

Thoroughly Modern

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<http://www.komonews.com/news/business/Thoroughly-modern-Luxury-buyers-ravenous-for-sleek-contemporary-style-223702011.html>



Jay Deguchi, architect of the Leschi house remodel, relaxes at his Seattle firm, Suyama Peterson Deguchi. Photo: Marcus R. Donner, Puget Sound Business Journal

One of the most stunning homes in Seattle's Leschi area rises from the shore of Lake Washington as if it does not care to be seen.

The Eisenberg residence is a monochrome structure with few adornments and a flat roofline. Sided in carbon black horizontal cedar, the house looks like its own shadow.

A comprehensive remodel, completed in December, borrowed a very old technology for its skin — a Japanese technique of charring wood called shou sugi ban. So just as the Eisenbergs' house was nearing completion, its builders set it on fire.

The process, which dates back some 300 years, preserves and protects the wood. A blowtorch is used to char the siding before attaching it. The char keeps the wood from rotting, and repels termites. To set off the ebony-colored wood, builders fastened the siding with stainless steel nails, leaving the heads fully visible.

The home, designed by architect Jay Deguchi of the Seattle firm Suyama Peterson Deguchi, is one of seven featured in the inaugural Explore Design Home Tour on Sept. 14, curated by the Seattle chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The homes, which also include townhomes and an apartment building, were chosen for their inspirational, forward-looking designs, with consideration given to how well they solved practical problems and enhanced the surrounding neighborhood.

"People here are not as egocentric as in other places," Deguchi said. "They tend to want to meld in ... and the architecture reflects that."

The firm's understated aesthetic has long appealed to those with a level of wealth that is hardly understated. The firm has been a favorite of Starbucks chief Howard Schultz, as well as

Nordstroms, Grinsteins and Benaroyas.

FROTHING

Whether at the very high end, or closer to the middle, the appetite for this spare, modern style of residential architecture is “frothing-at-the-mouth ravenous,” said broker Heidi Ward, who, with her builder husband Rick Ward, owns 360 Modern, which specializes in “modern” listings.

“It’s not uncommon for me to work with clients for seven years,” Heidi Ward said. “The real amazing homes don’t come around often, and the demand far outstrips the supply. When they are available, they fly off the shelves.”

The demand for what is broadly known as modern grew noticeably about 10 years ago, Ward said, as buyers softened on traditional homes with smaller windows, separate kitchens, and single-purpose rooms such as dining rooms and formal living rooms. Modern homes, by contrast, tend to combine those common rooms into one large space and merge kitchens into living areas. Modern homes also tend to place a larger premium on light and outdoor space.

One hundred years ago, the Arts and Crafts movement was the modern architecture of its day, shunning the decorative frills of Victorian design. The new style was defined by visible, structural elements (exposed beams), clean lines, natural materials and a more wholesome relationship with the outdoors — also hallmarks of what we think of as modern today.

The two fundamental characteristics of true modern design, said architect Matt Hutchins, are a floor plan that incorporates outdoor space and an “honest expression of materials.”

Hutchins is one of the principals of Cast Architecture in Seattle, which specializes in modern, sustainable design.

“The style is well-suited to the issues we have today of sustainability and density,” Hutchins said. “Modern architecture tends to fit the Northwest culture, which is why you’re seeing it more.”

True modern architecture, he added, doesn’t have a defined style. It’s also a response to the climate.

“What is modern in Arizona,” he said, “is very different from what is modern in the Northwest.”

‘WHAT REALLY MATTERS’

For Linda and Ian Eisenberg, whose remodeling project started with the idea of redoing the kitchen, the modern style was embodied in Deguchi’s attempt to “pare it down to what really matters the most.”

“(The Eisenbergs) are pretty modest people,” Deguchi said, “and that’s how they want to be perceived. They didn’t want the house to be ostentatious ... the kind of house that shouts ‘I’m the biggest.’ Their house is just kind of there. We wanted to be sensitive to neighbors and not obliterate their views on the other side.”

In the era of tear-down mansions, the Leschi project was relatively humble. The footprint of the original 1949 home remained the same. The design added a partial third floor for a new master bedroom, but otherwise the home’s skeleton did not grow appreciably. The house began with

3,400 square feet on two levels; the third-floor addition increased the total to about 3,900 square feet. Most of the work involved adding windows (and lake views), opening up the interior and optimizing an existing interior courtyard.

The couple, who have three young boys, also wanted to make the house more family-friendly and to remodel the kitchen so they could add a dishwasher and operable windows. They liked the general layout of their original home, which did not change even when the renovation plan expanded to the whole house.

"We wanted something simple, less flashy and more subtle," Ian Eisenberg said. "That's what we like about Jay's work."

The centerpiece of the main floor is the eastern wall, which faces the lake. A steel beam was added to the framing to support floor-to-ceiling, glass accordion doors that can be opened and moved to the side, leaving no barrier between the living room and the outdoors.

The home's floors are bare, sealed concrete on the main floor and basement level, carpeted on the third floor. The two steel staircases have no risers; treads appear to float. Doorways and windows were finished without trim or casing; the look is spare and minimal.

In a similar spirit, cabinetry for the main floor bathroom is made of unstained, sealed plywood. Other bathroom cabinets are more refined, made of vertical grain fir and oak, but also unstained and unpainted. The walls of the home are painted white.

Apart from the fire-darkened siding, the most striking feature of the home's exterior is a subtle one: eaves that extend about five feet past the walls. They shade the windows comfortably in the summer, while allowing in plenty of light in the winter, and provide the occupants with a sense of privacy and containment.

A FIRM'S HERITAGE

Deguchi's designs emphasize form and function over the flourishes of more traditional homes. The philosophy is a trademark of the firm, started by George Suyama in 1971 — Ric Peterson joined the firm as partner in 1983; Deguchi joined the firm in 1992 and became a partner 10 years later.

Suyama and Deguchi, both Japanese Americans, have said the legacy of internment camps has informed their approach to architecture. Suyama was a toddler when his family was ordered into a camp, as were more than 120,000 other Japanese Americans during World War II. Deguchi, who's about 20 years younger than Suyama, did not live in one, but his older relatives did.

"Whether you like it or not, it's part of who you are," said Deguchi of the camps, where families lived in what were little more than plywood sheds, usually wrapped in tar paper. "Regardless of whether you've gone through the camps, those sensibilities pervade ... of trying to be as efficient and economical as possible."

Even when working with clients who could afford to be flashy if they wanted to.