

salt of the earth

A RUSTIC SUMMERLAND HOME
DESIGNED BY SALT ARCHITECTURE PROVIDES
A PERENNIAL FIELD STUDY



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If a Southern California *Sound of Music* existed, it could've been filmed while weaving through Summerland's rolling hills, a well-preserved pocket of agricultural plots and verdant trails. On a jaunt in Santa Barbara's back country, one might find themselves sharing the road with cowboys, perhaps riding away from their newly built, refined ranch-style estate.

Set on 18 acres, the estate organically rises from the soil—as organically as a multi-million dollar, 5,195-square-foot residence can. Its elevated perch gazes out as morning marine mist snakes down into the sea, revealing a panoramic ocean view framed by the area's effortlessly descending slopes.

Crafted with European stone, vintage barn wood, and walnut accents, the home's natural materials handsomely blur the boundaries of its surroundings. Its true open-concept design culminates in the dining room. In any of the three bedrooms, sliding glass doors allow residents to sleep under a blanket of stars. Green roofs sprouting with native flora cool the space, while cross-ventilation borrows from the Pacific breeze.

As it turns out, this *au naturel* ambience is incredibly complex to calculate. For architect Dylan Henderson, owner of SALT Architecture, it was a matter of listening to the land. The seasoned designer—who's spent two decades crafting homes from the rugged mountains of Colorado to the unending coastlines of Hawaii and, now, Santa Barbara—views topography as a design language. Naturally, he also tuned into the desires of his clients: a prominent couple in the entertainment industry seeking a serene, pastoral retreat, complete with a 1,641-square-foot barn for their beloved animals.

I spoke with Dylan about the home, honoring the hills in the contours of his design, and the nuanced challenges—from relentless insects and burrowing gophers to the demands of arid earth—that come with crafting a vision of luxurious “living off the land.”





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SBLS Before we dive into the Summerland project, tell me a bit about your design philosophy, founding SALT, and its evolution to the present.

Dylan Henderson I have always worked in areas where the topography and the beauty of the things around us inform the work that I do. It's about what nature is giving back to us that we can enhance, as opposed to calling out the architecture as a standalone thing.

SALT started as an acronym for Structure, Architecture, Landscape and Timeless design. It means working with clients that are truly grounded 'salt of the earth' kind of people, and on projects that grow out from our natural topography and landscape. Obviously that can be hard to do, right? If you're doing a house on the Mesa, it's a postage stamp—it is what it is—but at the same time, maybe some of the materials and moments, even from a standpoint of how light plays in the space, can be that natural moment that you grab onto. So, SALT is not necessarily represented by a green roof in the architecture tucked into a hillside; it can just be informed heavily by an environmental aesthetic.

SBLS What would you say that 'salt of the earth' idea means in practice, in terms of translating your clients' desires, and also your own artistry, into designs?

DH It's in the way you approach a project and the design process. I come at it from the standpoint of everyone has a groundedness if you can find the things that are important to them. In an initial design concept conversation, these clients said, 'We want the house to be super natural; we don't even want heat in the house,' which you can't do by code, obviously. 'We want this to be a place where we rise with the sun. We want to go to sleep when the sun goes down.' So we have big windows and no shade coverings—they were intent about that. 'We want to have the windows and doors open all year round, and we'll dress accordingly.' So that hasn't said anything about what the house looks like, but it certainly tells you what the project should *feel* like.

For me, the 'salt of the earth' aspect is about identifying the things that are important to the individual and then figuring out how to ground that in a sense of place and natural setting. Like, how does it *feel* when you're sitting in that breakfast scene and the sun is hitting you in the morning?

These clients are both animal and nature-forward: they love their horses and pets, they love being in and out of their house all day long, without windows and doors. It's almost like they wanted to live outside, to live on the land...that was the initial comment, that they wanted to be truly integrated with their landscape.

SBLS As for the project's eco-conscious design: would you say that is one of your priorities throughout all of your projects, or something you particularly leaned into with these clients?

DH I often get asked, 'Are you a sustainable architect? Are you a green architect?' I think that when you're building in any of these jurisdictions now, and certainly with the California Energy Code, everyone is sort of forced to be green to a certain extent.

Where the division happens is when you're looking at things like predominant direction of wind and sun, like how harsh that Summerland sun can be. Where my focus comes in is how you can include the landscape as a real directive and driver of your design. In the case of this home, I pulled the front contour of the planter—which is a curved steel beam that's clad in stone and integrated into the screen-in porch—from the actual contour of the land before we dug it out. I wanted to make it feel like it had been in that hillside all along, and we were just borrowing from the vocabulary of the landscape to create, to direct that first line on the paper. In the same vein, if you look at the house from afar, the stacking of the roof lines goes *flat, gable, flat, gable, flat*—that follows the topography of the mountain beyond it.

SBLS So, so interesting. On the idea of honoring the landscape, how did the individual character of Summerland's topography feel for you as an architect? Have you done many other projects in the area?

DH This is my third project in Summerland. The hills and mountains have been there for eons, but it's been heavily impacted by human inhabitation. I think the biggest thing for me was, how do you soften what can be a bit of a harsh landscape? Back there, you're not irrigating, it's full of gophers, and pretty darn dry for seven months of the year—Rob Baday with Boski Landscape Architecture did a beautiful job there. You've got limited water, lots of sun, and different types of wind patterns in those little valleys, and so all of that had to be considered when we were placing the house and designing something as simple as an opening.

We have big overhangs as well. Like on the screen-in porch: some people would walk into the house and go, 'You've got a five-fold door that opens into a screen-in porch. Why wouldn't you just have those screens operable?' Well, there's a lot of insect life out there, and if you didn't have that covered, you probably wouldn't use it much, because it can be baking. So having those indoor-outdoor spaces that are integrated to the interior architecture, and having them extend into the exterior, creates a true year-round environment.

SBLS What else did the clients mention, other than essentially wanting to live outside, in terms of spatial functions? Did they want a lot of entertaining spaces? I know the barn is a big element of it because you mentioned they love their horses.

DH One directive they said to me early on was, 'We want to limit the number of interior walls, we want our spaces to be open to each other.' So you'll notice, in the two master bedrooms there are no walls between the bathrooms and the bedrooms. They wanted the whole thing to be an open, flowing kind of environment. They have a back access which provides all of the circulation, for the

powder room and laundry and those sorts of things. And then everything else is open to each other, and all interconnected, back into that great room, the kitchen area and the dining room. That was an interesting challenge—how do you create this open floor plan concept for a bedroom and a bathroom? I've seen that done poorly, like in the '70s, a shag carpet with a bathtub sunk into the master bedroom—I definitely didn't want that feeling. [Laughs] So it was a matter of materially changing between these elements, where it still feels like a separate place, but there is a limited amount of division between the two.

They're going to turn the whole area in front of the barn into a riding arena and a paddock so they can train their horses. They'll be sitting on the screened-in porch, or out on one of the terraces at the masters, and look out and have a very pastoral scene with their horses in the arena and corral. They wanted a center view, so that anything that comes out of that barn and ends up out in the field was central to their visual experience.

SBLS Tell me a bit about the materials on this project: there have to be stories behind these rich, deep woods.

DH We spent a lot of time being careful and intentional about the material. So all of the wood that's on the house, on the carport, and all of the interior beams, it's all reclaimed barn wood—true, vintage wood. That beautiful, natural stone flooring inside came out of Europe; there's nothing faux about any of that.

And the green roofs: they're always interesting, because people worry about them from a maintenance standpoint. But in order to ground the house and not feel like it was placed, but rather had been there for a long time, it was important for me to have those roots tied into the landscape. So when you look back at the house, it's almost like you don't understand what you're looking at, where it's green, your eye follows the hillside, and it all integrates.*

