

Nature informs architecture of Garden Oaks home

By Diane Cowen

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The band of darkened wood trim outside Dianne Murata and Robb Bunge's Garden Oaks home rests atop even darker horizontal lumber, visually taking your hand to pull you indoors.

It's a subtle touch not lost on first-time visitors, who likely can't stop taking in the tiniest details that separate this home from the hundreds of bungalows that are slowly giving way to more spacious, 21st-century designs here.

The architecture of this nearly 4,000-square-foot home is hard to define. There's a huge nod to Murata's Japanese ancestry, but there's also a midcentury-modern feel to the lines drawn by the couple's architect, Jay Deguchi of Suyama Peterson Deguchi in Seattle.

And there's no escaping his Pacific Northwest touch, in which nature informs how walls, windows and doors combine into a refuge from the physical and mental clutter of modern life.

Perhaps the home's most unusual feature is its exterior siding, created by burning planks of cedar using a centuries-old Japanese method called *shou sugi ban*.

Deguchi encouraged Murata and Bunge to use this wood for their home, but the couple thought it was too expensive.

One Sunday afternoon, Deguchi tested how easy it would be to do it themselves. He took his three children into their driveway where he'd placed weed burners and a pile of lumber.

His wife protested - "She was like, 'Why are you giving the kids blow torches?' " he said.

That's how Murata found herself, along with anyone she could persuade to help her, in her own driveway with 7,700 linear feet of cedar planks and her own blow torch. They got instructions from Deguchi, watched several YouTube videos and started charring planks until they bubbled up like alligator hide. Then they wet-broomed the char off for a smooth finish that is resistant to bugs and rot and, ironically, is fire-retardant.

The home's roof evokes images of old Buddhist temples with its low pitch and wide brim that shades the generous front porch.

It's all part of the welcoming feeling Murata and Bunge wanted for their home - an external signal that a neighborly family lives within.

At the same time grand and intimate, that roof and its overhang were also designed to make the two-story foyer feel larger than it is. Step inside, and you're greeted by mostly empty space.

There's no table or cabinet with knick-knacks or vases of flowers. Its art-free walls are a stark white.

Instead, a tall grid of vertical-grain fir draws the eye upward to a dramatic light fixture resembling a four-tiered bright-red umbrella.

Though the Murata-Bunge home clearly is Asian-inspired inside and out, the couple didn't set out to build something that specific.

Their goals, Murata said, were more elemental. They wanted something inviting to neighbors as well as something that would draw the lush landscape indoors.

"We also wanted it to be classic so we didn't have to redo the kitchen every five years, and we wanted it to be family friendly. Kids are going to break stuff, drop stuff, scratch things," Murata said.

The family's front and back feature big trees that provide plenty of shade, and Murata's green thumb means a well-organized variety of annuals and perennials that thrive in our hot, humid climate.

And they're all visible from the entire, L-shaped lower level through the massive Fleetwood sliding doors that line every room. From her dining room table, living room sofa or even her own bed, she, Bunge and their children are surrounded by nature.

Not all of the home's design is about its aesthetic value. The complicated system of wood trim above all of those sliding doors - or as Deguchi calls it, the "belly band" - is done in layers, with each 3/8 of an inch different from the next. Not having it all flush, he said, serves a functional aspect since wood moves and changes with temperature and moisture content.

Deguchi impressed the importance of this network of trim upon the home's builder, Erin Stetzer of Stetzer Builders, who had to "forget about everything we've ever done and reinvent who we are" for the project.

The "sticks and bricks" were the easy part. The hard part was slowing down the planning to educate tradesmen working on the home that their standard methods likely didn't apply here.

"When you see the house, everything looks simple, but it was not." She described the trim work as being milled to specifications in Seattle and then shipped to Houston like a disassembled puzzle.

Technology, of course, made Deguchi's long-distance role possible. While there were a few in-person visits, the architect, builder and homeowners could monitor progress via emails, texts and FaceTime phone calls.

And there were geographic differences. Deguchi had done one other project in Houston but hadn't quite gotten a handle on the bigger-is-better lifestyle in Texas. Murata wanted everything bigger.

"She picked two lots and put them together, wanting more square footage in a neighborhood that does not have houses of that scale," Deguchi said. "And she wanted a bigger garage they could fit a truck in, even though they don't have a truck. She kept pushing, bigger and bigger. We had a lot of conversations about whether that was appropriate to the block they live on."

The arduous process took a couple of years from concept to move-in, but Murata said she and her family came out happier for it.

"(In the beginning), we sat down and talked about how we would do this," she said. "We would learn from it, be stronger as a family and have a good time. We always went back to those intentions and values."

<http://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/article/Nature-informs-architecture-of-Garden-Oaks-home-7990129.php?t=8e3e595db0438d9cbb&cmpid=twitter-premium#photo-10230329>