

An architect creates his own urban refuge where everything works — on more than one level



The peak of the deck frame of architect Bob Swain's Phinney Ridge home peek-a-boos through smoke-screen trees. "It really is a timeless cabin in the woods," he says. "You barely can find me, which is my goal."



SOLITUDE *in the* CITY

The carefully engineered skylights in Swain's elevated "back house" bedroom (the only room with air-conditioning) are installed in the roof to add height. On a couple surfaces of his bedroom (Western maple, salvaged fir floor, decorative copper, gray natural exposed steel with lacquer finish), Swain keeps heart-shaped rocks ... and two wooden hearts his dad crafted for his mom when they met, at 16, in 1926.



AS YOU AMBLE along the lushly landscaped, wood-planked path to Bob Swain's Phinney Ridge home — once you find Bob Swain's Phinney Ridge home — your shoulders slump. Your neck destresses. You breathe deeply (remember that?) and sigh, not even on purpose: "Ahhh." Wait just one city-slickin' minute here — is this a house, or some kind of mystic hidden oasis? Yes. And yes.

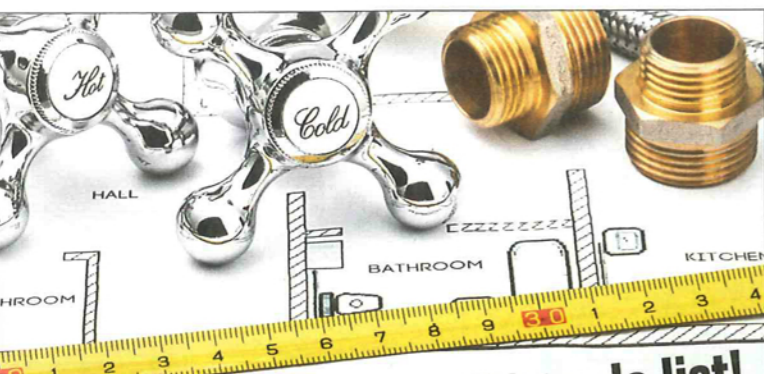
The sitting area of Swain's study is "super-quiet," he says, and overlooks a garden through an open wall of glass. Swain says he placed windows where he has "major privacy."



A former president of the Pratt Fine Arts Center board of trustees, Swain says he "carefully thought to support a lot of art" in his home. His cathedral-ceilinged living area is a virtual gallery of collected art and furnishings by classic designers, with a Le Corbusier cube chair, Noguchi table and Frank sofa alongside a recaned and reglued rocking chair from the 1800s.

"We live too-intense lives," says Swain, the architect/designer behind Robert Edson Swain Architecture + Design. "In a busy city, how do you create refuge? It's an emotional experience as you decompress before you make it to the front door."

Technically (though not argumentatively, because we are very relaxed), there are *three* ►



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This main-floor bookcase, crafted from Douglas fir, sandblasted steel with clear lacquer and natural copper, holds beautiful pieces ... and a secret: It opens to reveal a hidden staircase to the lower level.



Swain added a versatile "cantina" entertainment space partially below grade. It's accessible via a private entrance, and this hidden staircase.



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doors to the three living "environments" that make up Swain's intentionally tucked-away and thoughtfully renovated 1905 home. Together, they add up to 1,830 square feet, give or take, split between the main building's upper level, a back-house master suite/office (formerly a one-car garage) and a lower-level entertainment area Swain jokingly (but kind of aptly, actually) calls a "cantina."

Swain bought his "cabin in the woods" hideaway in 1998. The "long, skinny, tiny T-shaped building on piers" had been modified over the years but, let's say, maybe not to its full potential.

"The first thing I did was just cleanse," Swain says. Adios, asbestos. See ya, sad shag carpet and smoke-yellow walls. Bye-bye, giant pink GE refrigerator.

Out went the "classic workers' housing" vibe. In came the outside. And now every wide-reaching window offers a soothing view of greenery.

"I love climbing, hiking and wilderness," Swain says. "My fantasy is living in a Cascades cabin I could sleep in every night after work without driving to Methow. This is like a vacation every day in the city."

But it's a vacation spot where things work.

"Everything serves at least three purposes, and it has to be beautiful," says Swain, a credit to his New England boatbuilding heritage. "Everything is very changeable. It's a way to fit things you shouldn't be able to fit in a small space."

Striking examples are rampant:

- It's fitting that the back house used to be a garage, because now it screams *convertible*. Swain sited his gloriously skylighted bedroom up high, "driven by the sky," to create storage space underneath. His study turns into a yoga area once he moves chairs, nests a coffee table under a bigger table, and extracts the massage table from its below-bedroom nook. The same space transforms into business-meeting ▶

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This lower-level steel-shelved bookcase frames a bathroom behind its translucent glass back. The fully stocked and equipped butlers pantry/kitchen/bar is at right.



Western red cedar planks lead past a stone basin water feature to the entrances of two of the home's three separate living areas.

◀ NW LIVING

central when he angles the larger table 90 degrees, slides a wooden door to block the bedroom stairs, and hangs presentations from a pinboard rail.

- Opposite the rusted-steel-sided, cooper-floored fireplace in the living area, a beautiful bookcase looks a lot like your basic beautiful bookcase. But then it moves — and exposes a hidden staircase leading to the lower level.

- Down those stairs, the former crawl space is now a magical place of presto-change-o. Poof! It's a gathering spot: dinner around a 300-pound madrone-slab table and movies in the entertainment nook (on custom seating Swain designed). Abracadabra! It's a complete guest-house. Or apartment. Or *pied-à-terre*. The seating area becomes a queen bed; glass-framed doors define the new sleeping space; and you'll find your guest bathroom behind, and kind of nestled within, the translucent glass walls framed by steel-shelved bookcases. (That mirror above the granite sink nook just outside? Also a door to the service area.)

- Elsewhere (everywhere), walls hide drawers and light switches; screens shield electric panels and garden supplies; furnishings hold shelves; and nooks conceal storage spaces, travel gear and even a rolling wine shelf.

"I'm a person who's still super-practical," Swain says. "My way of thinking with this house is that I don't let you feel anything is ever a compromise. It's all in the detailing and thoughtfulness and mindfulness."

Mindfulness, did he say? Ahhh. 📧

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A 1990s Gabbeh rug grounds Swain's extra-convertible study, filled with pieces he's been "slowly collecting," such as a 1927 Le Corbusier lounge chair, leather Wassily chairs and a 1967 Guy Aulenti coffee table (outfitted with tail wheels from small airplanes). Swain once designed the interior of a private Boeing 737 and held meetings here to divine inspiration from the space.



The more-public sink, cabinetry and enclosed toilet section of the bathroom in Swain's "back house" acts as a corridor to an indoor-outdoor shower and a private deck. "I don't like normal bathrooms," Swain says. "This feels like I'm in the woods."

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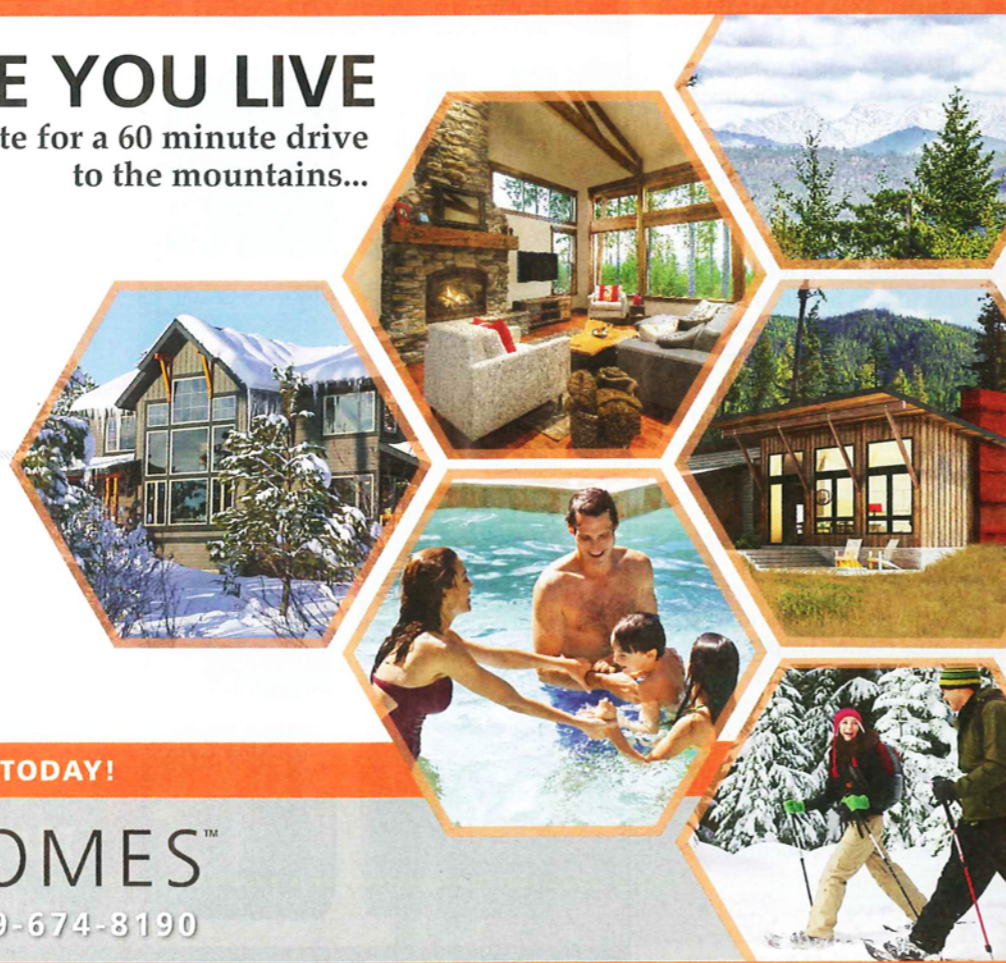
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