

Mineral Spirits

Concrete inspires a different kind of custom home. By Bruce D. Snider

An entry lined with rough boards leads into a home whose principal structure is cast concrete. As happy to be buried as exposed, the material helps this weekend compound achieve a deep connection to its site (opposite).



Fran and Scott McAdams's weekend home on San Juan Island is a three-and-a-half-hour trip from downtown Seattle—90 minutes by car plus a two-hour ferry crossing—but the feeling of escape kicks in before they even leave the mainland. Rather than wait in a long line of cars, they park at the landing and walk to the ferry. "That's where the vacation starts," says Fran. "We keep a car on the island. That totally simplifies the process." When they reach their house on the island, things get simpler still. "We don't have a radio or TV-by-satellite. We're pretty much cut off when we get there." Which is not to say bored. The blue





water in the distance offers plenty of entertainment. "It's a whale watch area," Fran says. "The orca whale goes right by." Dry land offers diversions too. "It's adjacent to the national park. We can walk on 1,000 acres of public property, which is excellent." Besides, with two high-pressure jobs on the mainland, this place is about doing less, not more.

With that stripped-down program in mind, architect George Suyama designed this artfully spare compound, which makes extensive use of cast concrete. "Philosophically, I just love the material," he says, "because of its elemental quality." That quality made it a

natural choice for this site, which offers a bracingly elemental experience of earth, air, sun, and water. Suyama dug the main house deep into a shorefront slope, 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 directly from the earth—but serves a rather practical purpose as well. It allows the owners to turn their backs to a housing development uphill from their home and focus instead on downhill views of parkland and salt water.

Having chosen concrete as his principal

Broad expanses of glass reveal the component parts of the main house—roof, walls, chimney—as nearly free-floating elements. A beam between the main house and garage holds the track for the sliding garage door (opposite).

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 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. The kitchen con-

sists of a single bank of vertical-grain Douglas fir cabinets, topped with black granite, that runs along the north wall's exposed concrete face. The dining island is a huge slab of 100-year-old Douglas fir. The building's single bathroom—almost literally a box with a lid—occupies the center of

the floor plan. The lone bedroom hides behind that box, opening onto a sheltered patio and the courtyard beyond.

Solid and impenetrable from the north, the building opens wide to the south. A wall of sliding glass doors joins the living room to a simple terrace, an abstract geometric



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. It was once alive. Concrete is dense, inert, mineral. Wood remains the principal structural material for light construction, and it is fine finish carpentry, as much as any other feature, that puts

Cast in Place

the custom in a custom home. Meanwhile, concrete's qualities make it the material of

choice for our least glamorous applications: sidewalks, bridge abutments, foundation walls. But in recent years concrete has overcome those 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. This building takes the material further still, casting concrete (as it were) in the starring role. ■ In the earthquake-prone Pacific Northwest, steel-reinforced, poured-concrete structures stand the best chance of surviving nature's wrath. But this house embraces concrete as more than a practical choice, exploiting the material's unique visual and tactile qualities and its nearly infinite flexibility. A concrete house 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. Poured concrete is far more expensive than conventional frame construction. Insulation requires special attention. And mistakes . . . well, let's not even talk about mistakes. Still, as this house proves, 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.—B.D.S.



composition of concrete slabs surrounding a small garden pool. Sheltered by the landscape and the main house, the patio leads to a concrete walk and, half-buried in the hillside, a concrete cube of a guest cottage. Inspired by the World War II-era gun emplacements that still dot the Pacific coast, the cottage sights down a steep ravine toward the water, remote enough from the main house to afford privacy to both owners and guests.

Accustomed to more conventional con-



Burrowed into its sloping site, the main house turns away from nearby neighbors and toward views of protected open land and sea.

struction methods, builder Dan Lowe admits he had to readjust his approach for this project. "There is no framing lumber in the house," he says. "It's all concrete, steel, and glass." Unlike standard light-frame wood construction, which conceals structural elements behind finish materials like siding, wallboard, and trim, this design hides nothing. As a result, he had to collapse the normal sequence of foundation, framing, and finish into a single, extended phase. "It was finish work from the start,

that's for sure," says Lowe, who nevertheless seems to have taken the project's unusual demands in stride. His own crew handled the concrete work, pouring 16-inch walls around a core of 4-inch rigid insulation. "We formed it all the same way. We just took more care."

The project overturned some of its owners' assumptions too. "When we started it we weren't planning on building a piece of art," says Fran. But she and her husband warmed to the idea very quickly. The com-

pound, as built, represents only a refined version of Suyama's initial design sketches. And, as Fran happily reports, the results pass the ultimate test: "It's fun to go there and very hard to come back on Sunday afternoon." ■

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 Warchol. ■ For product information see page 142.