



HOME AND MEMORY

IN THE LATE 1930s MY GRANDMOTHER built a house on a hillside meadow overlooking the Alpine village of Abtenau, Austria. Abtenau is located in a lush green valley, in the Salzkammergut area near Salzburg. The village is surrounded by wooded foothills and majestic mountain peaks on all sides. It consists of a collection of wood and stucco buildings gathered around a central *markplatz* (square), crowned by the spire of a beautiful small medieval church, where my parents were married in 1949.

Throughout my childhood and adult life I often visited this house, which my grandmother ran as a "pension," a small bed and breakfast establishment. Each time I arrived, first as a child with my family, then with my husband-to-be, and later on with our own family, a special note greeted us at the heavy wooden front door. The note was attached to the wide trim around the door, and a sprig of evergreen was placed above it. On stiff, creamy paper, with a narrow black border, the note was written in my grandmother's elegant, rather spidery script. It read "*Herzlich Willkommen*": a tender, heartfelt welcome.

A similar message seemed to emanate from the house itself, which was a simple cubic form capped by a deep sheltering roof. The house was simply laid out, divided into four rooms on each level: a kind of Austrian Four Square. All the rooms of the house had substantial shutters, both on the inside and the outside of the house. In the mornings, my grandmother would throw open the paned interior windows, unlock the heavy green wooden exterior shutters, and fold them to either side. The southern light streamed into the kitchen, and revealed a view of her carefully tended gardens below the house, the houses and church down the hill, and the mountain





valley and gray cliffs beyond. We ate our meals at her kitchen table with her guests. The table was nestled into a corner of the room, a "sitzbank" with wood paneled benches built into the walls on two sides. It was a cozy, sheltering, comfortable place that seemed to generate conviviality whenever we gathered there. As a child, I would spend long hours at the kitchen table, gazing out the window and using colored pencils to draw the magical scene outside. My grandmother pattered around the kitchen, cooking the kinds of meals only grandmothers can make. She would natter at me and my mother in German; my mother would answer for both of us. The babbling sounds of their conversations, which I only partially understood, provided a soothing background for my creative (and occasionally mischievous) endeavors.

On the second floor, French doors opened from the bedrooms onto a long common balcony. These were the "primo" rooms, usually occupied by guests of the pension. Thank heavens the guests knew us well. The balcony was a perfect play spot. It was sunny, yet deliciously private and hidden away. When my brothers and I sat on the balcony floor, we were screened from view by the blossoms (usually red) that cascaded from boxes at the balcony railing.

If I had never become an architect, these times would likely have simply been stowed away in a mental file of precious memories. In fact, it was only in the final year of my architectural studies, working on a design for a house, that I was challenged by a teacher to make a place that had meaning to me, one that would "feel good" to me. The exercise was peculiarly wrenching. I realized that in all my previous studies of architectural systems, structure, and theories, I had never yet been asked to seriously consider how one might *feel* as they experienced a place. I had not yet been able to connect the idea of human experience, mine or anyone else's, to the

⇒ ABOVE: *My grandmother at the kitchen table in the sitzbank, 1982.* FACING: *My grandmother's house in Abtenau, Austria, 1982.*



creation of places, rather than spaces. Design a place that would *feel good* to me? How the heck would I do that? None of the design tools in my architectural toolbox were adequate for the task. "Architecture" as I knew it wasn't like that . . . was it?

I spent the final year of architecture school immersed in that question. How would I design places that felt good? Places that felt good were in long unexamined memory. For the time being, I tossed aside the question of whether or not they were architecture, as I rediscovered the qualities of places experienced throughout my life that seemed the most delightful, comfortable, engaging, and magical. I became more sensitive to my immediate surroundings and was able to identify characteristics of the places that most satisfied both my body and my spirit. I was beginning to figure out my own personal experiential patterns.

Soon afterward, in 1985, I began working at a newly established local architecture firm called Mulfinger and Susanka. The partners, Dale Mulfinger and Sarah Susanka, were devotees of Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, and they introduced me to his concepts. The patterns seemed greatly akin to many of my own personal patterns. They just made sense to me. Although I have never designed purely by those concepts, I developed a good deal more confidence and expertise as a designer by utilizing some of them, in combination with those formed by my own life experiences.

The simple comfort and integrity of my grandmother's house, and particularly its strong, reassuring, inviting message of welcome, often inspired my designs. If houses could speak, I think the best of them would say, "Come in. Be safe. Be warm. Be alive . . . Welcome home." As Theresia Mayrhofer, my grandmother, would have put it, "Herzlich Willkommen."

—The barn form is pulled down into the steep hillside. It is composed of a series of related pieces, as if the original form had been added to for years.

Creating such houses is an exercise of the mind and the heart. Both the intellect and intuition play into it. Houses need to keep out the rain. It's terribly helpful to allot the correct amount of space for the microwave, and to place the laundry room in just the right spot. But it is equally important that houses be designed to be nurturing places for our bodies and spirits. To do that, we need to carefully observe and take note of the places and environments, both past and present, where we have felt most at ease, nurtured and alive.

A couple of years ago, I designed a barn-like residence for a couple that had long been enamored with New England barns. Their building site was majestic: a rock cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, on the western shore of San Juan Island in Washington State.

Diane Martindale was born and raised in Rockford, Illinois, which is on the Illinois-Wisconsin border. "There were barns galore there," she says, "and each summer we would spend a week or two at my grandmother's farm in northern Minnesota. The memories of those summers—the outhouse, pumping water, feeding the cows, hanging out in the hay loft with kids from neighboring farms—all of it was such great fun! I wanted to know all the different kinds of barns (Wisconsin has them all, including tobacco barns), the reasons for their differences, why they were painted red, and how the silos worked. I would probably have driven my Finnish grandmother crazy, if not for the fact that she spoke almost no English."

Diane also recalls the uplifting feeling of being inside the barns, the almost cathedral-like sense of their structural ribs surrounding an immense yet somehow intimate interior space. She relates, "I particularly enjoyed just sitting by myself in the hay loft. The light filtered through the tiny cracks between the wall boards, making a pattern of light and dark that played through the space, shifting as the light changed during the course of the day."

Years later, Diane and her husband, Steve Bowman, drove through the colorful autumn New England landscape, in search of a particular antique store in Connecticut. On a small road near the Housatonic River, Diane glimpsed a barn near the river. She says, "We pulled over and discovered an old gray barn that had been converted into a home. I was so excited to see that that was possible." The afternoon became a turning point. Her love of barns began to be translated into a dream of building a barnlike house.

In designing the barn house for its steep cliff setting, I integrated it into the rocky hillside by sinking it down into the site, so that one discovers the entry at the heart of a small courtyard space that is literally carved out of the stony earth.

The entire program for the house could have been enclosed in a single long barn form. But to better blend the exterior form with the surrounding landscape, I chopped up the massive barn form into pieces. The exterior shape was interpreted as a series of accreted gabled sheds, casually attached to the main barn, as if they had perhaps been built at different times. Together they create a meandering enclosure around the courtyard. The garage emerges from the hillside at an angle to the house. It is linked to the house by a low-slung building of stone, which is





➤ LEFT: The dining area is set for a feast produced in Diane's spacious kitchen. It receives afternoon light from the windows facing west over the water.



➤ LEFT: The stone fireplace in the living room dominates the north wall of the living area. The radiant floor is concrete stained a deep charcoal black. ABOVE: The work area of the kitchen is light and airy, with creamy enameled cabinetry.

capped by a flat green roof. The house is very recognizably a barn at the entry side, but on the ocean side the forms of the house and a deck become more angular and abstract as they proceed down the steep hill. Tapered structural piers of concrete and stone seem to grow out of the rocky cliff and support the deck and house above. They figuratively and literally anchor the building to the site.

Fond as they were of the spatial grandeur of barns, Diane and Steve still wanted the spaces within their home to be comfortable and cozy. Architect Meghan Kell Cornell and I designed the home, with the assistance of architect Maury Stenerson and Judy Ferrell, so that it would feel open and expansive, yet the spaces themselves would feel well articulated and sheltering. We opened up the ocean-facing side of the home with a series of large square awning windows, stacked vertically. The major spaces for everyday living on the main floor are defined by a system of deep structural fir beams. The geometry of the beams and their connections form a framework for the kitchen, dining, and living areas. They are arranged in an L shape that ends at a massive stone fireplace. The slanted form of the fireplace echoes the tapered stone piers outside, which penetrate the interior space of the house. A concrete radiant floor flows throughout the main level. The concrete is stained a deep charcoal black, which contrasts with the bold tones of furnishings and floor coverings selected by Diane and interior designer Bruce Forster of Vancouver, B.C. It also sets off Diane and Steve's extensive collection of artwork by Native American artists of the Pacific Northwest.

The Martindale/Bowman barn house is board on board siding, painted a deep, rich, vibrant red. The silo is of cedar boards, stained with bleaching oil to a light



◀ LEFT AND ABOVE:
*Detail of the stair as it proceeds
to the lower level. FACING:
The quilting room, with ample
work surfaces for layout of
fabric.*

silvery gray and topped with a domed metal silo roof. Wood and corrugated galvanized steel siding alternate on the ocean side of the house.

The silo form just beyond the entry contains a flowing wood spiral staircase that connects all four levels of the home, culminating in a little round room at the top of the silo, a place for solitary reflection, reading, and observation of the stretch of ocean to the west. The sensuous curves of the staircase railing are outlined with a massive rounded rim that spirals upward and curves inward on itself at the base of the stair. The staircase was masterfully crafted by Dave Kruegar of Lowe Construction. The main bedroom suite hugs the far side of the stairwell; its entry door is a sliding barn door shaped to the radius of the curved wall, which glides along a curved steel track above.

At the opposite end of the house, in the low building form of stone, is a sunny quilting room lined with broad countertops for layout and piecing, and a quilting machine. Diane is an avid and enormously talented quilter; her quilts adorn walls throughout the house. The striking fabric pieces, intensely colored and patterned, provide counterpoint for the simplicity of the surfaces and materials used on the walls and floor.

The upper floor of the house contains three spacious bedroom suites with ensuite baths for the enjoyment of family and guests. Each of the rooms is a work of art in itself, thoughtfully assembled by Diane with an eye to theme, color, pattern, furnishings, and accessories. The "Dick and Jane room," designed by Diane with



BELOW AND RIGHT:
The Dick and Jane Room.
FACING BELOW: *The Purple
Bedroom.*

Steve's grandchildren in mind, is like a sweet memory of an ideal childhood spot. It is an absolutely delectable arrangement of colorful fabrics, playthings, painted furniture, a comfy window seat looking out to the ocean, classic prints of Dick and Jane with Puff and Spot, books, toys, trundle beds for sleepovers, and a quaint little activity table ringed with chairs. Diane displays an assortment of antique toys there, and it is a place for her collection of illustrated children's books. She loves the gentle stories and the variety of artwork in them.

The other oceanside room, called the "Purple Bedroom," is artfully dressed and accessorized in shades of violets, greens, and sparkling white. The room is inviting and lovely; it features a cozy alcove for a daybed below the sloping ceiling next to the window dormer. It's a perfect spot for an afternoon nap.

Diane's most recent quilt project, fittingly enough, combines her love of barns and her love of quilting. It is a richly detailed portrayal of the old historic barns on San Juan Island, rendered in intricate pieces of fabric and embroidery, framed in a grid of classic red. The quilt, which received the top honor award granted by the island's quilting society, "seems to have a life of its own," in Diane's words. It seems that Steve and Diane's long-ago drive through the barn-studded New England landscape has taken root and come full circle in the quilt—and most definitely in the barn-house they created together.



