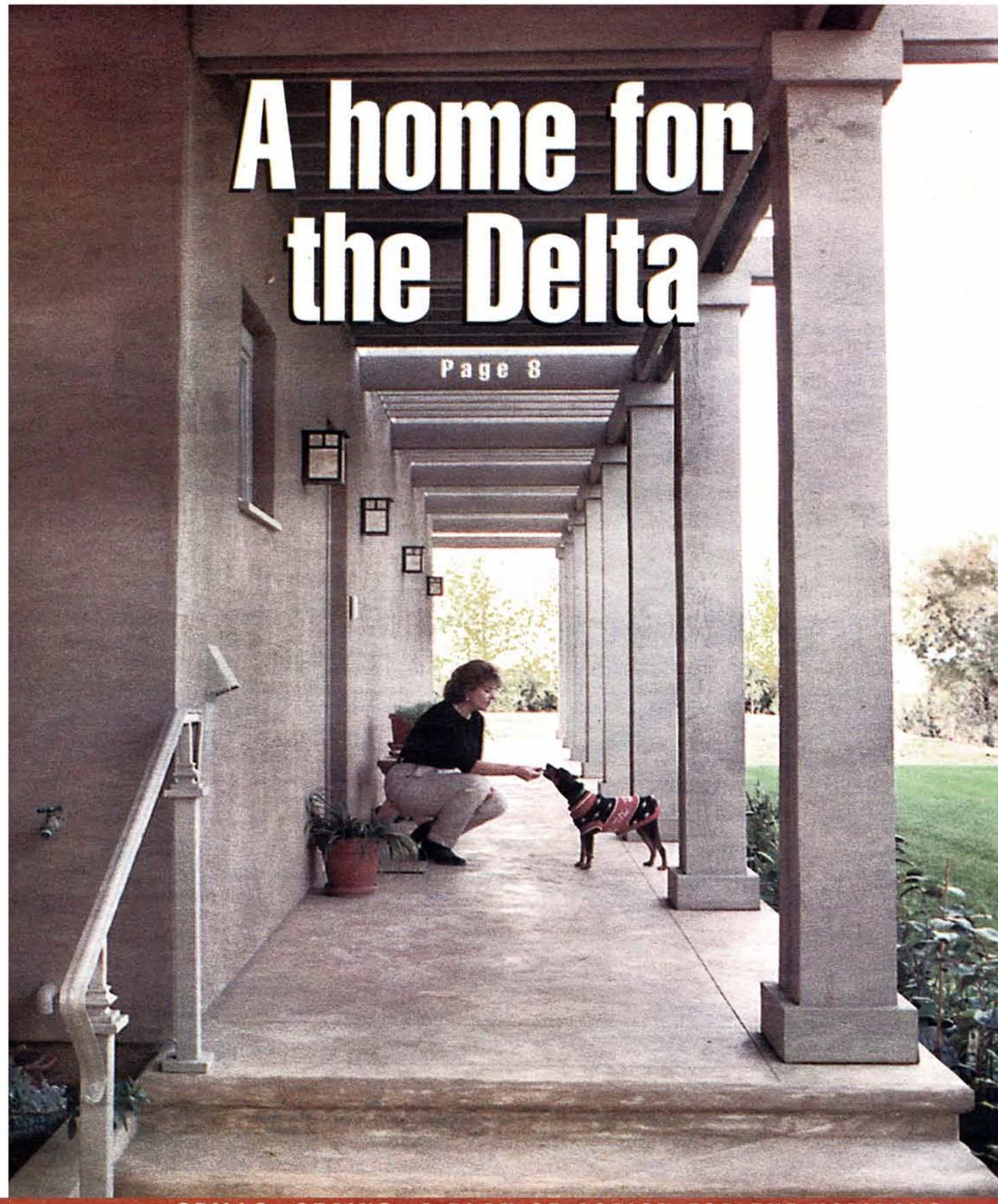
THE SACRAMENTO BEE ▼ SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1999

CALIFORNIA Life



A home for the Delta

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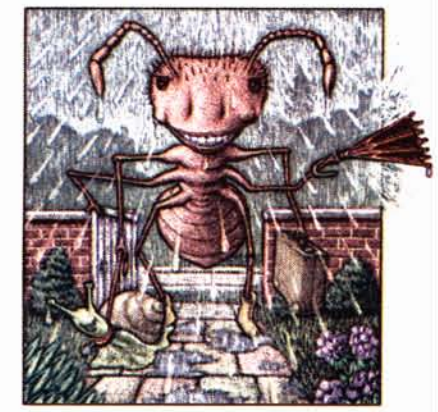

It's your turn to tell us what bugged you in '99

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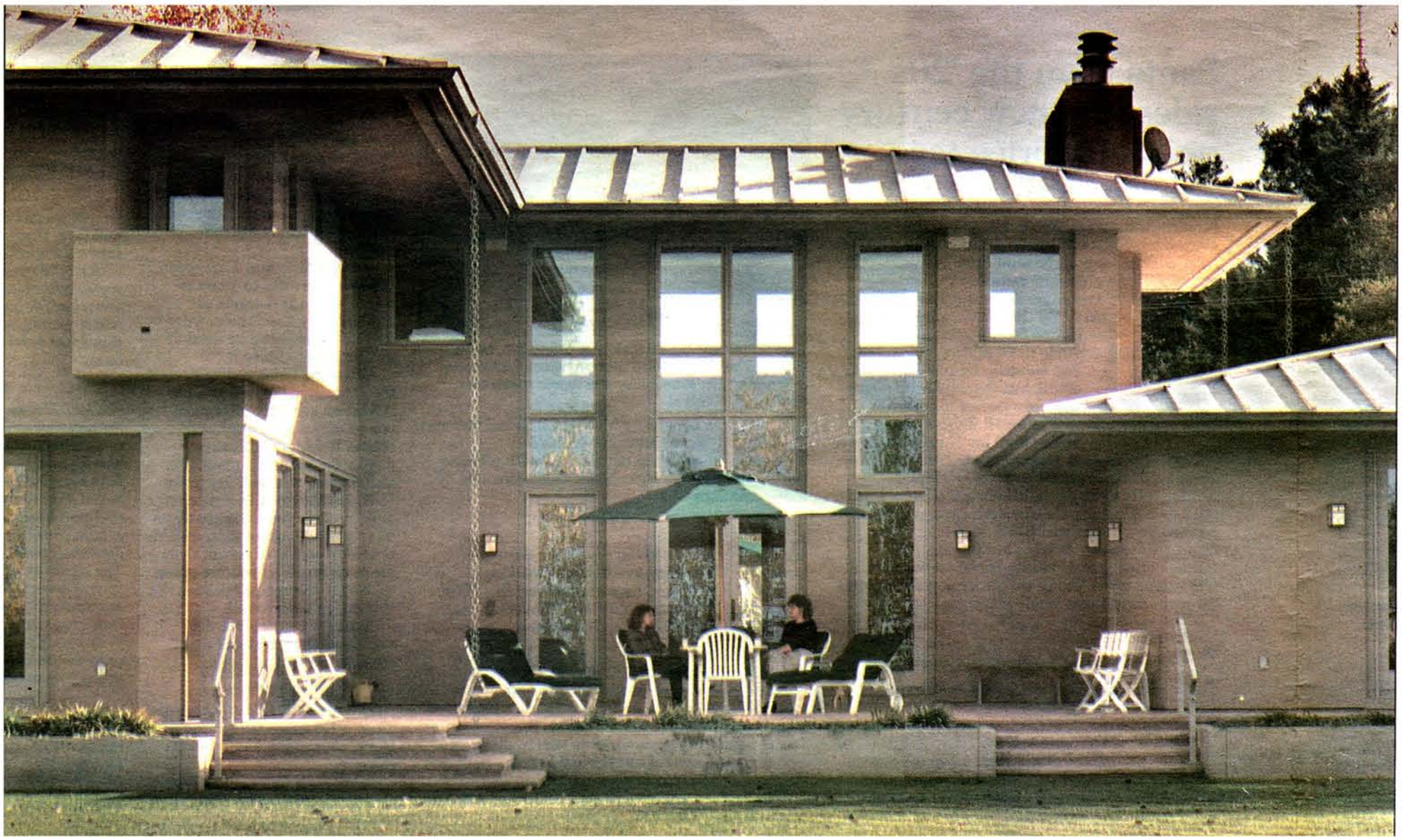

A home for the Delta

By Patricia Beach Smith
Bee Staff Writer

Bee photographs by Leilani Hu

Walnut Grove homeowners agree to concrete floors, metal roof, other unconventional designs . . . with no regrets

When architect Karin Payson suggested to Thom and Janice Wiseman that they build a house with a metal roof and concrete floors, the Wisemans shook their heads.

"Right. If we wanted a barn, we would build one," Janice remembered thinking.

But after two years of talking, planning and drawing, Payson won her case. The Wisemans' classic home in Walnut Grove, completed three years ago, indeed has a metal roof and concrete floors. But it doesn't look a thing like a barn.

Frank Lloyd Wright comes to mind, though.

Deep, sweeping eaves ward off hot summer sun, a central fireplace connotes the heart of the house. The decorative elements are simple but deliberate. And a tartan (as in plaid) grid conforms the rooms and the overall geometry of the house. Everything seems to echo Wright's Prairie-style houses.

"While it was being built, people would stop and ask what style the house was," said Janice. "I always told them it was 'River Delta' style."

To add to their knowledge of architectural styles, the couple went through what Thom called "reams of paper" looking at house designs. The couple and their three children had also lived in three houses and many apartments, Janice said. Those living experiences gave them even more ideas of what they might and might not want in the first home they would build for themselves.

"We didn't want a lot of styles put

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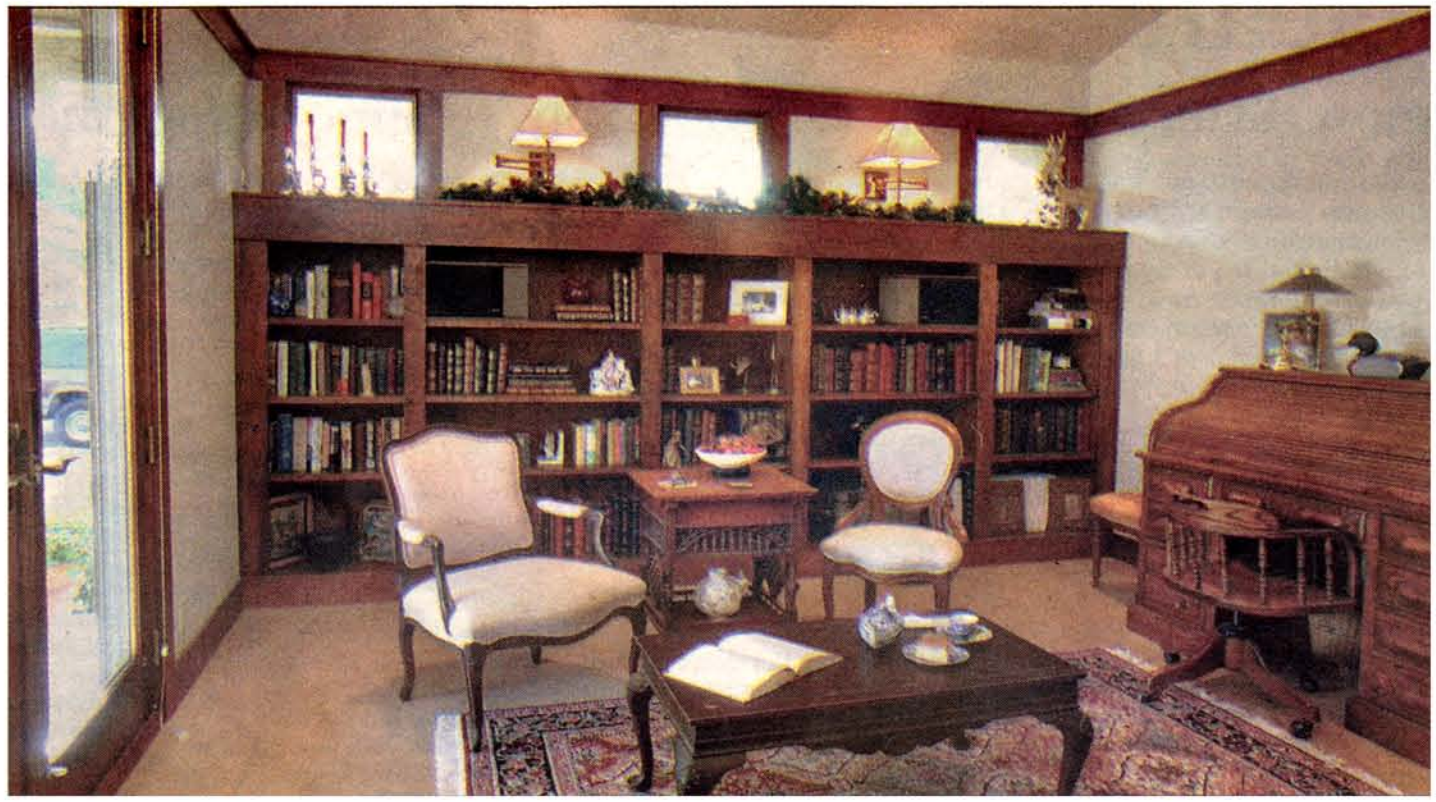
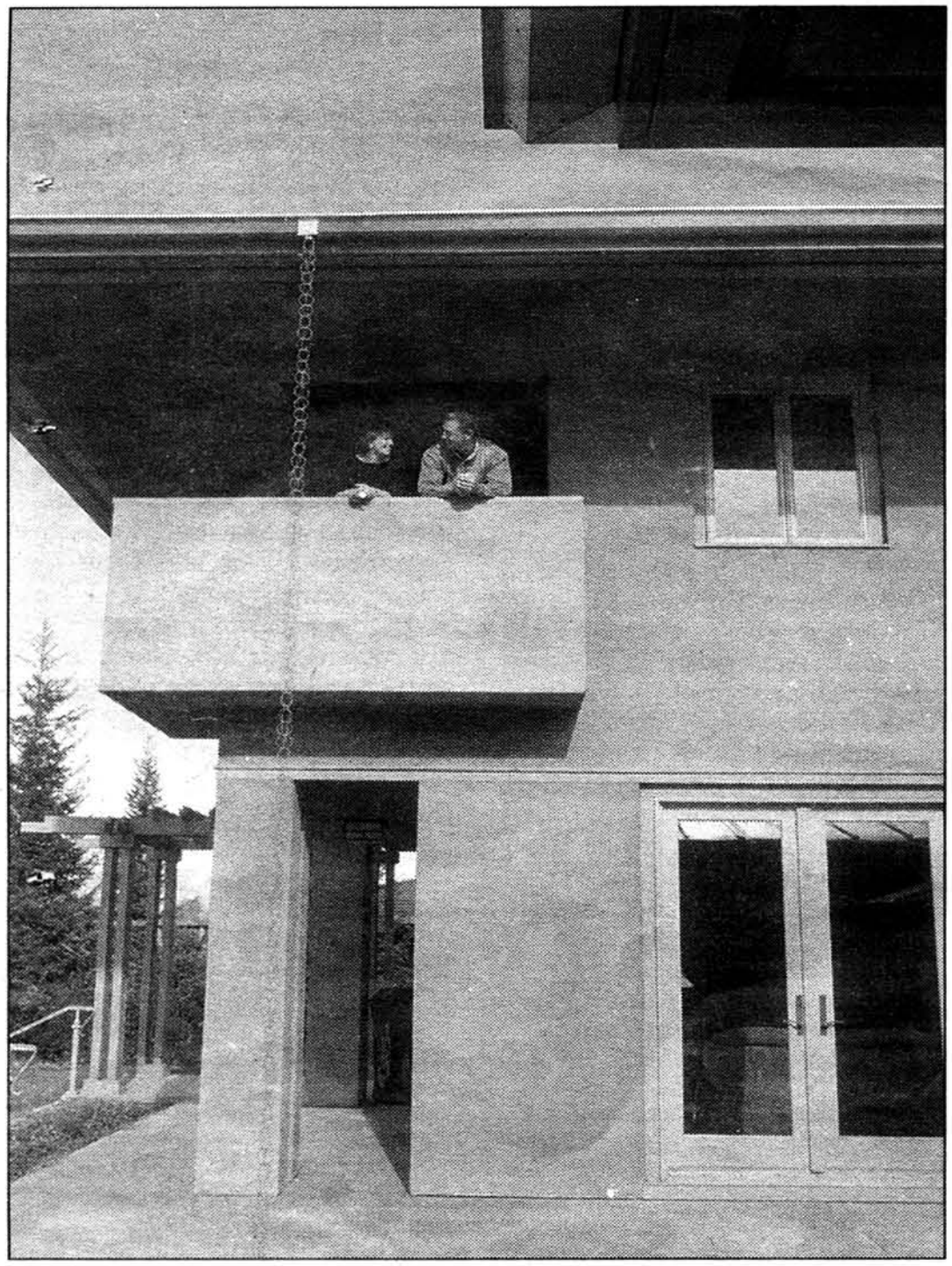
Architect Karin Payson, left, and Janice Wiseman relax on the Wisemans' back terrace, a space hugged by the family room and master bedroom wings.

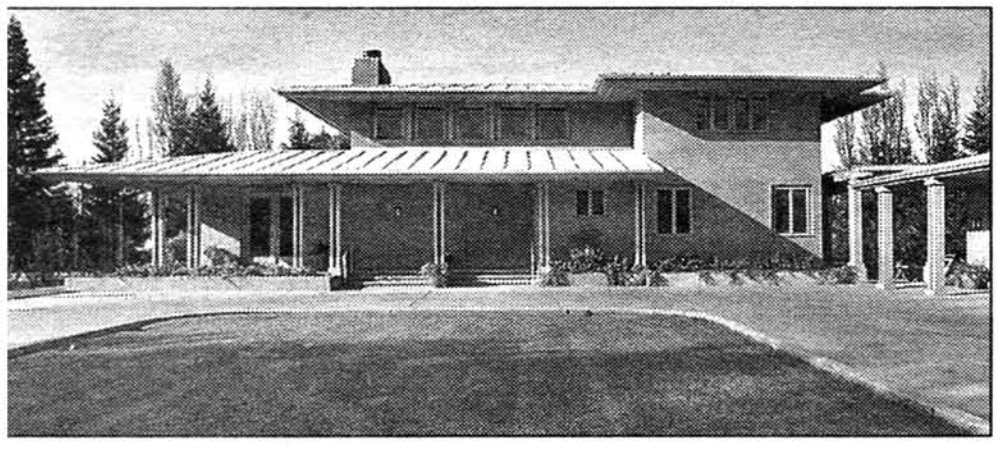


A library in the master bedroom wing of the home serves as a "getaway" room for parents.

The large central "wow" room is the focal point of the Wisemans' Walnut Grove home; doors open onto the terrace.



■ Janice and Thom Wiseman on a balcony overlooking the courtyard. An uncommon feature of the home are rain chains, which are used in place of downspouts to allow water to flow from the roof.



■ Wide eaves on the front of the Wiseman home shade the house from the Delta's summer sun.

Delta

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together. We wanted it all to be one style and something unique – not a model home," said Thom, a Delta native.

To follow the Wisemans' wish that the house also fit the area, Payson, whose practice is in San Francisco, said she drove around the Delta looking at existing homes to get a feel for the area.

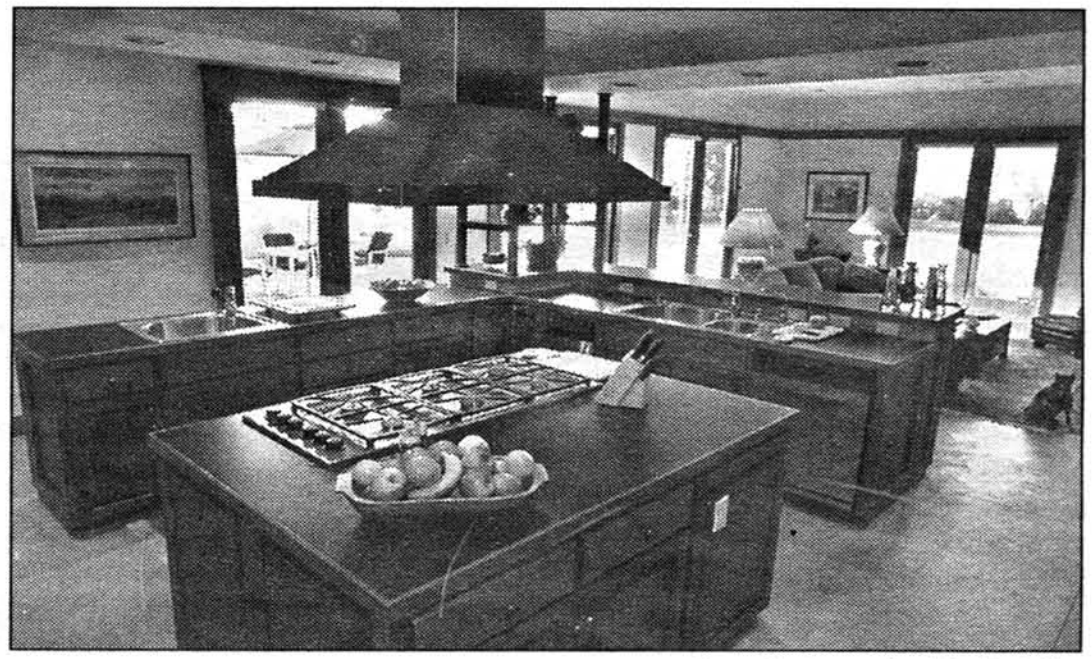
"Basically we told Karin we wanted our house to be timeless and not so perfect that the first nick on something would glare at you," Janice said.

They also asked for a house oriented to the back rather than the front of the property, said Thom, an agriculture production consultant with John Taylor Fertilizers.

"I like a big back yard where you can throw a football," he said. "And we did not want a living room. We don't live that way. Instead, we wanted a big room where we could sit and talk and eat. We like to have dinner with our kids and sometimes their friends come over, too.

"My dad did that for us. When I was growing up, it wasn't unusual to have two- or three-hour dinners where we talked about everything. I wanted to be able to do that for our kids, too. I believe in it. It gets the kids thinking."

Thom got his wish. Visitors come through the front door, make a few turns through a low-ceilinged vestibule and then enter the main room of the house. The cleverly diminutive size of the vestibule heightens the dramatic impact of seeing the 28- by 20-foot main room with its 18½-foot ceiling and huge fireplace surrounded by



Bee photographs / Leilani Hu

■ **Cherry-stained birch cabinets, black Formica counter tops and stained concrete make for a practical kitchen off the family room.**

black slate.

"We call it the 'wow' room because when we were building people would come in, see this room and say 'Wow!,' " Janice explained.

A wall of windows and glass doors on one side of the big room affords the visitor a view of the Wisemans' huge outdoor terrace and luscious lawn beyond. The idea of a courtyard house with master bedroom and kitchen/family room wings hugging a terrace evolved because of issues of privacy, Payson said. About 45 pages of drawings were produced by the architect for the contractors to follow over the months it took to build the house. Managing the project, Payson said, became Janice's full-time job.

"It is a daunting task to pick out everything for a whole house, including the shapes of the woodwork," Janice said. "This was definitely the biggest research project we've ever done. Karin was so helpful in educating us about everything, including alternate materials and ways to economize."

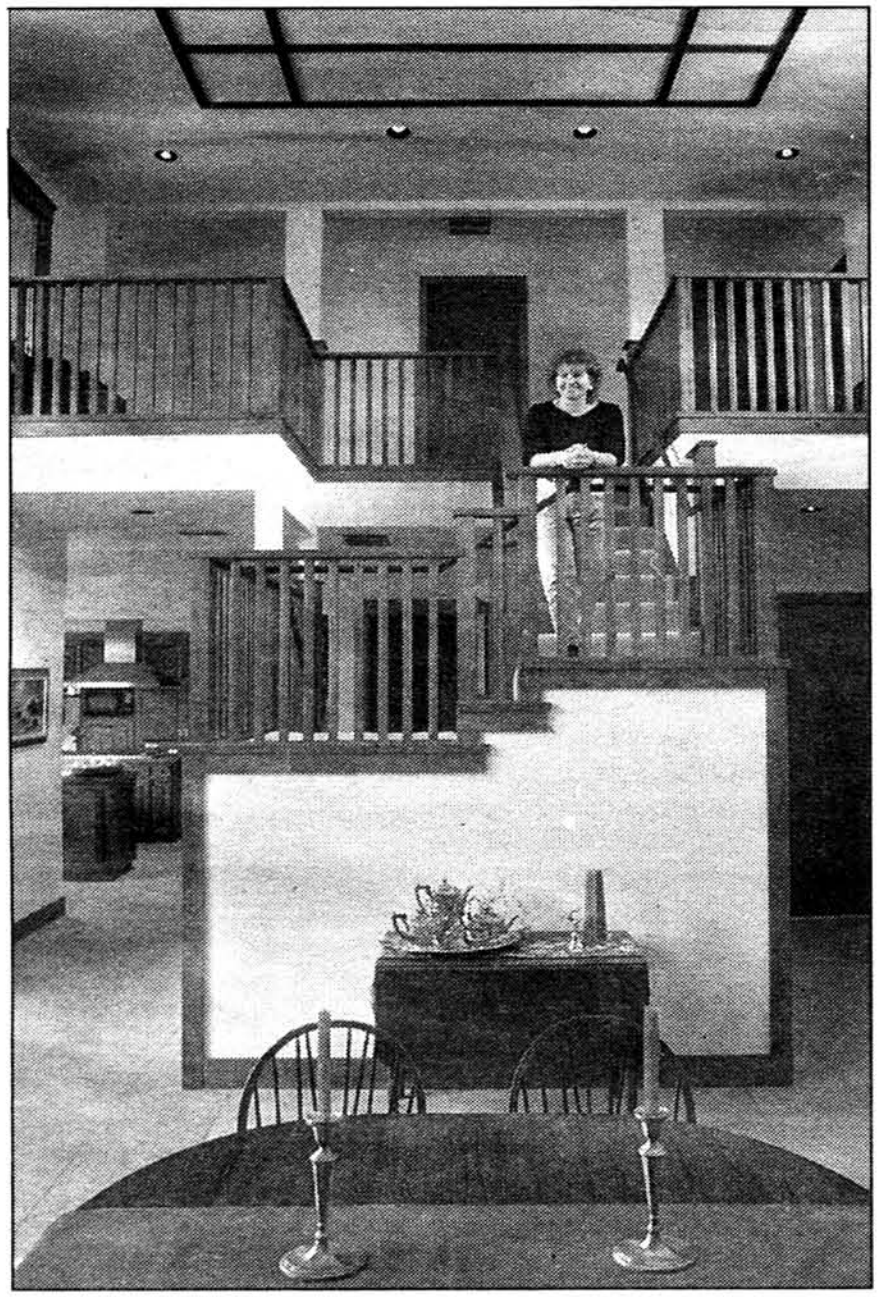
Building a 3,800-square-foot house is, everyone agreed, a lot about "process" and is something that doesn't happen overnight.

"I told them to put style aside and spend money on things they would not be able to change – the 'bones' of a house, like the walls, floors, ceilings, the heating and cooling systems and the roof. Everything else I call the 'dress' – the style – of the house. You can put it on after everything else is set," Payson said.

With that idea in mind, the Wisemans eliminated their original notions of having quarried stone floors and solid cherry for cabinets, bookshelves, stairs, railings and all other woodwork. They opted instead for stained concrete and a less expensive wood.

"I convinced them to go with birch and stain it to look like cherry. We also used Formica counter tops in the kitchen instead of stone or tile to save money. If they want to change it all in 10 years, they can," Payson said.

"For the floors, we decided to



■ **Janice Wiseman on the stair landing, which resembles designs by Frank Lloyd Wright.**

use integral-color concrete indoors and out. That gave us continuity," Payson said.

Choosing the color of the concrete wasn't too difficult.

"Janice said she wanted a dirt-colored house because it is very dusty in the Delta. So we went for a golden taupe," Payson said. The Wiseman home was Payson's first from-the-ground-up project. Since then, she has designed homes and remodels in Carmel; Napa Valley; Jackson Hole, Wyo.; and Rye, N.Y.

The standing seam steel roof and a hot water radiant heat system in the floors were also Payson's ideas.

"At first I was concerned about the coatings fading on the roofing material – and the cost. But now we love the look of it and it's a lifetime roof. It has some relationship to the Australian Outback architecture we've seen in books," said Thom. "All the buildings there have metal roofs."

As for the in-floor heating, Thom said it contributes mightily to his favorite aspect of the house: "The comfort we all feel in the house in the wintertime. The heating in the floor makes it possible for us to live in every room of the house all year.

"It cost us about 50 percent more than other (more conventional) systems, but the efficiency has paid us back already," Thom said. "In the summer, the windows and doors are open all the time and in the evening we open those automated windows at the top of the big room and the west wind comes through and clears out all the heat."

Payson's thoughtful design also affords the family maximum light, a variety of traffic patterns and abundant wall areas for ease of furniture and art placement. She also worked in plenty of space for each member of the family to either be alone in their own rooms or come together in the major public areas of the house, terrace and lawns.

"The wall space is possible because you enter and exit all the rooms from corner openings rather than ones centered on a wall," Payson explained. "Besides their bedroom, Janice also has a small library that she can close off from the rest of the house when she wants to go in there to read."

"The spaciousness is one of two things that come to mind when you ask what my favorite things are about the house," Janice said. "Also the choice of materials makes this house incredibly easy to keep clean."

Speaking of clean: The Wisemans agree that the only thing they would change in the house is the size of the laundry room.

"It's too small," said Janice.

"On the other hand," said Thom, "if it were bigger, we'd just throw more stuff in there and have to clean it up more. We didn't want to waste square footage on a bigger laundry room!"

"Now that we have lived here a while," Janice said, "we see what we told Karin we wanted. It comes back to us every day in the design."