

Home Tour: George Suyama

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As part of a new home tour series, produced in partnership with Sonos and West Elm, architect George Suyama invites us into his woodland refuge.

Beneath a gray November sky, cargo ships navigate the choppy waters of the Pacific Northwest. In the distance, historic houseboats and grandiose estates illuminate Seattle's tree-lined coast. A brief swath of green between the Fauntleroy Ferry Terminal and Brace Point marks the existence of The Junsei House.

Junsei translates loosely from Japanese to "purity." The name wasn't architect and owner George Suyama's first choice (pronounced 'juns-eye', he thinks "it's hard to say"), but it captured the essence of a structure so harmonious with nature that it dissolves into its wooded surroundings. Long and linear, the restrained form references a traditional maritime shed. Suyama resolved to minimize disruption to the region's native cedar trees, whose roots compose an intricate web beneath the site; the elevated home tiptoes above the arboreal network on stilts.

The house evolved from Suyama's desire to live sustainably, and by extension to design environmentally respectful projects. "Architects tend to keep adding details, little things to make a project interesting," Suyama explains. "We tried to do the exact opposite. We tried to reduce the architectural moves to the fewest we could get away with." He chose steel and plywood for their modesty, the latter an unusual choice for a luxury home but arguably the most befitting; stained to match cedar bark, it's difficult to tell where the grove ends and Junsei begins. Windowpanes reveal color gradations that allude to the building's plywood skin, another tactic to eliminate visual noise. The only intervention is a white cube that extends to the basement and contains the kitchen, bathroom and sleeping quarters. "It's one gesture, big and small at the same time," he says.

Junsei was Suyama's third attempt at designing the perfect shelter. The first house on the land, a primary residence he shares with his wife and two cats, is a "funky," 2,000-sq-ft structure called Fauntleroy. The second, a pair of cabins, Suyama describes as minimal and "very refined." Like a proverbial Goldilocks, he deems Junsei just right: "It allowed all these things that I wasn't able to fit into the first two houses. It might be the evolution of where we had to be."

The architect retreats to the home's tree-shrouded living room to thumb through magazines, dissect a design idea, or get lost in a classical melody. The space wasn't designed with acoustics in mind, but Suyama says sound is so flawlessly balanced that it's an architectural element. "Music sets the mood and becomes the heart of whatever I'm doing. It offers a fallback so everything's not so empty."

Sound system aside, the house is free from technology. The absence of a humming television or buzzing smartphone is palpable. "You don't know exactly what it is, but you feel as if you've been gripped by nature," the architect explains.

If Suyama seeks solitude at Junsei, he encourages an alternate experience among visitors. "The most important thing is that when they walk in they immediately feel comfortable," says Suyama. "That really helps extend a dialogue between people." He opens the house to friends and family for overnight stays featuring dinner and conversation. Local politicians are encouraged to host donors and constituents in the house, and to speak openly to the issues that affect them. The architect has fashioned Junsei as a cocoon: a safe environment for genuine interaction with nature, family and the community.

It's unlikely the ships on the sound are aware of its existence. There are no wooden stairways leading from the beach, no porch overlooking the shore. "There's a sense of calm and security that you get when you close yourself up a little. We haven't genetically changed since walking upright, so deep down we like being protected as if we're in a cave," Suyama contemplates. "We've always had the prospect of refuge in our philosophic library."