



ISLAND VISTAS

GEORGE SUYAMA TUCKS
A CONTEMPORARY REFUGE
INTO THE ROLLING AND
RUGGED TOPOGRAPHY OF
SAN JUAN ISLAND

opposite and above: George Suyama of Seattle's Suyama Peterson Deguchi architects crafted a concrete-and-glass retreat on San Juan Island, Washington. "The house, which sits in rocky headlands above a cove, focuses on and intensifies the landscape," says Suyama.







"The vaulted ceiling in the living, dining and kitchen area is disengaged from the walls," explains Suyama, who also created the house's interiors. A Suyama-designed table made by Gulassa & Co. is paired with Hans Wegner washed-oak chairs. Leather armchairs, stained fir side tables and a Japanese chest add warmth to the cool concrete flooring and walls. A 1975 work on paper by Peter Millet hangs on the fire surround.

DUE NORTH

OF SEATTLE, THE BLUFFS OF EAGLE COVE ON SAN JUAN ISLAND ENDURE DRAMATIC EXTREMES. IN THIS NARROW PUGET SOUND INLET,

STIFF WINDS AND SALT SPRAY CLIMB STEEP SLOPES AT HIGH SPEEDS AND RAKE THE LANDSCAPE OF HARDY GRASSES, GORSE AND NOOTKA ROSE. AMID THESE ELEMENTS, SEATTLEITES FRAN AND SCOTT McADAMS FIND REFUGE FROM THEIR CROWDED WEEKDAY LIVES.

From their retreat, designed by George Suyama, principal of Suyama Peterson Deguchi architects, they can watch the looming clouds and fog and the migrating orcas and nesting otters. "They feel very connected to nature up there," says Suyama. "It was a prerequisite to connect this house to nature."

Hunkered down on a slope, the concrete and glass planes of the residence stand as sculptural ramparts. With industrial strength they shrug off inclement weather while they envelop the homeowners. Suyama designs with a sculptor's eye, selecting materials that are both raw and refined, and creates structures that exert muscle without bulk.

Suyama opened his practice in 1971 and early in his career concentrated on residential projects. He believes the temperate climate of the Northwest can lead to a passiveness that can be detrimental to good design. "Architecture should challenge you in a realistic way," says Suyama. "But we're allowed to live in a very Eddie Bauer-esque environment here, and there's no pressure to push against something. People think there's so much beauty in the natural environment that they don't think about the built environment very much. I guess I'm a regionalist. A house should be materially part of the Northwest. And it should be part of where it is—where it's sited."

A pristine sweep of territory in a wild national park borders the house to the east. "It was very, very primitive, an absolutely amazing field of grass that would never be built on," Suyama says. "But to the west is a very pedestrian development." The McAdamses wanted something that would stand apart from the ubiquitous weekend houses that appear in herds across the island.

With landscape architect Bruce Hinckley of Alchemie Design, Suyama scoured the terrain for inspiration. "They came up here and crawled all over the place," recalls Fran McAdams. "They went down to the cove and came back with big grins on their faces, like they had a vision." What they brought back was a narrative of a mythic fjord—their imaginary extension of the topography and a poetic guess about how the house, once completed, might be.

The structure now sits in a cleft of earth and rock, thought to have been created ages earlier by the ebb and flow of ancient geological processes. Like boulders from a retreating glacier, the trio of large concrete volumes—the house, a carport and a guesthouse—forms the compound. The carport sits on the uphill side, open to the elements and tied visually to the house by a screen of industrial heavy-gauge mesh. The house itself is a simple rectangle, comprising a living area and at one end a master bedroom and bath. An arced roof of fir glulam beams—sheathed in zinc to resist the elements—floats overhead to cover the structure and deflect the wind. Built to withstand sustained ninety-mile-per-hour gales, the entire structure is crafted of rectilinear poured-in-place

opposite, top: The cubelike concrete guesthouse with aluminum windows and sliding doors offsets the curved roofline of the main house. "The guesthouse's simple form is partially buried and references local World War II fortifications," Suyama says. **opposite, bottom:** A long horizontal beam defines the entrance courtyard and connects the house to the carport. Rough-sawn cedar clads two volumes that flank the entrance. The master bedroom terrace is at right.





above: The living room terrace and the pool—once a watering hole for wildlife—are nestled into the rugged landscape and look to Eagle Cove and the Pacific Ocean. **opposite:** “The simple volume of the house contains floating architectural elements, including the closets and the bath,” explains the architect.

concrete planes; glass fills the voids. Some interior walls are unembellished, exposed to reveal the building materials and emphasize their stability. The concrete forms tie the structure to the ground, and inside the house they establish a hierarchy of primitive materials—simple, durable and rich, in keeping with the rugged surroundings.

The living, kitchen and dining area accommodates nearly all of the unhurried activity: cooking, eating, talking and fire tending. Stretching lengthwise down the center of the warm, cavernous room is a Suyama-designed table of epic proportions—nineteen feet of multipurpose surface—made of old-growth Douglas fir. Three boxes define the space within: Two large cabinets flank the entry to the house on its leeward side and provide indoor and outdoor storage. The third box contains the master bath and forms an unobtrusive barrier separating the living area from the master bedroom.

As a counterpoint to raw concrete and glass, Suyama designed a steel fireplace door and used vertical-grain fir plywood for the ceiling and interior cabinetry. The exterior entrance cabinetry is clad in hardier rough-sawn cedar plywood. “I like the mixture of natural and manmade, aging and new,” says Suyama. “I always try to use contrast.”

Outside the living area a concrete shelf juts eastward and creates a deck, partially shaded by a wind-sculpted noble fir. A path meanders toward the cliffs, ending at the guesthouse—another concrete box, named “the bunker” by the owners, that offers solitude and amenities for two. Its simple form and wind-burned patina mimic abandoned military structures, relics that are part of the island vernacular.

At the center of the compound is a rectangular pool, which Suyama views as the most symbolic element. “This was a little seed pool on the site when we first arrived, where the animals would have come to drink,” he says. “We reinforced that, deepening its connection to this cove.”

“George kept saying, ‘There’s nothing to it, there’s nothing to this house,’” notes Scott McAdams. “And he’s right. This is a very simple house. And yet to get it to work, to have this level of simplicity, is actually very complicated.” +

