Island Home with a Twist

A challenging site of sloping rock becomes the inspiration for this house on San Juan Island

BY GEOFFREY T. PRENTISS

The Martins' site was stunning. It faced west from the top of the rock bluff overlooking the sky-blue Straits of Juan de Fuca with the crisp Olympic Mountains beyond. At the foot of the bluff, orca whales chased salmon, and eagles hunted overhead.

I could have built the house at the bluff's edge, which would have yielded unrestricted views. But that position also would have been unprotected from the gales that buffet the island. More important, any house built atop the bluff would have been a harsh slap in the face for anyone looking up from the water.

After much discussion, John and Janice Martin agreed that the more sensitive, less conspicuous choice would be to build behind the bluff, nestled into the forest edge (photos left, below). Here, the land comprised mossy rock knolls and jumbled madrona groves. But the only spot available for building was steeply sloped, and to make matters worse, it sloped away from both the views and the sun.

The design grows out of the rocks

The rock was immutable; that was a given. So I developed the design concept for the house from the rock itself. The rock outcroppings were jutting, angular and inclined; I designed the shell of the house to mimic these forms. The plan of intersecting rectangles relates to the views, the light and the rock outcrops (floor plan, p. 109). The compound-angle roof planes thrust upward in the same manner as the jagged rock formations.

The resulting foundation drops 18 ft. from one end to the other in the north/south axis. To keep the living room as close to grade as possible, the uppermost corner is slab on grade. The rest of the floors were conventionally framed.

The rock itself provided the footings for the foundation. Pete Kilpatrick and his Ravenhill Construction crew pinned the foundation to the rock with 2-ft. lengths of #8 rebar drilled into the rock every 2 ft. The form boards were scribed to the natural contours of the rock.

The steeply sloping, natural rock outcropping became the basement floor. We scraped off (and stored for later landscaping purposes) the moss that had clung here. The rock then was pressure-washed and later sealed.

Tucked out of the way. *In response to the site, the house was pulled back from the edge of the bluff and tucked behind a rock outcropping at the edge of the trees. Photo above taken at A on floor plan.*

Steel roof supports, or are they? *The steel pipe seems to be holding up the roof overhang. In reality, the pipes anchor the roof to the rocks during winter gales on the island. Photo left taken at B on floor plan.*

Soaring ceilings and stacks of windows open up the interior spaces.

The powerful slant of the rooflines on the outside of this house translates into dramatically sloped ceilings inside. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

At the lowest end of the basement, we poured a 10-ft. by 10-ft. level slab for mechanical equipment and storage.

Holding down a roof of angles

The compound-angle shed roofs meant that no two points on the top plate were the same height and no two studs were the same length. Compared with most roofs, the work and the measuring were formidable. No two of the I-joist rafters were the same length nor could they be cut at the same angle. The construction foreman, Gordon Elliot, spent as much time scratching his head as installing joists. But the resulting dramatic roof planes are largely why the house blends so naturally into its site.

The two angled steel pipes that shoot up to the projected roof corners are deceiving (photos p. 105). The initial reaction is that they are meant to support the roof. But they actually hold down the roof, counteracting the uplifting force of the wind during our frequent gale-force winter storms. I originally wanted

to use cables, which I thought would have been a more straightforward solution. But I let someone talk me out of that idea, which I now regret.

An open layout for the perfect getaway

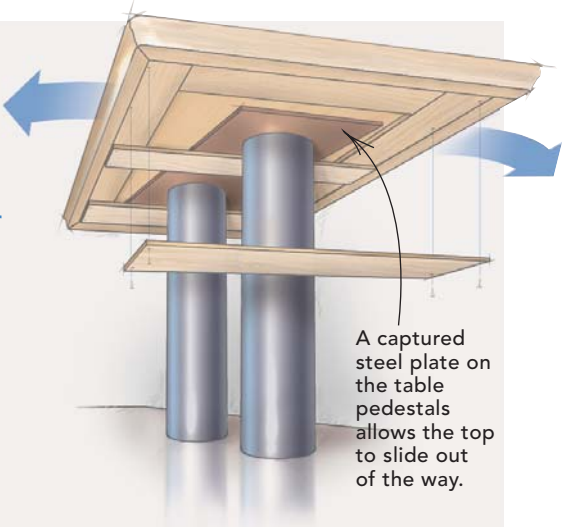
As a retreat for the Martins, this house is fairly small (1500 sq. ft.), so I kept the room layout as open as possible. However, to maintain a sense of intimacy in the kitchen, eating nook, office and living room, I tried to give each its

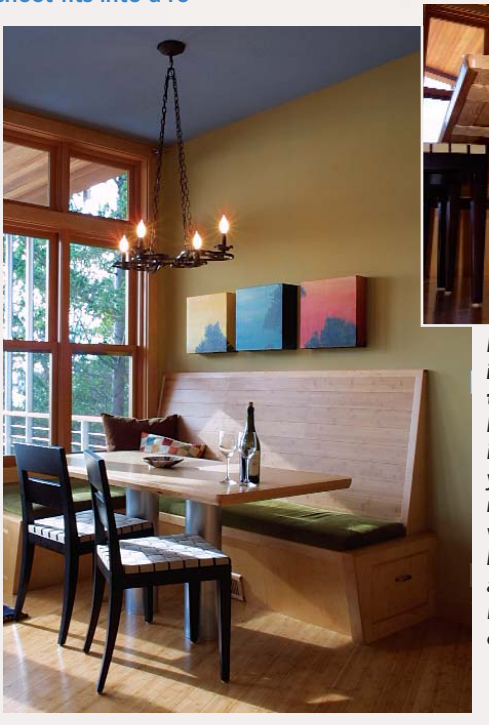
Plain and simple lines. *The kitchen cabinetry, along with the rest of the interior finish, was kept simple and unadorned for a distinctively Asian feel. Photo taken at D on floor plan.*

A TABLE THAT SLIDES OUT OF THE WAY

Ever had trouble sliding behind the table in a restaurant booth? A table for a built-in eating nook can be a problem because it needs to be farther away from you so that you can slide in, but closer to you so that you can eat. Enter the table with a movable top.

This table is supported by two pedestals with a rectangle of 3/16-in. sheet steel on top (inset photo, drawing). The steel sheet fits into a recessed flat section of the tabletop's underside. Two strips of plywood go under the steel and are screwed into the tabletop. These strips keep the top from tipping off the steel. The whole assembly is hidden by the edge trim of the tabletop. Extra play lets the ends of the tabletop swing out independently. Another helping of mashed potatoes, please? —*G. T. P.*





No trouble sliding behind this table. *No matter how many helpings you eat, you'll always have room to maneuver behind this built-in table with a sliding top. Photo taken at E on floor plan.*

Drawing this page: Dan Thornton

Disappearing doors turn the living room inside out.

Large exterior bifold doors open up for a seamless connection to the stone terrace and the rocky landscape beyond. Photo taken at F on floor plan.

own strong sense of place while still allowing the rooms to flow into adjacent spaces.

The ceiling of the main area has varied heights and forms reflecting the angular roof shapes. The flat ceiling over the kitchen with the two-story section above helps to divide the larger space into smaller segments. The most dramatic ceiling is in the living room, where the roof angles up to one corner. The windows step up into the corner for an upward energy that reflects the thrust of the rock outcropping just outside the house (photo p. 106).

Simple, unadorned maple cabinets lend a distinctive Asian feel to the kitchen (top photo, p. 107), and the countertops are ¾-in. slabs of honed limestone. For the peninsula counter,

Privacy and light. *A pocket window in the master bathroom lets in light and air from across the stair chase. Photo taken at G on floor plan.*

Wake to the sound of orca whales. *With the doors to the master-bedroom deck open, your alarm clock might be a pod of whales swimming by in the Sound. Photo taken at H on floor plan.*

the limestone is set atop a ⅜-in. cantilevered steel plate. Behind the kitchen, a pocket door can hide the laundry area or convert the lower bedroom and bath into a private suite.

Fold-away glass doors unite indoors with outdoors

Several sets of French doors lead to different terraces, letting the open feel extend beyond the walls of the house. A pair of doors flanked by large windows provides abundant light and beautiful views from the eating nook.

The sitting area has a bank of doors (Quantum Windows and Doors; 800-287-6650; www.quantumwindows.com) that fold back for a 10-ft. wide uninterrupted connection between the living area and the ground-level terraces (top photo, facing page), which perfectly link the house to the rocky site.

The master bedroom has doors that open onto an angled deck with a stunning view (bottom photo, facing page). To keep that view as unrestricted as possible, I opted against horizontal deck railing boards. Instead, I developed a system that replaced the opaque cedar with ½-in. tempered-glass planks that maintained the horizontal lines of the railing. The crew from Ravenhill Construction came up with an elegant system of stainless-steel brackets that capture and hold the glass planks without being drilled through.

To counterbalance the kinetic form of the house, we kept finishes and paneling simple and consistently horizontal. Ironically, the appearance of simplicity, particularly in an angular house like this, often takes more work than the most ornate designs. Both the trim and the cabinetry were exceptionally executed under the guidance of Joe Cooper of Ravenhill Construction. Gregory Carmichael, who did the interior furnishings, came up with an ingenious system that allows the eating-nook table to slide out of the way (sidebar p. 107).

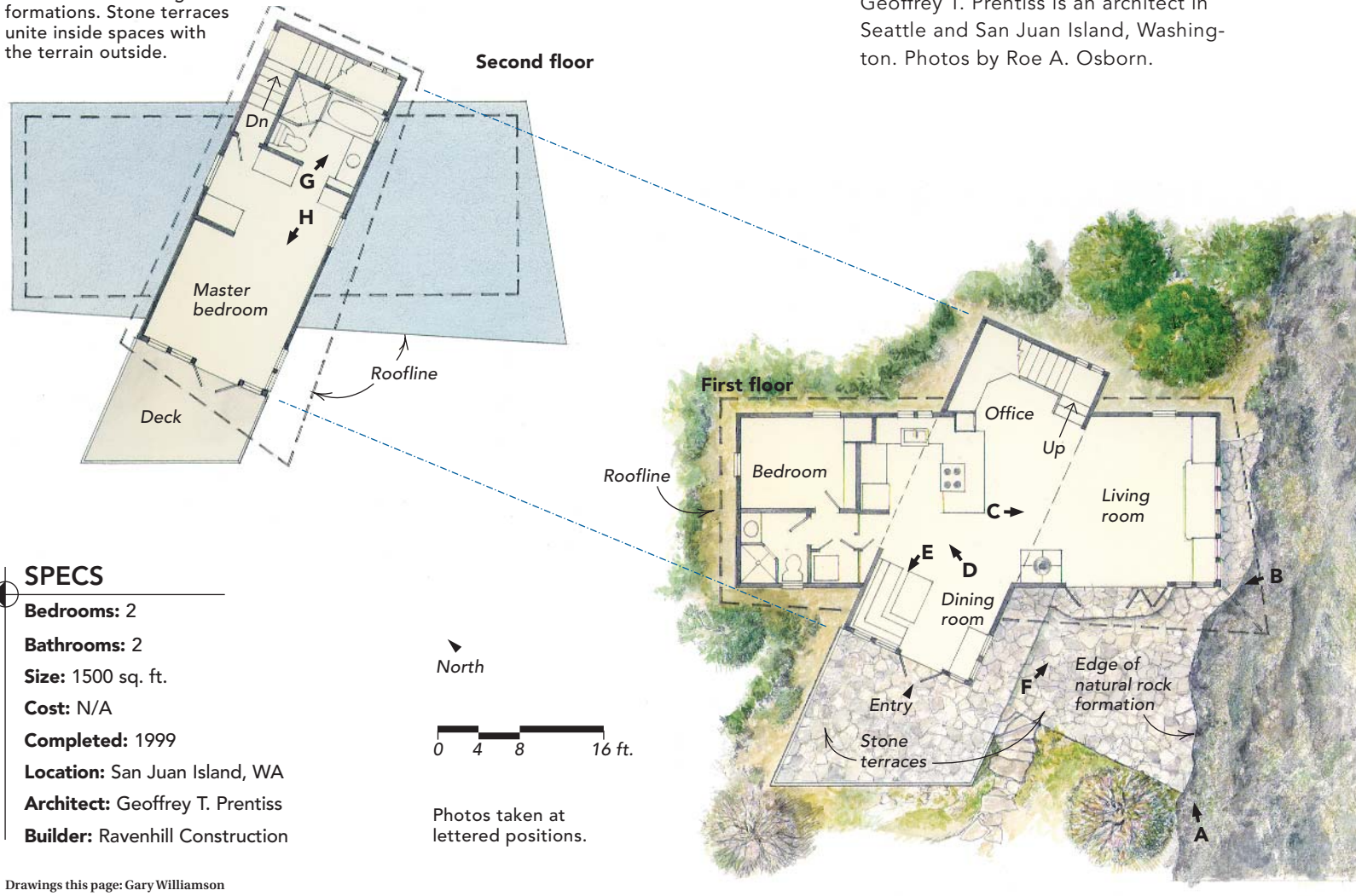
The windows, custom-made by Window-Craft (www.windowcraft-inc.com; 360-378-5595), a local San Juan Island company, have strongly defined horizontal bands. We even included an interior pocket window in the master bath that borrows light from a window on the other side of the stairway (center photo, facing page). Tongue-and-groove cedar on all the pitched ceilings aligns with the lengths of the rooms. The bamboo flooring throughout the first floor runs in the same direction.

The outside finish of the house is a mix of two types of cedar siding, which adds to the horizontal feeling. The majority of the siding is rough-sawn, 10-in. shiplap, custom-milled and stained to blend with the moss on the surrounding rocks. The clear-cedar accent siding in window areas has a 2½-in. exposure to contrast and complement the stained siding. □

Geoffrey T. Prentiss is an architect in Seattle and San Juan Island, Washington. Photos by Roe A. Osborn.

A HOUSE THAT ANGLES INTO ITS SITE

The main sections of this house are two rectangles set at opposing angles. The rectilinear form and the angular rooflines echo the surrounding rock formations. Stone terraces unite inside spaces with the terrain outside.



Photos taken at lettered positions.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 2
Bathrooms: 2
Size: 1500 sq. ft.
Cost: N/A
Completed: 1999
Location: San Juan Island, WA
Architect: Geoffrey T. Prentiss
Builder: Ravenhill Construction

Drawings this page: Gary Williamson