



Wilt and Dave: Client and Architect

■ **In the Beginning...** It was quite by accident that I met and became the Architect for the great competitor, Wilton Norman Chamberlain. A friend of mine, Gary Morris, had been given the task of finding a site for Wilt to build on; and Gary asked me if I had any idea where a really good hilltop parcel might exist.

I said no, but would be happy to provide my services, for the cost of time and such. Wilt agreed to retain me, and after renting a helicopter and scouring the Santa Monica mountains for open space, I found a big plot of land that had once been a Nike missile site during the cold war. It was a deal and Wilt had a place to build.

Wilt and I had, in the course of all this become friends, and I felt a real sense of connection and honest friendship with the Big Man. He was in my office one day when all the dust had settled and quite offhanded he said, "Hey! do you want to be my architect"? I replied, " why not," and the project was on its way.

■ **No Squares for Wilt...** It is a truly a great and special thing to be an Architect, and I feel blessed to have this as a life work. The challenge and task is always to look for a new and exciting statement that reflects the uniqueness of the client, and fits the use of project. I have always believed the greatest source of inspiration for a special project is a special Client, and Wilt was the perfect catalyst for a new and different work. The first task in a new project, aside from the basics of what rooms and spaces are needed, is to determine the geometry that fits the client and use.

We went out to the site, which has a breathtaking view out to the Pacific, and I drew shapes in the dirt, and Wilt stood inside each one. A square, a

circle and a triangle were tested. I said "Wilt, this is your house, which one feels right for you"? The triangle was where Wilt felt immediately comfortable, and basis of the project was defined.

There is not an Architect alive who has not in some way been influenced by the great Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and it was his concept of organic development of scheme out of a single geometric shape, that was the wellspring for the geometric and decorative nature of the final work.

■ **Real World Size...** Wilt wanted a place for friends, entertainment, and yet be at the same time a place to call home. He wanted everything to work for real size people, and in fact the only concession to size was the water closet in the Master Suite. "It's just no fun to sit down with your knees in your face," was Wilt's sentiment. The volumes, spaces, door heights and such were not designed for the tallness of the man, but rather the sense of self, and a love of openness and great spaces.



■ **A Stand of Redwoods...** My inspiration for The Great Room, the set piece of project, came from a photo I had taken when my family had visited Yosemite. Straight up through the Mariposa grove looking skyward, Ursa Major was to be a stand of trees supporting a great Redwood canopy. My first suggestion for the compliment to the redwood was to use red brick. Wilt grew up in Philadelphia, and every poor neighborhood was one faceless brick monolith after another. The bricks disappeared, and we went over sample after

sample of native field stone to work with the redwood. We settled on a great looking Bouquet Canyon stone for which we could get matched material for the whole house. →

■ **Ursa Major: the Big Dipper...** After many model studies, the scheme was born. I went to my good friend and structural engineer Vincent Kevin Kelly and we put together a structural system that to this day has withstood all the seismic trauma provided in the years since construction.

The Great Room was designed with spaces interrupted by vertical “tree” elements that would work for many guests, and still feel intimate and comfortable for Wilt when alone in a such a lofty major space. This was to be a great organic structure of natural materials, with water used as a building component becoming part of the concept — live water and reflection pools at the entry path, and the swimming section fitting naturally against the Great Room with a small peek inside just for fun.



■ **The Plan Checker Said, “I Give Up!”...** The concept was set, and each and every part of the structure was carefully designed by this Architect to reflect the basic design intent. The working drawings could finally commence. Sketches and exact design elements became paper real after incomparable hours of effort. I had a small office, and everybody turned to for this very special work.

The plans were submitted to the city for approval, and after meeting with the city engineer every day for two weeks solid, reviewing the most minute detail, the plan checker finally said, “I give up”. The work was underway, and the site, which was a geologic mess was excavated fifty feet down, and rebuilt to perfection and construction began.

■ **Spending Time With Wilt...** Bright, articulate, and a true romantic, Wilt was great fun to be around. He was a competitor of great capacity and courage, who when injured did isometrics in his cast and returned to play when everyone

thought him to be out for the duration. We spent much quality time together, having ribs at the Brentwood Country Market, going over the work — to create a place that would fit

Wilt’s feeling about himself. A great moment of one-on-one for both Architect and Client.

■ **Wilt in (not-so-hot) Water...** As one can imagine, sooner or later a project will test the budget. Wilt decided to abandon the Architect’s skylight details and have the skylight installer provide a design and install service for the giant thrust beam skylights — two structural glulam beams which have 60 foot skylights between the members. It’s Christmas Eve, and raining like hell. My phone rings. It’s Wilt. The low bid skylights have a problem: they leak!

“What can we do”, said Wilt. He is truly not amused, and I agree to come up and take a look.

There is just nothing to behold like a seven foot one and one-half inch tall Wilt the Stilt, standing ankle deep in water in his multi-million dollar entry and ready to kill.

Like all things, the rain finally stopped, the leaks were eventually fixed, and my family and I made Midnight service and Christmas did arrive on time.

■ **Wilt’s Legacy...** I was truly saddened at the death of my client Wilton Chamberlain. It was his wish to give the majority of his estate to help underprivileged kids get a leg up and out of their unfortunate condition. It is my hope that this web-site offering will encourage another to take the baton on ownership and care, as much of the proceeds will be to those who might some day be of large scale in the parade of time.

~ David Tenneson Rich



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