OAK TREES LEAD DOUBLE LIVES. This fact became extraordinarily important to architect Casper Mork-Ulnes as he set about designing an ultraeconomical, light-on-the-land cabin nestled within an oak forest in rural Hopland, California (an area dotted with wineries and just north of the latest “it” town of Healdsburg). A pair of young San Francisco couples had approached the architect to design a modest but thoroughly modern shared country retreat. It was a job that seemed easy enough for the founder of Modern Cabana, a company that specialized in petite prefabs (and was sold to Blu Homes in 2012)—except that there wasn’t a single square foot of level ground on the 16-acre parcel, the approach was 10 miles down a winding dirt road beloved by rattlesnakes and the clients asked that Mork-Ulnes leave each and every oak tree undisturbed. Enter the arborist, who illuminated the fact that oaks create an alternate, nearly identical universe beneath the soil, meaning the trees’ bucolic canopies are actually mirror images of their complex root systems.

In response, Mork-Ulnes devised a plan to forgo a traditional foundation, instead placing the small, single-level house on stilts, with concrete piers set into the ground only in areas absent of mature roots. The unconventional shape of the house—three wings emanating from a compact core—allows the spaces to slip between the trees. It also offers up distinct views in different directions: a mountain ridge, a vineyard-filled valley and a sculptural land mass known as Eagle Rock. It also provides privacy for its four inhabitants: Each couple gets its own wing, while the third wing is a shared
section housing the kitchen and great room. In lieu of traditional windows, the far end of each wing is walled in glass, which lets light stream through the entire structure. Pocket doors allow the owners to transform the house to suit the situation, depending on whether or not the couples are occupying the property together. The panels either slide shut to create additional walls for privacy or disappear to create a feeling of openness. All three wings seem to float over the uneven earth. “The only place the building actually touches the ground is the entryway,” explains Mork-Ulnes of a truncated fourth wing that holds not just the necessities (a slim stairwell up to the front door) but a bit of luxury as well: a shared spa bath featuring a sunken tub, a sauna and floor-to-ceiling views out to the vineyards of a neighboring property.

That particular bath is something of a barometer for the rest of the house—it appears luxurious but in fact is a study in economy. The high-shine exterior of the house is actually low-cost Rezibond steel cladding—a hardy building material resistant to ultraviolet radiation and humidity. A 1.5-inch cavity of air between the exterior and interior walls serves as extra insulation. The shape and size of the house (just under 1,200 square feet) take into account the standard measurement of a piece of plywood, so minimal cuts had to be made during construction and wasted materials were few. The interior walls all feature the exposed ply, and the IKEA-sourced cabinetry is clad in the same inexpensive wood to match (and to create the illusion of custom millwork). The floors are made of oriented strand board (“the flaky-looking stuff you see on the outside of tract homes,” says Mork-Ulnes), which the architect had treated with lye and then oiled—an old Norwegian method. “The whole design of the house is a cross-pollination between California and Scandinavia,” says Mork-Ulnes, a Norway native who splits his time between San Francisco and Oslo. The house seems defined by this disparate yet altogether appropriate sense of place. The modern structure could look at home on a city lot or a desert expanse, but it was actually designed to fit, hand in glove, into the oak forest in which it sits. Says Mork-Ulnes, “The building takes meticulous measures to be in harmony with its environment.” —Erin Feher

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