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ON THE COVER:
For the owners of a Montlake
guest house, retractable walls
and a flower sink assure that
nature is always near (see page 74).
Photograph by William Wright.

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TO BLUR THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR, ARCHITECT ROBERT EDSON SWAIN OUTFITTED THE FRONT OF THE GUEST HOUSE WITH RETRACTABLE DOORS AND PLACED TWO ANTIQUE CHINESE WELL MARKERS INSIDE THE ENTRY. A COMPACT KITCHEN ACCOMMODATES INDOOR DINING OR OUTDOOR MEALS; THE BATHROOM'S SHOWERHEAD CAN SWING OUTSIDE FOR ALFRESCO BATHING. AN ARBOR FRAMES THE FOREGROUND TERRACE, MAKING IT FEEL LIKE YET ANOTHER ROOM.

A Montlake guest house offers a tranquil
refuge for visitors and owners alike

BACKYARD SANCTUARY

WRITTEN BY LISA KENNEDY PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM WRIGHT



In a host of commissions spanning both coasts, architect Robert Edson Swain has combined the rugged appeal of earthy materials with the craftsmanship of a cabinet-maker, creating intimate spaces that exude an organic, primal appeal.

"I love to engage nature in my work and to draw nature in," Swain says.

He recently applied those skills to a guest house in Seattle's Montlake neighborhood. An adjunct to a glorious arts-and-crafts-style residence built in 1908, the free-standing guest house was added in the '60s and boasted none of the charm or character of its companion.

"We were looking for something that respected the architecture of the main house but was its own delightful universe," says the lady of the house. The guest house had to accommodate family and friends, provide additional entertainment space for large functions and serve as a retreat for the couple's personal use.

The completed structure embodies a remarkable duality: It is

wide open and airy, with a breezy indoor-outdoor feel, and at the same time it is as warm and sheltering as a cocoon.

The structure is based on a one-room concept and echoes the fusion of European, Asian and Native American traditions evident in the main house. Anchored on one end by a huge stone fireplace flanked by built-in bookcases, it features mostly indigenous materials, including Douglas fir, big-leaf maple and Index granite. Recycled timber beams support the cathedral ceiling, and the fir floors are stained ebony for a feeling of age. A retractable steel-and-fir ladder provides access to the sleeping loft, which overlooks the patio and gardens like a treehouse. Two pairs of stacked mattresses can be spread out as needed for visiting children.

The mood is lodgelike yet highly refined, with the connection to the outdoors reinforced by the choice of natural materials, colors and fibers. A king-size bed dominates the great room and is paired with leather swivel chairs, a tansu chest and a small dining table, selected with the help of interior designer Marjorie Yam.

"This is a very sensual and relaxing place," says Yam. "The

"We wanted this place to be a treat for visitors, a little sanctuary," says the wife.



NATIVE WOODS AND STONE HELP WARM THE LOFTY INTERIOR, WHICH PACKS MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS INTO A SINGLE SPACE. SLIDING WOOD DOORS CAN BE MANIPULATED TO REVEAL THE KITCHEN (THIS PAGE) OR A CLOSET (INSET). OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: LEATHER CHAIRS SWIVEL TO FACE THE FIRE OR A POP-UP PLASMA TV. THE BED IS AUGMENTED BY MATTRESSES IN THE LOFT ABOVE. THE LADDER SLIDES OUT WHEN NEEDED, AS DOES A SMALL COPPER WRITING DESK CONCEALED IN A BOOKCASE.



THE SHALLOW SINK (FAR LEFT) IS IDEAL FOR CUTTING FLOWERS, BUT IS READY WHEN THE NEIGHBORING DISHWASHER AND REFRIGERATED DRAWERS (LEFT) ARE CALLED INTO SERVICE. THE GUEST HOUSE (ABOVE, LOWER LEFT) IS JUST STEPS FROM THE MAIN HOUSE, GARAGE AND HOT TUB PAVILION, VISIBLE OUTSIDE THE SHOWER ROOM (OPPOSITE). ETCHED GLASS PROVIDES PRIVACY AND IS REPEATED IN THE WINDOW (INSET) ABOVE THE FARMHOUSE SINK.

decoration was kept very simple to allow nature to be both art and focal point."

Intricately designed and executed custom cabinets conceal ample storage space as well as a plasma TV and a pullout copper desk. Special features include concealed speakers that are integrated into the drywall, insect screens that recess into the window frames and electrical controls that are consolidated into copper channels to eliminate unsightly switch plates. "I'm obsessed with details," says Swain, "and builder Bob McCurdy and the artisans we worked with are wizards."

The kitchen and bathroom are situated at the entry, so they service both the guest house and the neighboring bathhouse. Sliding wooden doors can separate these rooms from the main living space when guests are in residence. Retractable etched-glass panels provide another layer of privacy, either screening the kitchen and bath from view or disappearing to facilitate outdoor cooking (or bathing).

The modern, European-style kitchen features a shallow granite sink that was custom designed for flower cutting and arranging. A small dishwasher and two refrigerated drawers tuck beneath a stainless-steel counter, and all other appliances are hidden behind fir and maple cabinetry.

The bathroom has the same clean lines and rarified simplicity. A stunning angled wall of fossilized limestone holds a shower arm that can be rotated to allow the user to bathe outdoors. A farmhouse sink, perfect for washing the couple's dog, somehow looks right at home in its modern context. The etched-glass window above is backlit to softly illuminate the room at night.

Two stone pillars stand just inside the entry, further blurring the boundaries between interior and exterior. Natural teak flooring serves as a bridge between the polished fir floors of the great room and the granite terrace outside; an arbor above the terrace mimics the roof brackets on the main house and makes this space feel like yet another room.

The landscaping, also designed by Swain, features a harmonious mix of native Northwest plants interspersed with Asian species such as the black bamboo that rustles softly in the breeze. Stone walkways and Asian rain barrels play up the fusion of East and West. A tranquil quality suffuses this wonderful urban oasis, seducing both its owners and their guests.

"We wanted this place to be a treat for visitors, a little sanctuary," says the lady of the house. "Now both of us are in love with this place and find ourselves thinking of it a lot when we are not here." ■

Contributing Editor Lisa Kennedy is a Mercer Island interior designer and freelance writer.

