

Suyama: A Complex Serenity' illuminates the career of a prizewinning Seattle architect

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The San Juan Island McAdams home. The owners said architect Suyama grasped "the idea of a simple life within a small dwelling."



The sun porch of the Grinstein house in Medina, designed by George Suyama. Glass panels that open and close can make this either an indoor space or an outdoor space, taking advantage of the view over Lake Washington.

At a pivotal point in his career, in the 1980s, Seattle architect George Suyama dutifully acquainted himself with every discussed trend and theory in the field of contemporary architecture.

Nothing he read made him happy.

As Grant Hildebrand notes in his smartly written and beautifully packaged coffee-table book, "Suyama: A Complex Serenity," Suyama was put off by "the nearly complete absence of any serious attention to the human experience within the architectural space."

For Suyama, founder of the Seattle architecture firm Suyama Peterson Deguchi, human experience should be the be-all-and-end-all of housing design. To his mind, architecture — imaginatively practiced — is "a tool that might allow one to live in a different and better way." A number of critics would say Suyama, the winner of half a dozen awards from the American Institute of Architects, has accomplished just that.

Even for Seattleites who've never hired an architect to custom-design a house — that would be most of us — the 69-year-old Suyama is a notable figure on the local arts scene. He may be best known for "Suyama Space," the gallery adjoining his Belltown architectural offices that has housed installations by Trimpin, John Grade and other cutting-edge artists. But he has also served on the boards of the Henry Art Gallery, On the Boards and other arts organizations and was a member of the Seattle Arts Commission for two terms.

Hildebrand, a University of Washington professor emeritus of architecture and art history, provides some brisk biographical background on Suyama — born in 1942, interned with his family for three years in Minidoka, schooled in Seattle — before focusing on the projects that have made his name over the past three decades.



The Kemper cabin in Skagit County. Architect Suyama's concept was of a "permanent tent" floating above the land.

Hildebrand also places Suyama in our regional architectural history, noting the indirect influence of Lionel Pries on him. Pries, a director of the UW's architectural program from the 1930s to 1958 (when he was fired for being gay), looked to architectural examples from Asia, Polynesia, Mexico and Native American tradition as much as any European and American school of architecture. He had a powerful influence on his students, including Gene Zema, who was the first to hire Suyama. By the time Suyama attended the UW in the 1960s, Pries was gone. But through Zema, Suyama was exposed to Pries' eclectic, globe-hopping design sensibility, becoming especially smitten with Japanese architecture, with its "complete integration ... of building and garden."

A seamless connection between indoors and outdoors eventually became the hallmark of Suyama's work. Examples include a house he designed for himself and his wife near the Fauntleroy ferry terminal in West Seattle, some small-scale retreats he created for clients in the San Juan Islands and an airy, ambling lakeside home done for Gerald and Lyn Grinstein in Medina.

Suyama's aim, Hildebrand tells us, was "to eliminate visual noise." But that didn't mean the buildings weren't complex. As in a Bach fugue, their overall rhythmic momentum was readily apprehended. But the way in which the bits and pieces dovetailed together could be dizzyingly intricate. In one vast hybrid of private home and personal art gallery on the Eastside, Hildebrand notes, floor surfaces, walls and ceilings form numerous planes that seem to float and harmonize within the house, without fully filling the space they occupy.

Suyama's designs can offer "significant challenges for the builder," says Hildebrand. George Schuchart, the contractor for the Grinstein house, found the challenges "real enough" yet "surprisingly rewarding" — so much so that he and his wife commissioned Suyama to design their house in Broadmoor.

To Hildebrand, Suyama's Fauntleroy house — winner of an AIA Honor Award for Washington Architecture — is the epitome of his aesthetic.

"All seems composed, all seems resolved," Hildebrand writes. "Yet this is an architecture as rich in ambiguities and multivalences as anything proposed by postmodernism or deconstructionism."

The distinctions between outside and inside are continually uncertain in it.

"Is it a room, or a terrace, or a garden folly?" Hildebrand asks of one gathering place in the house. "Do 'open' and 'closed' have any unambiguous meaning here?"

The effects Hildebrand describes can be so complicated that his prose occasionally gets snarled in knots: "The low wall that slightly pinches the middle zone of the living space is, conceptually, the southern face of the prism that is slid into the major volume a half-level below the living space."

But for the most part, Hildebrand eloquently illuminates the way Suyama's houses are puzzles that yield up their subtleties and secrets "only slowly ... through a seemingly orchestrated processional experience."

As one satisfied client remarks, "Every day I discover something new, every day a surprise."