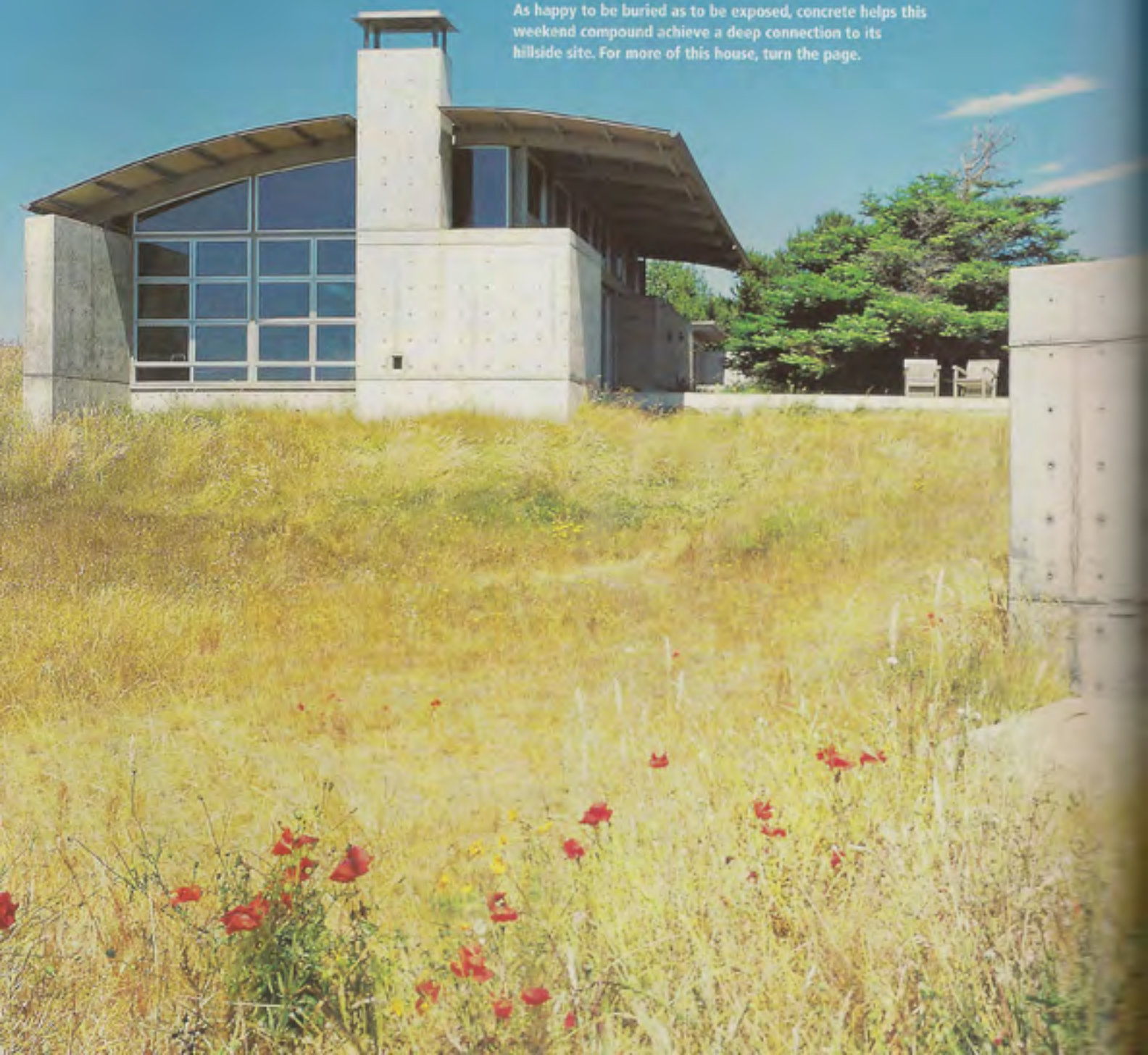


Portfolio

Mineral S

As happy to be buried as to be exposed, concrete helps this weekend compound achieve a deep connection to its hillside site. For more of this house, turn the page.



Spirits

Concrete inspires a different kind of custom home.

By Bruce D. Snider



Of all the materials that go into a custom home, it would be hard to find a pair more different than wood and concrete. Wood is light, resonant, flexible, flammable. Like us, it has cells; it was once alive. Wood has more in common with a carrot than it does with a concrete block. In most of North America, wood remains the principal structural material for light construction. And it is fine finish carpentry, as much as any other feature, that puts the custom in a custom home. Concrete, on the other hand, is dense, rigid, inert, mineral. You mix it from a recipe of ingredients and pour it into a mold—like padding, only harder. Concrete's qualities have made it the material of choice for our least glamorous applications: sidewalks, bridge abutments, foundation walls.

But in recent years concrete has overcome such prosaic associations to join wood as a high-end finish material. Always a strong supporting actor, it has advanced to cameo appearances in polished slab floors and countertops. And a small but growing number of custom homes take the material further still, casting concrete (as it were) in the starring role.

For most of the homes on these pages, the choice of concrete as the principal building material addresses a practical concern. Concrete block works well in the desert Southwest, with its bleaching sunlight and hungry termites. In the earthquake-prone Pacific Northwest and hurricane-lashed South Florida, reinforced poured concrete structures stand the best chance of surviving nature's wrath. But each embraces concrete as more than a practical choice, exploiting the material's unique visual and tactile qualities and its nearly infinite flexibility. Poured or stacked, board-formed or smooth, painted, dyed, waxed, or left untouched, the concrete in these homes gives a taste of the material's vast range of expression.

A concrete house, particularly one that celebrates the material as these do, is not for every client—or every builder. Finish applications require a level of care that is miles beyond that necessary for ordinary foundation work. Block walls can be economical, but poured concrete is far more expensive than conventional frame construction. And mistakes ... well, let's not even talk about mistakes. Still, concrete can do more than we commonly ask of it, and some things that no other substance can match. And, like any great actor, it makes its supporting players look good too. Especially wood. ■

Seattle architect George Suyama makes no secret of his fondness for concrete. "Philosophically I just love the material," he says, "because of its elemental quality." That quality made it a natural choice for this weekend compound, whose site on Washington's San Juan Island offers a bracingly elemental experience of earth, air, sun, and water. Suyama dug the main house deep into the earth, virtually burying its north and east walls and carving out a sheltered south-facing courtyard. The scheme lends the building a firm sense of groundedness—from some angles it appears to have emerged from the earth itself—but serves a rather practical purpose as well. It allows the owners to turn their backs to the housing development uphill from their home and focus instead on downhill views of park-

Earth Work

land and salt water. ■ Having chosen concrete as his principal medium, Suyama emphasized the material's essential attributes. "Everything in the house plays off the weight of the concrete and the simplicity of the concrete," he says. Holding back the hillside is a suitably massive concrete retaining wall that serves, along with an exposed concrete slab floor, as the house's main interior backdrop. The building's other principal elements—a massive concrete fireplace and chimney, two wood-paneled "bars" that flank the entry corridor, and the zinc-clad half-vault roof—seem to float free of each other, connected only by an infill of glass panels. A concrete terrace and walkway connect the main house to a concrete cube, half-buried further down the hillside, that contains a simple guest suite. ■ "There is no framing lumber in the house," says builder Dan Lowe. "It's all concrete, steel, and glass." As a result, Lowe had to collapse the normal sequence of foundation, framing, and finish into a single extended phase. His own crew handled the concrete work, pouring 16-inch walls around a core of 4-inch rigid insulation. "It was finish work from the start, that's for sure," says Lowe, who otherwise took the project's unusual demands in stride. "We formed it all the same way. We just took more care. We used new forms, obviously." —*B.D.S.*



Project Credits: Builder: Lowe Construction, Friday Harbor, Wash.; Architect: Suyama Peterson Deguchi, Seattle; Living space: 1,345 square feet; Site: .75 acre; Construction cost: Withheld; Photographer: Paul Werschol. ■ Resources: Bathroom plumbing fittings: Keramag, Circle 400; Bathroom plumbing fixtures: Vola, Circle 401; Dishwasher: Miele, Circle 402; Entry doors: Northstar Woodworks, Circle 403; Kitchen plumbing fittings: Aziva, Circle 404; Kitchen plumbing fixtures: Elkay, Circle 405; Lighting fixtures: Suyama Peterson Deguchi, Circle 406 and Tolomeo, Circle 407; Refrigerator: Sub-Zero, Circle 408; Skylights: Crystallite Skylite, Circle 409; Sliding doors: Kawneer, Circle 410; Windows: Milgard, Circle 411.

Mineral Spirits



Broad expanses of glass reveal the architectural assembles of the main house—roof, walls, chimney mass—as nearly free-floating elements.