

Clarity of Simplicity

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GEORGE AND KIM Suyama were sipping clam chowder during a stopover on a members' community association tour in West Seattle. It was five years ago. George looked up from his bowl and surveyed the tranquil waterfront property. "I could live here," he said.

Their own beach-front house was just a few blocks away, designed by Suyama, founding partner of Suyama Peterson Deguchi Architects of Seattle. It bore the Suyama imprint: carefully proportioned, meticulous construction, large interior spaces and art-friendly walls. Near perfect, except that frequent ferry-traffic backups at their driveway and a growing desire for quiet space outdoors made them ready for a change.

And change is what they got. As it happened, the chowder-stop property came up for sale not long afterward. They bought, they sold, they stored most of their belongings and moved into a 550-square-foot, 1940s-era cabin on the property's beach. There they made plans to demolish the main residence and build a new home.

Suyama had a big-house vision: 4,000-square-feet big. Yet as he worked on the design, he and Kim began to appreciate the simplicity and ease that came from living in small quarters. "After all, we were two people, two cats, and how much space do we need?" he recalls.

His revised plan called for 1,800 square feet on a single level. After long preparation, they broke ground in November of 2001.

The 50-foot-wide, 250-foot-deep lot sloping down to the beach was a challenge. Because of the grade, soil and groundwater factors, engineers called for expensive pin piles to support the house. When excavation began, he discovered that if they dug out a little more they could pour an engineer-approved



George and Kim Suyama, who are still getting acquainted with their new house, grab magazines and test the light at their main entry-area patio, which has barbecue equipment, in-floor heat and a fireplace. The space can be enclosed if they someday need a street-level bedroom.



Glass walls meet near the main entry. A steel tray of common pebbles underscores the dual nature of a design where indoors meets outdoors. The reflecting pool has a teak deck; nearby free-standing privacy walls will bounce winter's ambient light where it's needed.

foundation, eliminate the pin piles, save money and have a useful daylight basement — 1,000 more square feet.

Suyama's deft change of strategy is typical of a seasoned architect or builder — one who learns from a site and responds accordingly. He was well-trained for it. After receiving his architecture degree from the University of Washington in the 1960s, he worked with Ralph Anderson and Gene Zema, both well-known Northwest Style and Modernist architects who made their mark in Seattle. In 1971 he founded George Suyama Architects, as the present-day firm was known until this year. Suyama is noted for producing high-end architecture strong on design and detail.

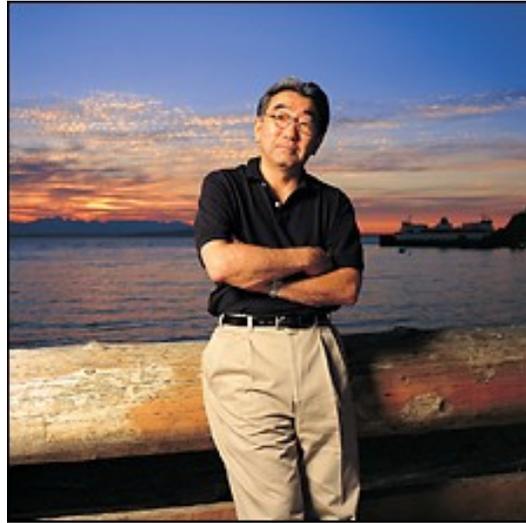
Coming down the walk toward the front gate, Suyama pauses. "It's beautiful when you come home at night," he says. "When you are standing there, the horizon and water and wall sort of align themselves. You get that glistening."

Seen from the street, the roof line of the single-car garage/office and adjoining concrete wall suggests a modified picnic shelter, just the informal look Suyama envisioned. A pivoting door leads into the first of two outdoor patios defined by masonry walls.

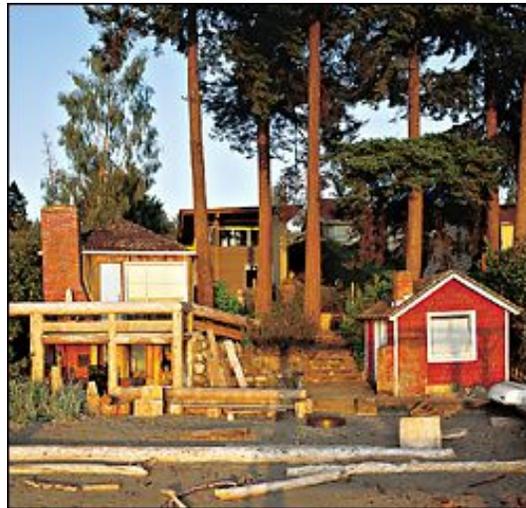
Light-colored exterior walls stand alone as sculptural elements, offering privacy or becoming part of the garden enclosure. "The idea was to get light in here without any screening," Suyama explains, "but it also has to do with the continuation of water," including the pool of recirculating water that is a ribbon to tie the length of the house to the Sound.

"That was Bruce's idea," Suyama says, referring to the landscape architect for the project, Bruce Hinckley, and his firm, Alchemie.

The patios face a row of cedars and bamboo. This is a cozy spot, where the garage and adjoining wall protect the south side, a wide



Architect George Suyama is an exacting professional with a strong interest in the arts and new ideas. He's also a fly-fisherman, a collector of assorted memorabilia and a link to Seattle's architectural heritage.



The Suyamas lived 4 1/2 years in the cabin on the left as they designed and built their house. They came to love their time under the trees, and feel they travel both climate and time zones in the short walk down from the main house. The small structure at right is an old fishing shack.

roof overhangs, and heated concrete floors and a fireplace keep things warm.

Simplicity also flows from dual function. The dining and sitting area was configured to accommodate an 18-foot-long, single-plank dining table, made from recycled fir, which seats 22 and doubles as a work table.

On the north side of the house, about halfway down a flight of stairs to the basement library and entertainment area, is the master suite, the only designated bedroom. A glass wall in the master bathroom faces a 12-foot-long reflecting pool. A bather relaxing in the soaking tub is at about the same level as the outside water. Walls pivot out like wings from a cube-like module in the center of the room to reveal shower hardware and to screen bathers from the sleeping area; otherwise, bathroom and bedroom have no barrier between. It's pushing the envelope, says Suyama.

Separated from the new house by gardens and a walkway, the cabin now serves as guest quarters. It gives expression to another side of Suyama's personality: the funky side, as he puts it, the part that fly-fishes off the beach and delights in folk art, bric-a-brac and novel stuff from the 1940s. If the cabin weren't there, the house may have been more "aggressive," Suyama says; there would have been more opportunity to get closer to the Sound. Instead, the new house is "a reserved, tree-house kind of sensibility. This house wanted to be a counterpoint to the cabin, a visual foil, a backdrop and not a competition."

Suyama acknowledges that after seeing the cabin, "People come in and say, 'Why'd you ever move?' " He answers by telling a story. While designing the house, the couple bought a little condominium in Vancouver, B.C., a "kind of minimal worker's condominium, where the bathroom doesn't even have a door. Kind of paring it down to nothing, going to the extreme. It seemed to do something to you, to be in a space like that, when you can take it back to that sort of baseline.

"I think most of us are living in a very restrictive



This view of the west end of the house has what the architect calls a reserved, tree-house sensibility. The library/media room, center, has a deck, above, reachable through the great room. This side of the house is partly shaded by tall firs. (A neighbor's roof is visible behind the hedge, at right.)



This all-season patio, equipped for outdoor dining and informal gatherings, ranked high on the architect's list of priorities. The main entry is just left of the floor light. Part of a reflecting pool is visible between the table and lamp.

situation with all the stuff around us, with all the things that we do with our lives so that we have no clue about how to really live. I think architecture can give you a clue.

"Some places start to viscerally affect people. Then I think they might start thinking about it."

