lead by design

Portola Valley Town Center in Portola Valley, Calif., serves the needs of the locals while treading lightly on the land, thanks to a design by the team of Siegel & Strain and Goring & Straja

By Amy Milshtein
Photography by Cesar Rubio

McMansion lovers may feel uncomfortable in Portola Valley. Sure the town boasts McMansion-levels of income, but the people who live here chose to put their money to use in other ways. Founded in 1964 to protect the western hills from development, the town has one of the most educated populations in the nation—50 percent of its 4,462 residents have earned a graduate or professional degree. These Silicon Valley and Stanford University smarties prize their open space and feel a strong connection to the natural landscape. So when the time came to build a new town center, Portola Valley citizens turned to the architecture team of Emeryville, Calif.-based Siegel & Strain and Oakland, Calif.-based Goring & Straja to create a complex that serves the environment as well as their needs.

The old town center was crammed into a 1950s-era school. Not only was the space ineffective and cramped, but also it sits directly on top of the San Andreas Fault. The townspeople knew that the situation had to change, "but they didn't know how many buildings they wanted or what the square footage should be," remembers Larry Strain, Siegel & Strain. "They weren't even sure where they wanted the new center."

They did know a few things though: No one was happy with the idea of just demolishing the old school building. And when studies showed that the best location for the new center was a mere 200 yards away from the old one, no one was keen on the idea of paying $20 million to build a complex within sight of the old building. "It took a lot to convince people that this spot was safe," says Ted Driscoll, town council member and five-time mayor. "But I have an advanced degree in geology, so I know the difference of being on a fault versus being next to a fault."

Portola Valley Library furniture was flat packed in a way that allowed it to be shipped in only half of a container (right).