opens to the gardens and is essentially a transparent form of living in the garden is the most important thing to me," Berkus says. "If you have an older house like this, you have to accept that you're going to have more convection, you're going to live colder or warmer because it's single glazed."

Photographs by Jim Bertsch (above)

Before



Tile was a real challenge on this job: ceramic floor tile ran throughout the house, and although it wasn't original and was in some disrepair, it would have greatly expanded the scope of the remodel to replace it. The crew salvaged tiles from areas where it would be covered by new structures to patch other portions. "We spent hours per individual tile, so as not to break one, and handled them as if they were gold," explains general contractor Randy Barnes. "We patched every spot needed, and had two tiles left over." The glass, mosaic and custom tiles used on the kitchen backsplash, fireplace surround and in the baths were all different thicknesses, but needed to be flush with the surrounding walls. "Every tile material change had a different thickness of mortar behind it and all were hand done by Conception Tile," Barnes recounts. "We had to figure the transitions out down to each grout joint—all at 1,000 m.p.h. because of the tight schedule."



space that was sculptured in a way that would bring forward excitement and dignity from living in something more than just a box. I spent a lot of time on that, then moved on to modules and improving the efficiency of how we build things. I did a lot of research on anything that had been built in a factory since the turn of the [20th] century. We did early modular work under Richard Nixon and George Romney, the first Smart House and a show house for the copper industry with 12 different active and passive systems."

For his own Solvang residence, he focused on stripping away some of the later, stylistic changes and addressing modifications that had compromised the structural integrity. Plumbing, wiring, lighting, deferred maintenance and refining how the house functioned were all part of the project.

"The house needed to be revisited: the baths opened directly to the bedrooms without any doors, and the doorways were two feet wide, so it wasn't accessible for anyone in an ADA situation," says Berkus, who advocates for

life-cycle design. "We left the baths intact except for adding interesting tile patterns to bring in more color." Openings between rooms were widened and doors added, while in the generous master bathroom they replaced a sunken Roman bathtub with a Japanese soaking tub and a glass-enclosed shower. The existing cabinetry was retained, as throughout the house they tried to reuse as many elements as possible.

"The kitchen had a breakfast nook, a small island and a lot of patterned tile that I think was probably not something May would have loved, but was likely the owner's choice," Berkus explains. "The kitchen lacked a visual connection with the great elements of the house—the overhangs and shelter over the pool, and the views across to the fireplace. We opened one section of wall between the dining room and kitchen, using rough-sawn timber jambs and headers [like the originals]. I really tried to stand in his shoes and ask what May would do today."

The slab's radiant heating system was tuned up and



Before



Hallways are treated as gallery space, like this area leading to the master bedroom, seen in the before shot as well.



Drafting space, flat files and video conferencing allow Berkus to work remotely with his Santa Barbara offices. Two red Verner Panton Cone chairs and artwork by other renowned architects tie it to the rest of the open floor plan.

recharged: the master bath was repiped, a new boiler installed and a coating applied within the original copper water lines so any pitted areas would be filled. The former 16' x 20' music room between the master bedroom and the living room became an architect's studio, complete with T-1 lines to allow video conferencing.

In what must have been a tedious undertaking, the distinctive ceilings and outdoor overhangs were repaired and repainted. "May filtered the skylights in this house with grape stakes, almost like a lattice," Berkus says. "It's phenomenally important because of the heat gain; by doing this, he was able to [handle] the light so there's not a direct movement of sun through the center of the house and there's not a lot of super heating. You can have temperatures over 100° part of the year, but he oriented the house so you have northerly ocean winds that come through the canyons about noon every day. [It isn't air conditioned but] you can open the glazing on the north and south and move air through the house."

When asked if Cliff May's custom houses or his tracts of smaller modern homes were his greatest strength, Berkus replies, "I hope somebody asks that question about me

some time in the future. Both were very important to him. He was able to express himself in the larger houses like Mondavi, the ones in Switzerland and Australia and such, but I think he also got great enjoyment bringing to the people design and a house that was more than just shelter. Eichler did the same thing. They made people focus on the idea that architecture was important to live with."

Gregory Christman is an architect and architectural photographer who writes that the insight gained by designing three dimensional environments gives him a unique vision into what makes a two dimensional image capture the essence of a building. This article also included photography by Jim Bartsch, whose work has appeared in Architectural Digest, Elle Décor, Town and Country and numerous other magazines.

Before images courtesy Barry Berkus; resources page 87

To learn more about May and the Berkus home, we recommend Cliff May and the Modern Ranch House; see page 25 or atomic-ranch.com.