

# How to Cope With a Beautiful Site

Don't force the footprint. Let the surroundings choose the palette, and plan plenty of outdoor rooms.

BY CHRIS BIGOS

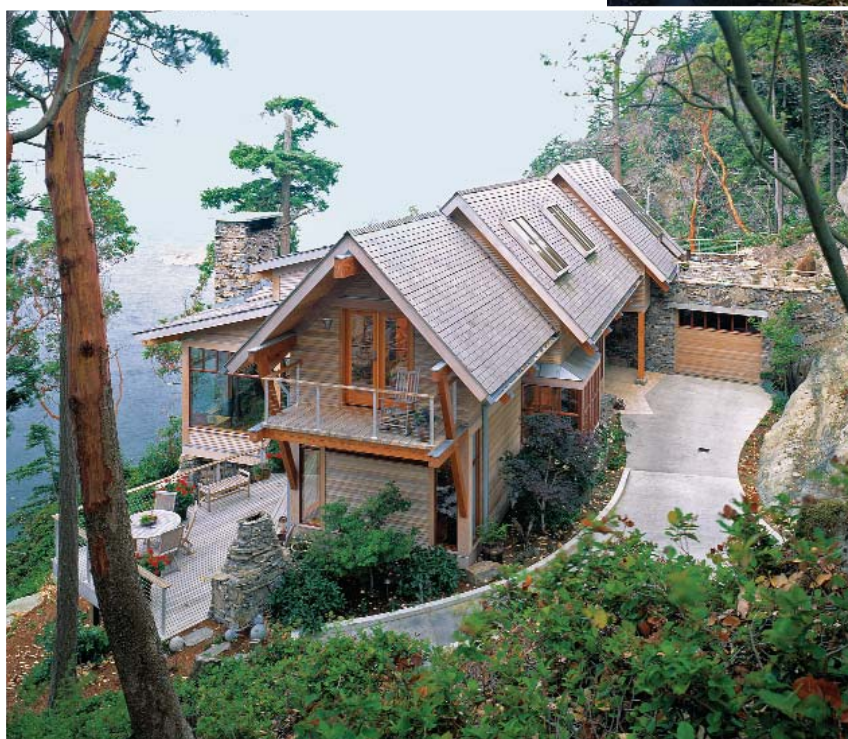
**T**hey say that beauty has its drawbacks. I don't know if that's true, but in the case of Washington's steep, rocky coast, it certainly poses challenges. Seemingly impossible ideas, such as outdoor living space, on a site such as this are achievable with a good design team and open-minded homeowners. A strong connection between indoor and outdoor rooms is what makes this design successful. The indoor/outdoor connection is forged with materials, colors, and structural cues taken from the site.

While architects often talk about trying to marry a house to its site, sometimes we really have no choice. With so little buildable land, this house is more than married to its site; it's embedded there.

## Let topography dictate floor plan

To take full advantage of this beautiful site, my firm and I needed to use the steepest, rockiest section that good sense allowed. Further complicating the design, the owners wanted exposed timbers. Timber-frame construction is best served by a regular layout of posts, beams, and rafters. This site, however, is anything but regular.

Rather than forcing a typical footprint, we let the land's features direct the floor-plan development. For starters, we removed as



**It's tricky to tread lightly on a steep and rocky site.** Broken rooflines, broad overhangs, and an embedded garage help the house nestle into the landscape. Photo right taken at A on floor plan. Photo above taken at B on floor plan. Photo at far right taken at C on floor plan.







## What makes it work?

# 7 DESIGN GUIDELINES

- 1 DON'T FIGHT WITH THE SITE**  
Let the natural contours help to build the footprint (photo facing page).
- 2 USE NATURE'S PALETTE**  
Choose colors and materials indigenous to the surroundings (photo left).
- 3 CLEARLY DEFINE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE AREAS**  
Delineate zones within both indoor and outdoor rooms but also within particular rooms (bottom photo, p. 64).
- 4 CONNECT INDOORS AND OUTDOORS**  
Use glass to bring the outdoors in, and decks, porches, and patios to bring the indoors out (top photo, p. 64).
- 5 GO WITH THE FLOW**  
Group utility areas to ease traffic patterns from public to private zones (floor plan, p. 65).
- 6 MAKE A GREAT ENTRANCE**  
Whether entering a room or the home, the feeling should be inviting, not overpowering.
- 7 DON'T OVERLOOK THE ROOFLINES**  
Steep roof pitches make rooms inside feel safe, and deep overhangs provide a cozy refuge (photos pp. 66-67).







**Exposed timbers frame the view.** Using glass as infill accentuates the sturdy timber frame while providing a positive connection to the outdoors. Many of the materials found inside are the same as those found outside, but with a high level of refinement. Photo taken at D on floor plan.



**Work zones can contain private spaces.** In fact, they can be defined by private nooks. Noncooks can sit comfortably out of the way at the center island or at the built-in window seat (inset photo, right). Both private areas help to define this open layout. Photo above taken at E on floor plan. Inset photo taken at F on floor plan.



few trees as possible, choosing instead to design around them. Also, the house's low profile complements its surroundings.

### Let the floor plan develop

The floor plan that evolved has three different zones: a public zone; a transitional zone; and a private zone. These distinct zones contrast in function but also in structure. The irregularly shaped masonry structure (the transitional zone) is flanked by two rectangular timber-frame structures (the public and private zones).

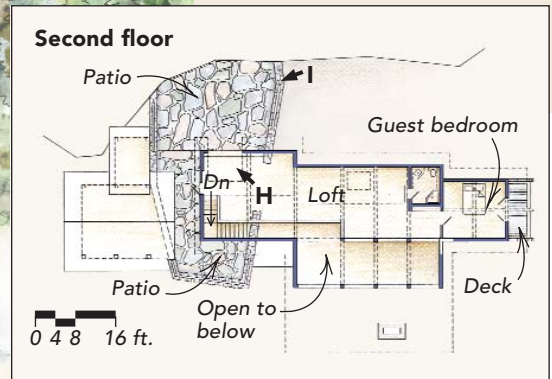
The masonry form anchors itself to the land by tying into the steep topography, taking on the



## STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS DEFINE TRAFFIC PATTERNS



The floor plan is divided into three zones: public, private, and transitional (tinted on floor plan). The transitional zone is an irregularly shaped masonry structure flanked by two timber-frame wings that contain the living areas and master suite. Outdoor living areas are nestled into every side of the house and provide privacy and protection from the elements. Photo above taken at G on floor plan.



Photos taken at lettered positions.

character of a rock outcrop. The stone walls run from the cliff through the home and back out to the land with little interruption.

The timber-frame structures float above the ground, while the masonry form is embedded in the terrain. This design welcomes cascading decks and patios to ease the transition of rocky sloped site to rigid timber frame.

### Let the site choose your palette

Taking cues from the site's natural features is important when laying out the floor plan as well as when choosing which materials, colors, and textures to use. Natural materials with muted colors can reduce a building's

visual impact by helping it to blend in with its surroundings.

The abundance of madroña trees is one of the most striking features of this site; their smooth bark can range from a deep orange when young to a vibrant red as they age. This red is echoed in the stain for the wide window trim, but it was serendipity that the color of the Douglas-fir timbers complemented these trees.

### Celebrate the outdoors from inside

Many of the materials making up the exterior composition can be found on the inside as well. While the timber frame is essentially

## SPECS

**Bedrooms:** 2

**Bathrooms:** 3

**Size:** 3380 sq. ft.

**Cost:** N/A

**Completed:** 2000

**Location:** South Bellingham, Wash.

**Architect:** Zervas Group

**Builder:** Mocer Construction Inc. (general contractor); Cascade Joinery (timber frame)



# The indoor/outdoor connection is forged with materials,



**The second-floor loft opens to a rooftop patio and garden.** Through the French doors, you can turn either right to the rooftop patio (below) or left to a private sitting nook with a view of the ocean. Photo taken at H on floor plan.

**A rooftop patio grows out of the topography.** The patio sits on the garage roof with dedicated garden space. Photo taken at I on floor plan.





# colors, and structural cues taken from the site

**An inside corner makes an outdoor room.** Rather than continue the exterior walls to follow the timber frame and roof, the author cut a corner out of the inside living room and created an outdoor one. Photo taken at J on floor plan.

an accent on the exterior, it remains a prominent feature inside.

One way to accentuate the timbers is with contrast: painting the walls off-white and eliminating extraneous wood trim around the timbers. Instead of covering the joint between drywall and timber with a piece of trim, the two materials were left separated by a ½-in. reveal. The drywall was finished with J-channel. Although this detail required a bit more diligence from the drywall crew, it allows the wood to expand and contract without cracking the drywall, and it strengthens the impact of the timber frame.

The flooring and the casework in the kitchen, dining room, and living room are a deep, rich cherry. Because these spaces are open in plan and section, they benefit from a dark floor that adds a sense of warmth. The entry hall, utility room, and master bath, which are more closed, benefit from a light-colored limestone-tile floor, more appropriate than wood for these uses.

In addition to offering expansive views and creating continuity between inside and out, the large windows that fit between the posts and beams also emphasize the timber frame as the structural system (top photo, p. 64).

## Outdoor living: dining, sitting, and away rooms

Because of the occasional rain here in the Pacific Northwest, covered outdoor space in addition to the open-air rooms is a good idea. An outdoor living room of sorts was formed by not filling the walls of a 10-ft. by 10-ft. cor-

ner. Instead, the timber frame and roofline are left intact (photo above).

The other main deck space is an outdoor dining room off the formal dining room (photo p. 63). The spaces are joined by two large glazed doors flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows.

At the other end of the house, the master bedroom's private deck extends over the steeply sloping cliff side and looks down into a small cove. The guest bedroom on the second floor has a similarly scaled balcony deck with a roofline extending 4 ft. beyond the exterior wall for shelter.

These private outdoor spaces contrast with the more public living-room and dining-room decks not only in the size of their structure but also in the size of their view. The large public deck spaces offer expansive views down the shoreline and out to the horizon.

A couple of more secluded outdoor sitting areas perch above the stone outcrop. Above the garage, a low-slope roof was designed as a patio with stone pavers to provide an outdoor living and garden space that can be accessed from the second-floor loft. Another more intimate sitting area is on the ocean side of the house.

Although this house and site offer stark contrasts in shapes and scale, in the end it's all about continuity—continuity of indoor and outdoor spaces, visual elements, and materials. Continuity pulls the house and site together to make a beautiful composition. □

Chris Bigos is a designer with Zervas Group Architects in Bellingham, Wash. Terry Brown was the principal architect on this project. Photos by Doug Scott.

