

Custom Home

The Art and Craft of Custom Home Building ■ November/December 2004



2004
**Pacesetter
Awards**

On Site

Near Escape

An island retreat in Puget Sound
is closer than it seems.

By Bruce D. Snider

Built on a low sand dune between
a salt marsh and the shore, this
weekend home focuses on
the view, subtly screening
out its neighbors.

Seattle may be past its go-go golden age of instant dot-com fortunes, but it still ranks as one of America's most livable big cities, and one of its choicest features is the number of islands a short ferry ride away. For those who can afford one, a weekend home on an island in Puget Sound is a dream with a very practical foundation. The trip from office to oceanfront porch can take less time than commuters elsewhere spend reaching the suburbs. But proximity is not an unmixed blessing. Weekenders are numerous on the more accessible islands, especially in the summer, as are full-time residents who work on the islands or commute to the city. To enjoy the dream, one must learn to share. This new weekend home shares its strip of beachfront with a motley parade of, shall we say, less distinguished houses. But while it clearly outclasses

its neighbors, the new building also minds its manners, with an austere shingled exterior that plays down its superior breeding. For those invited inside, however, the building becomes a world of its own, creating the very pleasant illusion that it has this island all to itself.

The effect begins before one even enters the house. The wood-frame structure rests on a "plinth" of stone-faced foundation walls and elevated patios. As one ascends to the entry patio, parallel wings of the H-shaped plan discreetly screen out the neighbors. And when the front door swings wide, the embrace is complete. The door opens into a voluminous space bracketed by twin stone fireplaces and spanned by four massive wood roof trusses resting on stone masonry columns. Comprising entry, dining, and living spaces, the room recalls a medieval great hall. But with the Puget Sound

view filling six French doors opposite the entry and light streaming in through dormer windows above, the feeling is anything but Dark Ages.

"In designing a house like this, I'll start with the principal room and kind of work outward from there," says architect Stuart Silk. Here, in a home designed for parties, that focus centered on the great room. Given the large scale of the room, Silk sized its constituent elements accordingly. The chimneys carry their full width all the way to the ridge. Each stone column is wide enough in the north-south direction to give a sense of heft but narrow along its east-west face, so as not to block the views. The trusses—fabricated from glue-laminated beams and clad, like most of the interior, in clear Douglas fir—are stout enough to do the job, but simple enough to avoid distraction. "I wanted to do a





Clear Douglas fir roof framing caps the great room in dramatic fashion. Fir wall paneling, fir ceilings, and end-grain fir block flooring give this large house an all-of-a-piece feeling.

There is no home entertainment center in this great room; all the entertainment one needs is up overhead. The elaborate composition of trusses, purlins, rafters, and decking boards—all of clear Douglas fir, and somehow managing to evoke both fishing shack and Japanese temple—is a wonder to behold. And if you've built anything you must know that it was not easily put together. To get the ridge elevation right and to make sure that all the purlin and rafter bays came out equal, builder Donald Heggenes lofted the roof sections at full scale on the concrete slab. Because the glue-laminated chords of the trusses are clad in fir (the vertical webbing is solid fir), all of the connections were made with kerf plates, some of them 3 feet long, let in to saw-cuts in the beams. "You're blind drilling to hit those bolt holes in the plates," Heggenes says. "Then we had to countersink the bolt heads and washers. There are 280 bolts inside those four sections." Rather than lift the completed trusses into position, he says, "I had them all assembled on the ground, and I took them apart and reassembled them up in the air. The beams themselves weren't very big or heavy, so we just man-handled them up there." With the trusses in place, Heggenes and his crew laid up the rest of the roof system—the 4x4 purlins, the 2x2s that run from eaves to ridge, the 1x6 decking boards—"layer on layer on layer, and once that finish ceiling was done I built another roof, 2x8s, which had the insulation in it." As with any complex task, especially one executed aloft, planning was the key element. "I think there was more layout involved in that roof system than there was actually building it," Heggenes says. "In fact, I'm sure there was." —B.D.S.

Details: Truss Me



truss that didn't look like every other truss," says Silk, who characterizes the resulting design, and the fir purlin-and-board roof structure it supports, as "semi Japanese, semi Northwest." Doors and windows are proportionally oversized, with a head height of 8 feet and windowsills only inches from the floor. "We're doing a kind of Monticello deal with the windows," Silk points out, referring to the triple-hung windows Thomas Jefferson designed for his own dining room, which open high enough to serve as doors to an adjacent veranda. No one will climb through these windows, but their scale suits that of

both the building and the scenery outside. The two parallel, flanking wings open onto the great room, like separate buildings onto an interior courtyard. The east wing holds kitchen and service spaces at the first floor and a suite of children's rooms above. Knowing that guests tend to congregate in the kitchen, and not wanting to waste all the effort he had invested in the great room, Silk devised the kitchen as a subtle means of behavior modification. To make the room comfortable for the family but less inviting for larger groups, he said, "Let's squeeze this space as much as we can. Let's not put

a TV in there." The west wing sweetens the deal for party guests with an expansive game room at the first floor. A second stair reaches a private media room, a home office, and a loft-like seating area that overlooks the game room. The second-floor areas of the two-story wings are not contiguous, but Silk cut a window into each chimney and dropped the bottom chord of the trusses to create a balcony view over the great room from end to end. The master bedroom suite occupies its own annex at the westernmost end of the house.

Leaning on the stone sill of one of those chimney openings and looking through the intricate pattern of roof framing, builder Donald Heggenes allows that the great room posed the greatest challenge in building this house. Just working out the framing so that all the purlin bays ended up equal represented a significant effort. "I had to lay it out from the top down to make all the spacing line up," he says (see "Truss Me," above). But having been involved with building houses on this island for most of his 37 years, Heggenes takes for granted certain other factors that set this project apart.



The Builder: Small World

Living on an island is like living in a small town, only more so. "Anything that you say or do will be back to you before it ever leaves your mouth," says Donald Heggenes, who grew up on Washington state's Whidbey Island and runs the custom building company his father started there in 1967. But if the light-speed grapevine of an island community sounds intimidating to those accustomed to urban anonymity, it is a boon to a solid citizen like Heggenes. While his clientele is now exclusively from the mainland—"2 1/2 years ago was the last house we built for a year-round resident," he says—Heggenes still trades successfully on his reputation, and on his family's good name. "I'm a third-generation carpenter on the island," he says. And three generations of first-class work has earned a lot of goodwill for his business. "My name is not in any phone book," Heggenes says of his marketing strategy. "It's all by word of mouth." ■ Heggenes has done projects off the island—"on the other side," as he says—but only as favors for friends. He prefers to work not just on the island, but on its south end. "My radius is about 10 miles," he says. Building large projects is one way Heggenes makes the most of his small territory. Subcontracting a minimum of work is another. "We do our own foundations," he says. "My crew does the framing. We do all the finish." With a crew that varies from 3 to 12, on projects that range from \$500,000 to \$3 million, he averages \$3 million in annual volume. And where does he find carpenters with the skills to work at this level? "Most of my crew is native island guys," Heggenes says. "All of them are, in fact. I know which guys would be good to hire. Word travels pretty fast." —B.D.S.

Second Floor



First Floor



Because the site is essentially a sand dune, Heggenes had to build the house to float. He over-dug the foundation hole by 2 feet, then compacted fill in 6-inch lifts alternated with layers of reinforcing fabric. Soil conditions also influenced, of all things, window selection. On this exposed site, winds are often strong enough to blast the house with beach sand. "After 7 or 8 years, the glass will actually get etched," explains Heggenes, who installed windows and doors by Kolbe & Kolbe Millwork, which offers a special glass that resists etching.

Heggenes, who has seen his share of Pacific storms, describes the exhilarating view from the game room loft: "In the winter, when it blows 45 or 50 mph it seems like every day, you just sit up here and watch all that stuff come at you." On such days the house becomes a comforting refuge, bolstered by the solidity of stone masonry and the warmth of fir paneling. But this is a house for all seasons. On summer days, with French doors



thrown open, parties flow out onto the stone-cobbled patio and the compact skirt of lawn that backs the beach. Intimate spaces at the north side of the house present quieter views of marsh and stream. And despite the close quarters on this block, the house builds the illusion of great privacy. From every vantage point, this weekend retreat delivers on a promise that should be the envy of urbanites everywhere: a place that seems far away without being far away. ■

Project Credits: Builder: Heggenes Construction, Freeland, Wash.; Architect: Stuart Silk Architects, Seattle, Wash.; Living space: 7,843 square feet; Site: 13.5 acres; Construction cost: Withheld; Photographer: Benjamin Berschneider (except where noted).
 • Resources: Bathroom plumbing fixtures: Kohler, Circle 175 and Waterworks, Circle 176; Ceramic flooring/stone countertops: Ann Sacks, Circle 177; Dishwasher: Bosch, Circle 178; Doors/windows: Kolbe & Kolbe, Circle 179; In-floor radiant heat: Wirsbo, Circle 180; Kitchen plumbing fixtures: Elkay, Circle 181 and Franke, Circle 182; Oven: Dacor, Circle 183.

Twin opposing shed dormers lighten the voluminous roof of the great room. The chimney "window" gives the second-floor loft a view of the public space below.

