

A Simple Plan for

Lakeside



Living

A low-budget vacation house proves that simple doesn't have to mean shortchanged

BY GENE DeSMIDT



In the summer of 2000, my wife, Sharon, and I were driving back to our home in the Bay Area from a remote piece of property that we own in northern California. We were exhausted from the dusty, unpaved roads, the dry heat, and the dogs drooling in back. This was no way to unwind. We decided to look for a vacation retreat that was closer to home and preferably on some water.

After looking at nearly a dozen houses, we found a piece of land that once had a resort hotel on it. Long ago, it burned to the ground, and now the site had two overgrown building sites less than 50 ft. from a small lake. We bought it on the spot.

Big bites reduce small budget

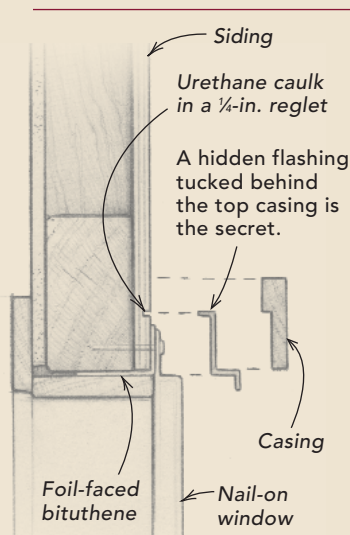
After buying the land, we had \$150,000 to complete the project. Right away we found

Board-and-batten rouge. Lipstick red and set to party, the author's vacation house features a shed roof with 6-ft. overhangs sheltering the patio. Photos facing page and above taken at A on floor plan. A freestanding island (top photo) separates the kitchen from the living room. Photo taken at B on floor plan.



I BUILT THIS PLACE FOR A SONG

In addition to keeping the house simple and the materials modest, we stretched the budget by developing some details that streamlined construction, and others that will cut down on future maintenance.



FLASHING WINDOWS IN PLYWOOD SIDING

Our plywood-as-siding detail presented us with a dilemma. Without the typical layer of siding over the plywood, we had to get creative about flashing the tops of the windows. As shown in the drawing (left), a strip of foil-faced bituthene wraps across the intersection of the plywood and the wall framing. Above it, a flashing behind the rabbeted 1x4 head casing tucks into a 1/4-in. reglet in the plywood.

DOUBLE-DUTY SIDING

Our house is in an earthquake zone and therefore required shear walls to secure it to the foundation. Shear walls typically are composed of plywood or oriented strand board (OSB), so builders sheathe a house with one of those products and then cover the sheathing with another layer of siding. This redundancy adds another layer of expense.

I found a source for 4-ft. by 9-ft. lap-jointed fir plywood, 5/8 in. thick, that was designed for exterior exposure and rated for shear walls. We used it for both shear walls and siding, and gave it a board-and-batten look with 1x battens nailed over each stud. That detail covered the lap joints in the plywood, gave us the look of an informal, rural building, and didn't require any extra blocking for the battens.



SPECS

Bedrooms: 1

Bathrooms: 1

Size: 875 sq. ft.

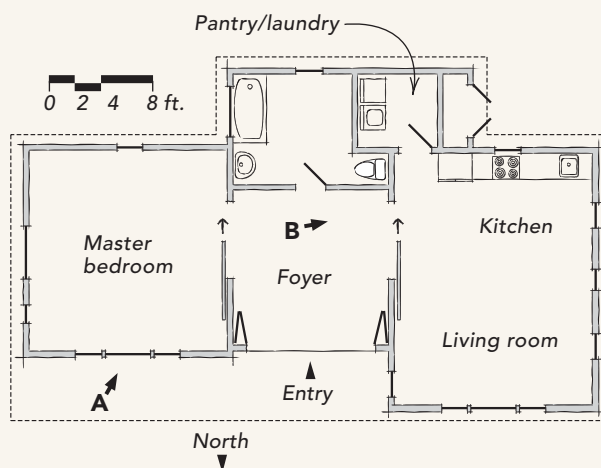
Cost: \$125 per sq. ft. (doesn't include owners' involvement)

Completed: 2002

Location: Lake County, California

Architect: Helen Degenhardt

Builder: Gene DeSmidt



out that a good chunk of it was going into the ground. Because we wanted to build close to the water, we couldn't install a traditional septic tank and leach field. Instead, we would have to install a sewage-treatment system complete with a pump to convey effluent to a leach field 1000 ft. behind the house. That lightened the checkbook by \$30,000.

Next, we learned that getting electricity to the site would cost \$7,500 for the pole, the

A 4-in.-thick layer of foam insulation concealed from below by knotty-pine paneling completes the ceiling.



Because so many building materials come in dimensions that are multiples of 2 ft., we framed the house to take advantage of them. All the studs are 2 ft. apart. The rafters are 4 ft. apart, bearing on studs placed directly below them to carry their loads. This kept our lumber costs to a minimum and allowed us to use standard-size windows rather than expensive custom sizes.

A photograph showing a view through an open wooden-framed glass door. The door is made of light-colored wood and has multiple glass panes held together by metal hinges. The door is open, revealing a large, leafy tree in the garden. The tree has a thick, dark trunk and dense green foliage. In the background, there is a body of water and a grassy hillside. The ground in the foreground is a light-colored, paved surface. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a pleasant day in a garden.

As shown in the photo above, we hinged together pairs of standard Simpson door blanks with four pairs of stainless-steel 4-in. ball-bearing hinges. Experience has taught me over the years that gravity always causes the top hinge to droop when the doors are heavy. To keep these doors from sagging, we added an extra hinge toward the top of each door. Barrel bolts at the top and bottom of each door keep them secure in the closed position.

Clearly, the house had to be small and composed of modest materials without fussy finishes. It also had to be easy to build because seasoned carpenters are tough to find in Lake County. Sharon and I figured we could get

In my work as a contractor, I typically build expensive houses. The company motto is “Perfect is close enough.” But for my own house, we changed it to “Close enough is perfect.”

Before learning that we needed a sewage-treatment facility, our plan was to build three

With the help of our beloved architect, Helen Degenhardt, the early plan evolved into a rectangle with a shed roof (bottom photo, p. 93). A house doesn't get much simpler than this, but a couple of twists energize the plan (floor plan, facing page). The two primary rooms—the master bedroom and the living

BUILD A GUEST HOUSE ON A LAKE



Another time, same place

In the vintage postcard above, five cabanas, lined up like turtles on a log, overlook the lake. Behind them, the lodge dining room occupies the spot that has become the site for the author's house.

The concrete bulkhead that supported the original cabanas was still in excellent shape, 80 years after the demise of the old lodge. The bulkhead now supports a pair of colorful cabins—the banana cabana and the grape escape—which serve as guest sleeping quarters. Photos above taken at C on site plan.



Guest-cabin cabanas sit atop the seawall foundation of an old resort.

AND THE GUESTS WILL COME

room/kitchen—are separated by a foyer that is akin to an interior courtyard. Accordion doors fold back, linking the foyer with the patio (photo p. 95). On warm summer evenings, we swing open the doors and live out there (photo p. 92).

We wanted the interior of the house to be visually open, from the bedroom to the foyer to the living room/kitchen. But we also wanted the option of complete privacy when the living room doubles as a guest room. The solution: insulated barn doors that open up each space or completely close each one off. The bath is off the foyer, accessible from each bedroom.

Being as close to the ground as possible was important to us, and choosing a concrete-slab foundation and floor fit right into that goal by keeping the floor just a few inches above grade. The slab also saved us the cost of forming concrete stemwalls, floor joists, and an 18-in. crawlspace with all the necessary vents and access hatches.

We left the concrete (pigmented dark green) exposed in the entry foyer and the bathroom. Both have floor drains to catch the runoff from the bathroom shower or dripping swimmers just back from the lake. We prefer, however, not to walk on concrete all the time. So the master bedroom and living room have hardwood floors atop the slab.

By the end of the project, we were relieved to see that our cost-conscious approach worked. The house ended up costing \$110,000 and change. That didn't include about \$5,000 worth of building materials that I had been gathering over the years for a project like this. And it didn't include the time that I spent swinging a hammer and managing the subcontractors. But 90% of the work was done by locals. And it's fair to say that if the house had been any larger or any more complicated, we couldn't have done it. □

Gene DeSmidt is a contractor based in Oakland, Calif. Photos by Charles Miller, except where noted.

MINI-CABINS AS GUEST ROOMS

We have lots of friends who join us for weekends. After a year of tucking guest beds on couches, in cars, and in tents, we decided the best way to give us all a little privacy would be to build a couple of tiny sleeping cabins.

The long-gone lodge, the Laurel Dell, included a concrete bulkhead at the water's edge. It was still in great shape, so I designed two 8-ft. by 12-ft. cabanas cantilevered over the bulkhead and took the plans to the building department. Application denied: Zoning wouldn't allow us to build over the water.

At about the same time, Sharon was on eBay looking for old postcards of the lodge. She found one that revealed five cabanas with decks hanging over the water (inset photo, facing page). Vintage postcard in hand, I went back to the building department and showed it to the head inspector, asking her if we could "grandfather" our cabanas. She and the zoning department were convinced, and our permit was

approved (and we sent her a dozen roses).

We framed all the cabana walls in my shop in Oakland, and then trucked them to the lake. It took three people one day to install the walls and rafters. I spent many more weekends with my son Danny, putting down deck boards, building the railings, and trimming out the cabin interiors (photo left).

The floors cantilever so far beyond the bulkhead that we had to install piers uphill to keep the joists from lifting. As a result, the floors are a little bouncy. But so far, nobody who's stayed in the little purple and yellow cabins has complained about it.

Down the hill from the main house. The small guest cabins are out of conversational earshot, but close enough to hear the dinner bell. Photos taken at D and E on site plan.

