

THINKING BIG

TEXT **JORGE S. ARANGO** PHOTOGRAPHY **CESAR RUBIO** AND **DAVID WAKELY** INTERIOR DESIGN **DUNAGAN DIVERIO DESIGN GROUP** LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE **ARTERRA LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS** ARCHITECTURE **THE WEBER STUDIO** AND **SIGNUM ARCHITECTURE**

The Glass Fire that raced through Napa Valley last year came to a scorching halt at the 20-foot retaining wall under a private terrace and sculpture garden.

The Glass Fire had come dangerously close to a section of the 44-acre property where a philanthropist had built a modernized Italian villa. It's hard not to believe that Mist, an enormous wire head by sculptor Jaime Plensa, stared the flames down and forbade their entry.

The 20,000-square-foot scale of the residence was a rare undertaking for all involved, including two architects – Key Biscayne-based The Weber Studio and Signum Architecture in St. Helena – interior designers Charlotte Dunagan and Thomas Diverio of Dunagan Diverio Design Group in Miami, and Gretchen Whittier of San Francisco-based Arterra Landscape Architects.

Dunagan and Diverio had worked with Weber on other homes for the client, who bought this parcel and the dour Mediterranean-style house there as a getaway for his extended family. “It had a lot of small dark rooms,” recalls Diverio. “Most,” adds Dunagan, “had a fireplace dead center with windows on either side. The first thing we noticed was that you couldn't see the view from most rooms.” Referring to Weber, she explains, “Tom knows how this family lives, so he was responsible for the space planning.”

Weber devised the original schematics with his client. “His understanding of flow and process is just like sitting with another architect,” Weber declares. “The question was ‘How contemporary do you take it so it still looks like an Italian villa and of the place?’” He brought on Jarrod Denton, partner at Signum because, he adds, “I didn't want a team that was just going to draft. They added their take from their knowledge of being out there. They really changed the character of everything.”



Wispy pepper trees offer a counterpoint to Ai Weiwei's Tree 2020 in the reflecting pool. Behind, the glass-enclosed two-level bridge floats above the ground.

Denton traveled to the Veneto region of Italy at about that time and became transfixed by the Brion Cemetery, designed by Carlo Scarpa (who is buried there). “There was a reflecting water element, and the work in concrete was impressive,” he recalls. “The geometric forms and the authenticity of materials were beautiful.” In Verona, he was struck by Scarpa’s restoration of the Castelvecchio Museum, particularly his then-controversial use of steel.

“One big theme became the use of steel, wood and stone,” observes Diverio, “which are used differently in each room.” After passing through an open-air arcade of locally quarried aggregate Syar stone, one enters an enormous glass-box foyer. The stone structure forms one wall in the vaulted, timber-ceilinged space. A steel stair with cantilevered wood treads ascends against the glass wall overlooking a reflecting pool.

Denton also took a cue from old farmhouses. “You had one part of the house for the family, and then a portal to a structure for animals,” he explains. Here, glass boxes define the transitional portals between Mediterranean villa-like stone or stucco structures serving public and private functions. The most impressive of these is a two-level bridge enclosed in glass that connects a stucco-walled structure and a large stone turret housing a magnificent spiral staircase. It floats about 12 feet off the ground, overlooking the back pool and terraces.

“The owner is a major art collector,” shares Dunagan. “We worked closely with the landscape architect and the owner to place these works on the grounds and inside.” Whittier recalls that, “When I interviewed the client, he said he had a ‘fake tree’ he needed to place. I laughed, thinking he meant he had a plastic palm tree, and was game to figure out how to make that work.” That faux tree turned out to be an enormous work by Ai Weiwei, which today stands off-center in the reflecting pool at the center of the U-shaped residence.

Dunagan Diverio Design Group chose a soothing neutral palette for the living room. The art on the right side of the doorway is Instant Gratification by Michel François; the medium is melted metals. The art on the left side is Unwound Rope Wall Piece by Lucy Dodd; the medium is woven rope and wood. The leather chair and foot roll were purchased from a local gallery. They are Italian leather with brass embellishments, Palmwood arms and front legs, with hammered Egyptian bronze at the arm caps. The table is an English Stone tabletop with a custom metal base. The sofas were purchased at Restoration Hardware.





“The main design intent was creating a landscape where the owner could hold parties for 300 to 350 people, but also feel intimate,” says Whittier. So, she divided the property into interconnected outdoor rooms separated by “Syar stone walls that are seat height so people can gather around the edges of the landscape.”

“The client likes a lot of antiques and Old-World things,” observes Diverio. He and Dunagan raided Randall Tysinger’s gargantuan antiques warehouse in High Point, North Carolina to fulfill that component of the interior design program. But they mixed it with contemporary and custom pieces, such as a dining table made of a vertically split tree trunk suspended under a glass top on blackened steel supports.

“Most of my work is contemporary,” reflects Denton. “When I go back to this style, I think it has to be done in an authentic way, from the roof tile and proportion of the eaves to the materials.” This impressive manse certainly says “Italian villa” thanks to these elements. But the extensive use of glass brings the home into the 21st century.



▲ The living room opens to a terrace with Nano walls. A sculpture by Ursula von Rydingsvard is at left. ◀ The husband’s metal Japanese-style soaking tub in the primary suite bath. ▶ Sleek cabinets and the “industrial flair of I-beams” in the kitchen, suggests Charlotte Dunagan, contemporize the space. She and Diverio added metal banding around an antique table to enlarge it.





Shao Fan's ink-on-paper "Rabbit Portrait" in an upper hallway that leads to the bridge (visible to right).



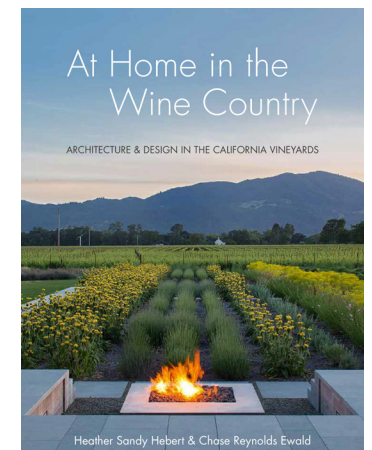
The sculpture on the second-floor bridge, *Trapped in the Dream of the Other* by artist Jeffrey Gibson, connects the primary suite to the fitness center. Signum Architecture partner, Jarrod Denton, took a cue from old farmhouses. "You had one part of the house for the family, and then a portal to a structure for animals."



▲ The owner had the face of Plensa's Mist etched on glass doors to the wine cellar's tasting room, which boasts an aerial sculpture by Bill Starke called Airborne. Opposite ▶ Long Island Buddha by Zhang Huan in a stand of trees near the guest cottage. Middle: Jaume Plensa's Mist (left) and Erwin Wurm's Big Kastenmann on the terrace overlooking St. Helena. Bottom: A bronze and steel work by David L. Phelps on the pool terrace, appropriately called Sisyphus Over St. Helena.



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