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WHIDBEY ISLAND, W.A.

These pages in the living room, a floral rug and brightly colored pillows add bright grace notes to a décor notable for its muted colors and textures. The painting over the fireplace depicts a prairie scene reminiscent of the landscape on Whidbey Island.



PHOTOGRAPH BY J. GARDNER

PRODUCED AND STYLED BY LINDA HIMPHELY PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL SKOTT

With historic sites and eagles as neighbors, a Washington State architect carefully carves out a compact dream house with room to spare

open to change

When designing their own homes, architects often succumb to the temptation to seize the opportunity to make a grand statement, one that incorporates all—or at least many—of their most cherished ideas about their chosen profession. This does not hold true for Dennis Marsh, AIA, of the Seattle firm AOME Architects, AIA. On the contrary, when he and his wife, Jenny, a corporate attorney, decided to build a weekend cabin on their Penn Cove property on Washington State's Whidbey Island, Marsh shied away from any and all displays of architectural ego. Indeed, his objective was to create a structure that made as little impact as possible. "We wanted a house that would blend well with its natural surroundings," he says.

There were practical, as well as aesthetic reasons for Marsh's restraint. For starters, the lot is situated on a bluff high above Puget Sound and various zoning regulations left little buildable area. So Marsh designed an admirably compact structure that contains only 2,400 square feet of living space. Furthermore, Penn Cove is surrounded by Ebey's Landing, a national historic reserve administered by the National Park Service, which closely monitors all new construction in order to preserve the area's rural, prairie-like character. To that end, Marsh chose to cover the exterior of the house in brownish-gray natural cedar shingles and to landscape it with native vegetation, including snowberries,

To assure a maximum of sunlight, Marsh used ceiling-high windows in nearly every wall.



Rug in dining room: Doreen Raborn. Tabletop, napkins, and glasses in dining room (on dining table): L. Garner Home. Plates (on dining table): Rosanna. Pictures on wall: Doreen Raborn. Wooden platter (on kitchen island): David Smith. Wood cabinet: Doreen Raborn.

Top left: The living area opens onto a back porch that affords unobstructed views of two beautiful mountain ranges. **These pages:** In the kitchen, the architect chose a light-colored maple laminate for the countertop in the foreground, which he built up with stone for the adjoining counter.



“I prefer that color come from the furnishings and accessories rather than the architecture,” says the owner.

Nootka roses, and conifers. Complicating matters was the fact that the Marshes' property could once have been a Native American burial ground. The couple was required to hire an archeologist to oversee the excavation. “If he had discovered bones,” says Marsh, “we might have been forced

to abandon the project.” After finding a single weapon early on, the archeologist turned up nothing else. Construction was able to proceed.

A “do not disturb” sign was hung out near a pair of bald eagles who—just after the couple purchased the land in 1997—built a nest in one of the fir trees on the property. By law, such nests cannot be moved. Marsh negotiated with the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife and struck a deal that allowed him to build within 30 feet of the nest, as long as he preserved the surrounding habitat. Incredibly, only one tree had to be cleared to make room for the house—a tribute to Marsh's ingenuity in siting the building. (In the intervening years, the birds have flourished, producing four new generations of eagle offspring and providing a fascinating, on-site zoology lesson for the Marshes and their three children.)

Marsh's low-key sensibility is equally visible on the inside of the house. Clearly, the chief priorities here are comfort and livability. To offset the house's relatively small proportions, Marsh devised an open-plan design for the first floor

Above The telescope in the sunroom comes in handy for watching the eagles that nest on the property. **Left** A small bedroom is just large enough to hold a pine bed and an armoire.



that evokes a sense of coziness—thanks to such touches as a slate-lined fireplace, a pillow-adorned window seat, built-in bookcases, and wainscoting (made of economical medium-density fiberboard instead of wood).

For residents of Seattle, a major appeal of Whidbey Island is that it gets far less rainfall than their hometown. Marsh, needless to say, wasn't about to let all that precious sunlight go to waste. To maximize the light that streams into the house and to take advantage of the spectacular southern views of the Cascade mountain range to the east and of the Olympic Mountains to the west, Marsh installed ceiling-high windows in nearly every wall, effectively bringing the outdoors inside.

The house's natural, understated appeal is further enhanced by the muted wall colors and the couple's choice of furnishings, which tend to be Shakerlike in their simplicity and their use of organic materials. The floors throughout the house are of Australian Cyprus, a wood that combines the durability and hardness of oak with the informality of pine. Then, for the custom-built cabinets in the kitchen, Marsh chose alder, “a beautiful wood,” rather than the more conventional fir, and treated it with only a light coat of lacquer. The decks and porches are made of unstained mahogany.

“It's a quiet house,” says Marsh, modestly. “We wanted something simple and easy to maintain—a place for family and friends to come together and enjoy this wonderful setting.” To say he succeeded in realizing that goal is an understatement worthy of the architect himself.

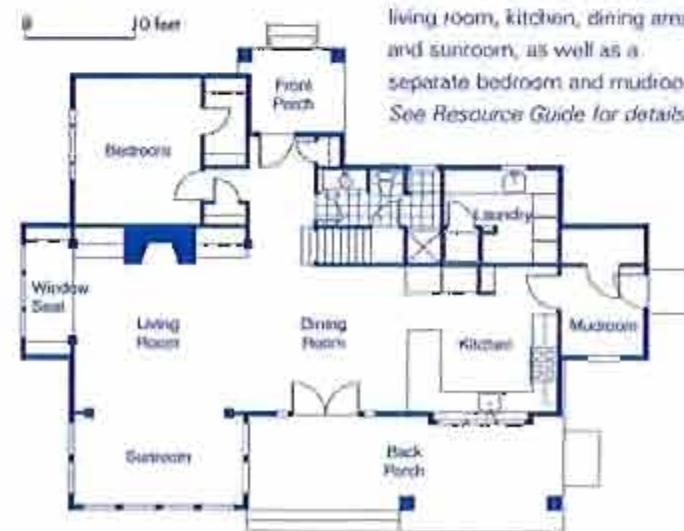


1. Muted wall colors and white-painted paneling help create a sense of serene spaciousness. The effect is enhanced by the minimal, almost rustic, furnishings throughout the house.

2. Such details as a cozy built-in window seat and a media center concealed behind cabinet doors make optimal use of all available space. The window seat doubles as an extra bed.

3. Upstairs, two of the four sleeping rooms are equipped with built-in bunk beds which provide sleeping space for overnight visitors.

Top left Cabinets provide plenty of storage. **Above** The gray fabric on the window seat is Suntralla, used for outdoor furnishings. **Below** The open plan of the first floor includes the living room, kitchen, dining area, and sunroom, as well as a separate bedroom and mudroom. See Resource Guide for details.



Out-winter pillows and armoire (on window seat); Ventilators; Red silk pillows with gold rimmed and small red because pillow (on window seat); David Smith and Company; Gray pillow (on window seat); Crate & Barrel