



THE TEST OF TIME

House and habitat merge on the Olympic Peninsula

By Jim Tolpin

Photographs by Art Grice



After many rewarding years of living and working in the Bay area, Lila Schmidt felt a strong urge to return to the sparkling waters, verdant forests and ocean-cooled breezes of the Olympic Peninsula—the home of her youth.

With the blessing of her husband, Ron, an electrical engineer, Lila began to seek out waterfront property where they might spend vacations, entertain family and friends, and perhaps retire. Happily, a piece of low-bank waterfront property that once belonged to her parents came on the market. For Lila, it couldn't have been a more suitable property on which to re-establish her roots and build a wood-and-stone forest shelter just steps from the sea.

The home's armature rises from a basalt base; structural timbers pass through window walls, diminishing divisions between interior and exterior.

LILA AND RON knew from the start that Cutler Anderson Architects of Bainbridge Island were the ones to design their home. Lila harbors an abiding interest in residential architecture, and often found that her favorite designs were produced by the firm's lead architect, Jim Cutler. (She once asked to buy a waiting-room magazine when she discovered a picture of one of his projects inside.) With full trust and confidence, the Schmidts engaged Cutler and allowed him to be, as Ron puts it, "the design guy."

Of course, the Schmidts had specific hopes and needs they wanted Cutler to fulfill, such as a light and airy interior, private facilities for guests, room for hobbies and an outside fireplace. But their prime directive was that he give them a home that felt like it belonged there—a home where every board and stone and essence of form spoke clearly of the Pacific Northwest.

"We didn't want a fashion-statement house identifiable by a particular style or decade of design," explains Ron. "We asked for a timeless house that would stand the test of time."

The Schmidts' directive was an inspiration for Cutler, who sees his job "as one of respecting the nature of everything I work with—to make the true nature of

Wood floors, ceiling and cabinets wrap the living room in an amber glow. The basalt fireplace was built to resemble dry-laid stone, offering an architectural alternative to countrified river rock.





CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:

**The master bedroom
boasts treehouse views.**

**Twin islands provide
kitchen storage without
obstructing scenery.**

**A stone-lined entry walk
knits the house into the
landscape. A fireplace
warms the courtyard
sandwiched between the
home's two wings.**

the materials, the place and the program comprehensible to everyone.”

Before he committed a single line to paper, Cutler conducted a thorough survey of the site (that included mapping every tree in the potential building area) and interviewed the homeowners-to-be. The architect quickly realized that the best—and the most respectful—response to the Schmidts’ requests would be to divide their home into two portions juxtaposed at complementary angles to one another. The main structure contains the primary living space (a great room with kitchen and dining room) and a second-floor master suite,

while the second building shelters guests, provides a second-floor model-train room and offers a garage. The corridor connecting the two buildings is paved in slate and paneled in knotty cedar. The rustic finishes help underscore the passageway’s role as a transition space between the more refined living areas elsewhere.

The two wings enclose a private deck fitted with an outdoor fireplace. A separate structure located at the top of the driveway (and not visible to the living areas) will eventually house Ron’s machine shop.

The buildings, framed and clad in the indigenous woods of the Northwest and

left unstained to weather naturally, rise from the forest floor on a foundation of Columbia River Gorge basalt. Broad roofs with ample overhangs are supported by substantial posts distinguished by vertical striations, while massive cedar beams visibly extend from the interior of the structures to the exterior—the proud bones of the building. The basalt continues out from the foundation to form massive chimneys and retaining walls that run along berm lines throughout the property, melding the structures to the natural lay of the land.

Inside, exposed structural timbers, stone hearths and earth-toned surfaces mix with varnished maple cabinetwork, smooth granite counters and fine furnishings, producing a remarkable fusion of the rustic and the refined. Numerous wood-framed windows—the majority running from waist height to the ceiling—draw in the surrounding forest so that it becomes a seamless part of the décor. This effect is especially apparent in the upstairs master bedroom, where a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows offers a treehouse view to the water and casts light deep into the recesses of the room and the glass-partitioned bathroom beyond.

The completed home affirms and sustains the invigorating life the Schmidts have come to the Northwest to experience. For Lila, in particular, it represents a reconnection to the trees and waters of her youth, and to a parcel of land once held dear by her parents—fertile soil indeed for re-establishing one's roots. ■

Jim Tolpin is a writer (The New Cottage Home, et al.) and woodwright (from timber frames to gypsy caravans) who has lived and worked in Port Townsend since the late 1970s.



