

When a Tree Is Key to Home Design

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George Suyama, a principal of Seattle architecture firm Suyama Peterson Deguchi, designed a house next door to his main house in Seattle. WIQAN ANG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Five years after architect George Suyama built himself a new house on the shores of Seattle's Puget Sound, the house next door went up for sale. The price tag: \$1.2 million for a small, derelict cabin on a narrow, overgrown lot measuring a little more than a third of an acre. Mr. Suyama didn't need more space. He already had a house and two other cabins (one just for storage) on his own property next door. But what he did want was a large cedar tree on the neighbor's lot that acted as a natural buffer between the two properties.

After the derelict cabin was torn down, Mr. Suyama let the tree determine the shape of a new house that he would use as a personal retreat. Mr. Suyama, 75, a principal of the firm Suyama

Peterson Deguchi, designed a long, narrow (80 feet long and 18 feet wide) house with 1,990 square feet of living space. Inside, 22-foot high ceilings give the structure volume and make it feel spacious.

Mr. Suyama believes the ideal house is like an enclosure set in nature: Though it's impossible to make it disappear into the landscape entirely, the goal is to create a serene space that connects its occupants with the outside.

To that end, the interior walls are made from construction-grade fir stained to resemble the bark on the trees outside. The windows look like they're carved out of the walls because they lack wood trim. Galvanized steel beams frame both ends of the house, which is clad in corrugated metal, eliminating the need for structural trusses to hold up the roof.

"Every decision was based on whether it was absolutely necessary," he says. That tone is set as soon as a visitor enters the front door. Rubber coat pegs along the hallway eliminate the need for a coat closet. The kitchen, with cabinetry from IKEA, is monochromatic and minimal. The cabinets and a long island are all white. The round dining table is just 26-inches high and encircled with wood chairs; sitting lower makes people feel more relaxed, like at the beach, says Mr. Suyama.

Off the hallway from the front entrance, a curtained doorway leads to the home's only bedroom. An open-tread staircase gives the feel of ascending through space. At the top is a loft with a sitting area, a flat-screen TV and a big drafting table where Mr. Suyama intends to work. Shelves hold tortoise shells, old pencil sharpeners, camera lenses, rulers—all objects with shapes he likes.

The home, which was completed in 2015, took several years to design and build and cost about \$900,000.

Mr. Suyama and his wife, Kim, bought a house in the neighborhood, called Fauntleroy Cove, more than 30 years ago. After they had been there for 10 years, their neighbor in back cut down one of Mr. Suyama's favorite trees and "took the soul out" of his property. "I found out that way that if you can control what's valuable and sacred to you, you do it no matter what the cost."

The couple looked for a new house for three years, but homes rarely come on the market in their neighborhood—listings are usually publicized by word-of-mouth. Then a friend told them about a property about a half-mile away on the other side of the ferry dock. It had both a Mediterranean-style house and a 550-square-foot wood cabin by the beach. The Suyamas bought this property off market for \$785,000 in 1998.

Deciding the existing 3,000-square-foot Mediterranean home was architecturally “too horrible” to live in, they moved into the cabin. “It was more authentic,” Mr. Suyama explains.

They lived in the tiny cabin for 4½ years before tearing down the main house and replacing it with a 2,220-square-foot, one-bedroom, two-bathroom house in 2003. It was designed to have minimal visual noise so as to not overpower the cabin, which is now used as a guesthouse, Mr. Suyama says.

From that house, which is his main house, Mr. Suyama can’t see the new house, allowing him to escape the routines—and the family cats. He reads magazines and listens to music there, like he does on vacation. “It’s so different. It feels like I can do something there other than what I would normally do,” he says.

KEY COSTS

Kitchen: \$19,000

Steel shelving: \$2,800

Wood flooring: \$18,950

Windows: \$33,200

Plywood walls: \$28,300

Exterior steel cladding and roof:
\$49,200

Light fixtures: \$800

Dining table: \$3,800