

SEATTLE HOMES

AND LIFESTYLES

Athletes at Home

Sam Perkins
Rosalynn Sumners
Dave Valle
Brian Holman

Romantic
getaways
Home
theaters



Geometry Lesson

Playful shifts animate
a contemporary
home in Bellingham

As shown in the Frshigs' Bellingham living room, the
concrete-block fireplace rests on a broad concrete platform.

The TV rises out of a compartment under the vases.

OPPOSITE (top to bottom): Two views of the rear elevation; the roof
'floats' over dearestory windows; the bridge to the front door.



By Lawrence W. Cheek

Photographs by Claudio Santini



We often think of serenity as a kind of heavenly void—an absence of stress, distractions and incongruities.

But on rare occasion, architecture expresses serenity as a tangible thing. You can see it, touch it, even feel it working on you.

Such is the case with this Bellingham house by Seattle architect George Suyama.

The home is impeccably graceful, well mannered and understated. It has little decoration aside from the natural grain of the cedar channel siding wrapping the interior spine and the visual rhythms of the open ceiling trusses and stairway. Meticulous detailing everywhere seems to confirm the rational order of the universe. All is as classically proportioned and beautifully harmonized as a Mozart sonata, except ...

... Except that after an hour or two, you gradually become aware that the grid in the living room's concrete floor doesn't exactly line up with the walls. And the terraces out back are slyly trapezoidal, not quite the nice, neat rectangles they first appeared to be. It isn't as if Frank Gehry (architect of Paul Allen's Experience Music Project) had slipped in one night to deconstruct Suyama's exquisite composition, but it *is* naggingly mysterious.

After a week of reflecting, you figure it out. The house is essentially composed of two boxes: a big one containing the living spaces, and a smaller one for the garage and workshop. The two are skewed about five degrees from each other so that the garage can line up with



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the street, and the house with the best view of Bellingham Bay at its back. Suyama allowed a bit of the garage's geometry to infiltrate the living quarters so as to, in his words, "create more of an active engagement for the people living in it." Translation: He needed to subvert that perfect serenity with just enough tension to make it possible for real, not-quite-perfect human beings to relate to it.

Those humans, Herb and Billee Ershig, had none of this in mind when they commissioned the house, except that, as Suyama recalls, "They wanted it to be architecturally significant—something that would stretch them a little bit." They remember simply wanting a house with a sleek, contemporary look and a free, open flow of interior space so their activities wouldn't be compartmentalized. (They're a couple who enjoy doing things together.)

Somehow, these loose specifications inspired a design that embraced both their physical needs and artistic instincts on the first try. "It was kind of spooky," Herb says. "When we saw the first set of drawings, I said, 'I could move into that house immediately.'"

ABOVE: The dining room is separated from the living room by a floating stair.

RIGHT: A Leo Adams painting hangs outside the master bedroom, which hovers like a treehouse over the living room.

OPPOSITE: Judy Davison's understated furnishings counterpoint exposed I-beams and roof trusses.

We didn't have a lot of discussion or changes. Basically, this house is the first cut."

Since the lot slopes steeply from the street down to the bay, the house's front door opens onto a mezzanine overlooking the living room. One step inside, and space unfolds in a carefully scripted but expansive drama. A view wall to the north grandly frames Bellingham Bay. The master bedroom perches over the two-story living room like a treehouse. The simple furnishings below—three couches bracketing a sleek steel table on a Pande Cameron rug (the work of Seattle interior designer Judy Davison)—announce the social heart of the house. On clear afternoons, the not-quite-rectangular reflecting pool that nuzzles the living room bounces the sun onto the ceiling in an abstract ballet of light.

The total effect is one of an environment meticulously *designed*, down to subatomic detail. A stray knickknack on a table would create chaos. But the Ershigs are thoroughly tuned in to the design's refinement. For example, a large abstract painting by Yakima artist Leo Adams "just didn't look right in this house," Billee says. Adams himself came to check it out. "It needs a metal frame," he prescribed. Herb, a mechanical engineer recently retired from running an industrial sheet metal and fiberglass business,









ABOVE: Few furnishings are needed when you have such a dynamic interplay between structure and materials.

OPPOSITE: The kitchen cooktop rests in a slate-lined niche. Herb Ershig built the aluminum light fixture.

fabricated one himself. "That made all the difference," he says. "It needed that black outline, just to give it a little punch."

Although it is a sizable house (3,540 square feet, not counting basement, garage or workshop), there is relatively little furniture in it—and the pieces that Davison designed or specified are quiet and unassuming. "There's so much going on in the architecture that if you had the furniture competing, the place would be unpleasant," she says. Built-in white oak cabinetry in the kitchen and bedrooms scoops up the stuff of everyday life. Bookshelves and even towel bars and phone nooks are recessed so as not to impose themselves. In the living room, the TV normally lives in a secret chamber beneath the fireplace base, rising like a periscope with the push of a button.

God is in the details in this house, although there were some devilish complications installing Him there. The kitchen's artistic centerpiece is a high-

tech aluminum light fixture that Suyama designed and Herb Ershig built, and which, Herb confirms, was a great deal more work than its clean, simple geometry seemed to promise. (The whole house was like that; in fact, it took 20 months—instead of the projected 10—to build.)

But for all its refinement, the house doesn't feel formal or restricting. It adapts gracefully to almost everything that is asked of it. When the Ershigs' son was married in the living room, the upstairs

exercise room became the perfect stage for a string quartet. Instead of being compartments for standardized activities, the spaces seem infinitely open to possibilities.

In exchange for that sense of abiding serenity, the house makes one nonnegotiable demand: it will tolerate no clutter. "I feel compelled to keep everything picked up," says Billee. "If I don't, it disrupts my serenity." ■

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