

# Solitude in the city: An architect finds peace and quiet in Seattle with his renovated cabin



Originally published March 18, 2016 at 7:00 am Updated March 21, 2016 at 8:12 am



**1 of 12** 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." (Benjamin Benschneider / The Seattle Times)

**Architect Bob Swain creates a Phinney Ridge refuge where everything works — on more than one level.**

By [Sandy Deneau Dunham](#)

*Pacific NW associate editor*

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?



Swain calls the nearly 3-inch-thick madrone slab table that... (Benjamin Benschneider / The Seattle Times) **More** ∨

Yes. And yes.

“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* 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.



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... (Benjamin Benschneider / The Seattle Times) [More](#) ∨

“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.”



A 1990s Gabbeh rug grounds Swain's extra-convertible study,... (Benjamin Benschneider / The Seattle Times) **More** ▾

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 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.



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." (Benjamin Benschneider / The Seattle Times)

- 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.



Swain added a versatile “cantina” entertainment space partially... (Benjamin Benschneider / The Seattle Times) [More](#) ∨

- 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 guesthouse. 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.

*Sandy Deneau Dunham writes about architecture and design for Pacific NW magazine. Benjamin Benschneider is a magazine staff photographer.*



Everything in Swain’s home is super-versatile, including its owner. Swain also does urban and landscape design, city master planning and mixed-use and residential architecture in China. This lower-level steel-shelved bookcase not only displays beautiful gifts from China, such as a packaged 18-foot-long silk scroll and a gold-plated framed sculpture; it also frames a toilet and shower room behind its translucent glass back. The fully stocked and equipped butlers pantry/kitchen/bar is at right. (Benjamin Benschneider / The Seattle Times) [Less](#) ∧