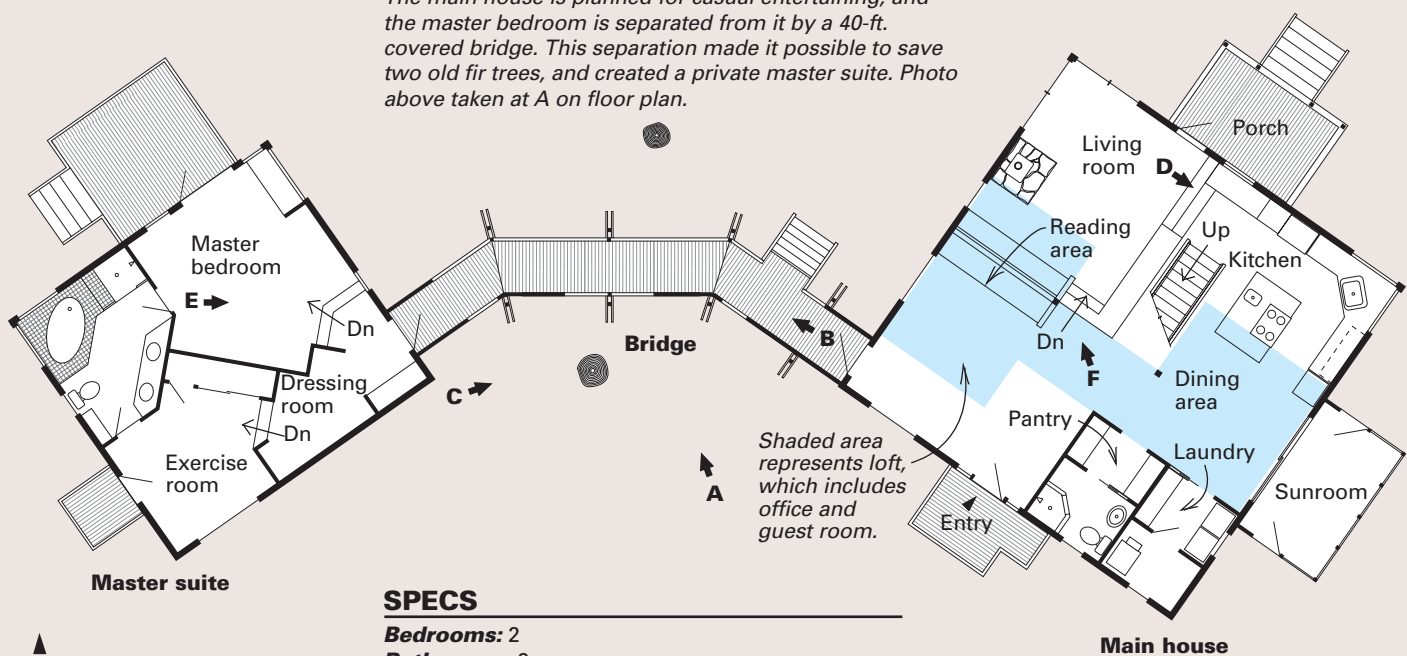




An open floor plan, but a variety of space

The main house is planned for casual entertaining, and the master bedroom is separated from it by a 40-ft. covered bridge. This separation made it possible to save two old fir trees, and created a private master suite. Photo above taken at A on floor plan.



SPECS

Bedrooms: 2

Bathrooms: 2

Heating system: Oil-fired radiant floor; woodstove

Size: Main house: 1,691 sq. ft.; master suite: 624 sq. ft.

Cost: \$115 per sq. ft.

Completed: 1994

Location: Lopez Island, Washington

North

0 2 4 8 ft.

Photos taken at lettered positions.

When Bob and Jan Sundquist retired, they wanted to trade their hectic suburban life for one of tranquillity. They wanted a home in a quiet setting, a private place where they could share coffee with a neighbor and enjoy nature's beauty. They found the site on Lopez Island in Washington's San Juan Islands. The land was typical of this section of the Washington coastline—a beautiful view of a quiet bay and its rugged, rocky coastline, large cedar and fir trees, alders, and an abundance of ferns and mossy logs. A short walk down a moderately sloped bluff led to a small beach.

On the other hand, it was a steep site, and wet, even by Washington standards, situated near the bottom of a wide draw that sloped down to the north. This topography meant that drainage was important, as was making the most of the limited amount of direct sun, and the 17% slope of the site would require careful excavation.

Working with the site demands unusual solutions—Bob and Jan asked me to design a house where they could enjoy both a sense of shelter and their site's natural beauty. It was critical to design a house we could build with minimal disturbance to the site. Our greatest concern was three large fir trees growing in the middle of the site and standing in the best location for a house. They survived the previous

Taking Advantage of a Difficult Building Site

A compound house is joined by a bridge that threads between old fir trees

by Joseph W. Greene



Planned for minimal disturbance. The bridge footings were kept to a minimum to avoid damaging sensitive tree roots. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

The bridge is open on the bay side. Giving the owners intimate contact with nature, the bridge is closed in only on the windward side. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

A large butcher-block-topped island dominates the kitchen. Saltillo tile and fir trim give a sense of intimacy and balance in an open floor plan. The stairs provide access to the loft and serve as an informal room divider. Photo taken at D on floor plan.



Separate from the main house, the master suite is private and romantic. Surrounded on all sides by forest and garden, and reached by the open bridge, the master suite has the sense of being an island. Photo taken at E on floor plan.

A variety of floor and ceiling heights creates differing moods. The living area is open and flooded with daylight—planned for entertaining—while the built-in bench on the left is cozy because of the sheltering loft floor. Photo taken at F on floor plan.





year's 100-mph winds, so we figured they were strong, but how to design a house around them was not readily apparent.

After a brainstorming session with landscape designer Fran Abel, I presented Bob and Jan with a plan that split the house into two parts connected by a 40-ft. covered bridge (photo p. 94). By keeping the main parts of the house away from the firs, we were able to preserve two of them. The bridge between the trees required minimal excavation, so we could avoid disturbing their roots. The tree we had to remove could be milled into lumber for the house. The compound-house plan resulted in a private, somewhat remote master suite tucked up against a rocky, wooded bluff, while the other structure enclosed the main living and guest spaces (floor plans, p. 94). The connecting bridge, threading its way between the fir trees, and open to the bay on one side, allowed an intimate, immediate sense of nature while screening the house from the road on the uphill side of the property. Surprised by the unusual design, Bob and Jan took a deep breath and agreed to proceed.

We decided to use simple building forms. Splitting the house in two and adding the bridge provided a complexity that did not require additional architectural interest. We wanted to integrate the house with the landscape, which

meant using timeless, classic forms. Finally, the variety of interior spaces begged for simplicity. As a result, we chose two nearly square gabled structures, one smaller and one larger.

A strong connection to the earth—To create a close relationship with the garden and other natural elements of the site, I wanted to keep the house close to the ground. We cut into the hillside, creating a 4-ft. high rockery, or rock garden, about 15 ft. from the house. This excavation put the main floor of the house one step above grade on two sides, at the front porch and at the patio by the rockery on the south side.

To handle site drainage, we first made sure that the road, about 130 ft. uphill from the house, had a good, functioning ditch to carry away any surface water. Fifty ft. uphill from the house, we dug a trench and placed perforated plastic pipe that ran downhill to daylight. We filled this trench with gravel, making a curtain drain. We put another drain at the edge of the patio, and footing drains surround the bases of the structures. The site drains well in the heaviest rains.

Because of the potential wet-soil condition, we built the foundation during late summer before the winter rains had a chance to make the excavation into a muddy bog. We started framing the following spring as the weather cleared.

The bridge ties everything together—Designing and building the covered bridge connecting the two parts of the house was particularly challenging. Given the island's weather patterns, the bridge needed to withstand hurricane-force winds. It also needed to change direction twice, slope to the differing floor levels of the house and avoid the large tree's roots. As in the interior, the structural elements became a key aesthetic component. Dubbed "finish framing" by the contractor, the rigid structural frame is exposed and worked to a simple finished quality with eased, square-cut edges and carefully designed joinery (photo left, p. 95). A minimum number of 4x4s connects the bridge to the ground, limiting disturbance to the trees and creating a true bridge between the structures.

Board-and-batten cedar siding with a semi-transparent stain integrates with the woodland setting and reflects the casual, rural tradition of the island (photo right, p. 95). The painted wooden knee braces and gable supports are both functional and decorative. The roof extends to create a broad porch at the end of the garden path, and beams supporting the porch roof continue out to become a wisteria trellis.

An inviting, informal interior—The owners wanted a warm, casual and open living space for entertaining contrasted with a private master

suite. In the main house, skylights brighten the loft used for the guest sleeping area and office. The dining area, the reading area and a small bathroom are intimate and cozy because the loft floor of exposed 2x6 decking forms a wood ceiling (bottom photo, facing page). The open stairs to the loft occupy the center of the space, separating the living room with its high ceiling and stepped-down floor from the kitchen (top photo, facing page). A long bench near the woodstove divides the living and reading areas, and the steps to the living room extend to become an informal seating area. Although the main floor is visually divided into several distinct areas, it is easy to talk with people anywhere in the house.

In contrast, the other structure is comprised of private spaces. From the bridge, one enters the master suite through the light, roomy dressing area. Steps to the left lead down to an exercise room. The master bedroom, with its deck and spectacular views of Hunter Bay, is to the right (photo left, facing page). Two window seats double as storage. The focal point of this structure is the master bath with a corner tub that overlooks the moss-covered rocks at the base of the hill.

Natural materials make a warm interior—The exposed structure of the house is as important to the aesthetics as the finish work. We joined the rough-sawn timbers with simple, locally welded metal brackets. The 1-in. square balusters in the loft and stair balustrades provide a strong contrast to the large 3-in. by 4-in. newel posts that are bolted to the supporting beams below.

The entire main floor consists of saltillo-tile pavers installed over a mortar bed on a plywood subfloor. The color of extensive, clear-finished Douglas-fir trim matches the tone of the pavers; and white-painted walls bring a brightness to the space, an advantage on gray, damp Northwestern days. The tongue-and-groove pine ceiling is a cozy complement to the large volume of space in the living area.

The sunroom, which is located on the south side of the main house, uses an insulated, exposed aggregate concrete floor for radiant-heat storage. The heat to the interior of the room is controlled by a sliding-glass door opening to the kitchen and to the dining-room area. During the summer, the owners can leave the two exterior glass doors ajar to allow breezes and their enthusiastic Labrador retriever, Babe, to pass through the sunroom. □

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