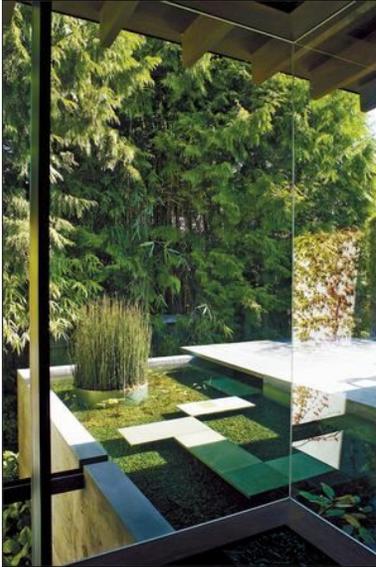


Blurring the line between inside and out

Debra Prinzing, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, May 26, 2006

<http://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Nw-Style-Blurring-the-line-between-inside-and-1204360.php#photo-668213>



A wall of glass showcases a line of evergreens that act as a figurative wall for the interior of the house.



The cabin features design elements found in traditional Japanese residential architecture, including two screened porches that flank both sides of the main living space and run the length of the house.

Sometimes the most comfortable rooms in the house are outside.

That's how Seattle architect George Suyama and his wife, Kim Suyama, say they feel about the many roomlike spaces tucked into the alcoves, courts and covered terraces of their airy West Seattle home.

"We wanted the garden to be the dominant design premise for the house," George Suyama explained. "The garden drove the architecture."

The couple's home and landscape are featured in the just-published book "Outside the Not So Big House" by award-winning landscape designer Julie Moir Messervy and best-selling author-architect Sarah Susanka.

In a chapter titled "Parallel Paths," Messervy and Susanka praise Suyama and landscape architect Bruce Hinckley of Seattle-based Alchemie for their minimal yet elegant design approach. The authors wrote: "Landscape and building are components in a singular sculpture for living in. It's truly a remarkable illustration of what *katei*, the all-encompassing Japanese term for 'house and garden,' can really mean."

Like many homeowners who are drawn to a property for its natural beauty, the Suyamas cherish their site's low-bank orientation with its saltwater, sand and views of the ferries traveling between the Fautleroy dock and Vashon Island.

That the lot is slender and steep didn't daunt George Suyama, an award-winning architect whose residential projects have received accolades from the national and international design press.

The couple first discovered this spot in the late 1980s when visiting friends who owned a home on the property. They enjoyed a comfortable waterside meal beneath the tall firs. "I said, 'This is where I want to live,'" Suyama recalled.

He didn't think much of the existing home at the top of the site, but loved the feeling of the land, and was drawn to a pair of rustic cabins at the water's edge.

In 1998, the Suyamas learned that the property was for sale and made an offer to purchase it. "We were third in line, but the other people eventually dropped off," Suyama said. "It was meant to be."

While spending nearly five years designing and building a new residence, the Suyamas lived in the two 1930s cabins, the largest of which was 550 square feet.

Kim Suyama recalls the carefree sense of living beachside, a feeling she and her husband wanted to bring with them to the new, more contemporary home. Suyama and Hinckley collaborated on a design scheme that seamlessly places a 2,600-square-foot home into its surroundings of native plants, mature conifers, sandy beach and saltwater shore.

It is the presence of water that serves as a metaphor for connecting the new and the old, said Hinckley, who likens his collaboration with Suyama as "comparable to playing improvisational jazz." The men came up with no fewer than seven different schemes while devising the new home and landscape. "The one we ultimately selected is the most unorthodox," Hinckley said.

It's impossible to tell where Suyama's design for the wood frame and concrete structure and Hinckley's design for the serene landscape begin or end. This transparency celebrates the site, using simple, elemental shapes, forms and materials to convey the best of a Northwest-inspired environment.

Echoes of picnic shelters at nearby Lincoln Park quietly remind its occupants of West Seattle's history as a summer getaway community.

The idea of an outdoor shelter also appealed to Hinckley, who recalls spending much of his own West Seattle childhood not far from the Suyama property, playing, eating and sleeping in a covered structure that his parents built. "We used to live out there in the summer. It had a real influence on me," he said.

Suyama's design for the home is based on a 2-foot grid. Although the grid is sometimes square and other times conveyed in vertical or horizontal bands, the shapes are pleasing and anything but boring. "I was worried it would feel too ordered, but now I think it feels calm," he said.

Exposed posts, beams and frames are stained dark fir, "the color of tree bark," Suyama said. The main floor -- essentially a single room with spaces for cooking, dining and relaxing -- has a visual



The protected front courtyard becomes another usable room of the house, allowing for more interior-exterior continuity.

connection to Puget Sound, uninterrupted because windows at the northwest and southwest corners of the home are formed by unframed pieces of glass.

South-facing windows are limited and the home's primary windows face north. "Because the home opens to the north, we take advantage of reflected light," Suyama said.

A dramatic change in grade and a desire for privacy motivated decisions to orient the home toward the north. In doing so, the Suyamas created intimate outdoor areas that they enjoy as much as the inside spaces.

"We created a space that is in opposition to a typical waterfront property where people use as much glass as possible," Hinckley said. "Here, we have a covered patio space that has north light, is wrapped by water and has the added outdoor fire element. It's serene, elegant and calming."

Upon entering the gate from the street, the first thing visitors see is a gallerylike space, which Hinckley calls the "spring box" room. Paved with a mixture of gray-green crushed gravel and partially enclosed by vine-covered walls, the entry court's dominant feature is a channel of water that flows west under a cantilevered outdoor dining deck. The water spills over a retaining wall and lands in a rectangular pool on the same level as the lower-level master bedroom and bath.

"We use nature to create art in a new way," Suyama said.

Dining and entertaining spaces flank the home's front door. To the left is living room-style seating with a gas fireplace. Overhead, the roof of glass allows light to illuminate the semienclosed space, casting parallel shadow patterns as the sun moves above the roof.

The dining area is protected from the elements by a half-wall. Even though these areas are east-facing, they are 10 degrees warmer than the temperature by the beach, Kim Suyama said.

"When we lived in the cabin, the wind was often blowing. Here, we're always out of the wind. We've been out here in the middle of winter and it's been comfortable," she said.

The inside-outside motif nearly doubles the couple's living spaces. "We spend so much time inside and we all should spend more time outside," George Suyama said. "As long as you provide shelter from moisture, you become more aware of the outside and you use it more."