

Sound Design

A cramped single-story cabin grows up

BY MATTHEW SWETT

This project began with a birthday present. Kathy, who attends my wife's yoga classes, learned that I'm an architect, and asked if she could gift some of my time to her husband, David to help him design a small woodshop. Kathy, I soon discovered, is an avid weaver. She didn't know it at the time, but I had grown up in a woodshop making weaving looms with my parents. We were well matched.

A few hours consultation evolved into a full design for the woodshop. We worked well together and our collective attention turned next to their house. Kathy and David were nearing retirement and were considering transitioning from their home in Seattle to their property here on Whidbey Island. The existing cabin was a mere 800 sq. ft., and downsizing from their four-story Craftsman-style home was too much of a leap for the couple. However, they realized they could make it work with some thoughtful modifications.

The site steers design

The cabin was old—the first of its kind built at Bush Point. As such, it was well sited, high on the hill with sweeping views of the Salish



BEST REMODEL

The 2018 Best Remodel Award goes to Matthew Swett of Taproot Architects in Langley, Wash. Swett used traditional materials and steeply sloped rooflines to transform a boxy cabin into a modern farmhouse with a flexible floor plan that considers aging in place.



CREATING A CLASSIC LOOK The cabin original to the site was cramped and squat, and its uncovered outdoor living space went unused much of the time. The remodeled house is everything the old structure was not. Designed in the farmhouse style, it has a covered porch, soaring gables, and an all-wood exterior that glows with inviting warmth. The wood's natural finish is complemented by the dark tones of the windows and roof, giving the exterior a simple yet striking appearance. The windows have traditional divided lites, but in most cases they're limited to the top sash for uninterrupted views.

Sea. Age added grace—over the years, the landscape had grown and the house had been enfolded in a mature grove of trees.

The building itself was small and oddly laid out. It lacked an entry; you arrived via French doors directly into the kitchen. The bathroom and bedrooms were tight and, in our rainy climate, the large, uncovered front deck was seldom used. The mechanical system was an afterthought, tacked on to the side of the building some time in the last century. It needed some help.

Early in the design process, we agreed that stewarding the landscape was a high priority, so we decided to keep the footprint as close to the original as possible. We tried to retain as much of the existing structure as we could, but soon learned that was impractical. The existing ceilings were too low, the framing insubstantial, and the energy performance poor. The one bonus was that the foundation system had been upgraded in the recent past. Constrained on all sides, but with a solid foundation under us, we decided to marginally increase the footprint and add a second floor above. Ultimately, that meant nearly starting over on the existing foundation. Kathy and David had spent a considerable amount of time refurbishing the cabin's interior woodwork already (see sidebar p. 37), so in the interest of preserving that resource and history, they carefully removed it for reinstallation in the new structure.

A hardworking, compact plan
It was a bit of a challenge to fit everything my clients wanted into the available area, but a few key decisions made it work. We split the living area across the floors. This resulted in a modest parlor on the lower floor and a more generous living room on the second floor, where there is better access to the views. This allowed us to closely follow the original house plan, with the bedrooms on the north side and the living areas on the south.

A small addition for the stairs provided just enough room for a walk-out laundry room on the first landing and a built-in window seat on the landing above.

We added a wraparound porch on the view side of the house. Aesthetically, this helped to shape the home into its farmhouse character. Functionally, the porch extends the living space outward, providing shelter in inclement weather, and even transforming into a kennel for Loki and Sunna, the family dogs. Steel railings atop trolleys telescope out from



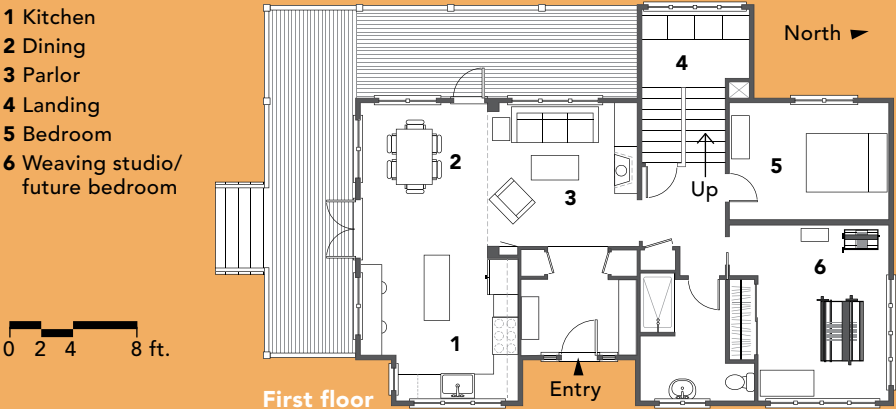
SPECS
Bedrooms: 2
Bathrooms: 2
Size: 2100 sq. ft.
Location: Whidbey Island, Wash.
Architect: Matthew Swett, Taproot Architects, Langley, Wash., taproot.us
Builder: Sound Construction LLC, soundconstructionllc.com



Plan for aging in place. The weaving room can be closed off from the rest of the first-floor living space by closing a reclaimed five-panel door. The room can become a first-floor master bedroom should the owners decide they no longer want to use the stairs.

A floor plan with flexibility

The bedrooms are on the darker northern side of the house to encourage sound sleep. The primary living areas are on the south side, making the spaces brighter and providing water views. There are living rooms, full bathrooms, and bedrooms on both floors, giving both the owners and guests privacy and allowing the owners to live on one level as they age.



Floor-plan drawing: Patrick Welsh



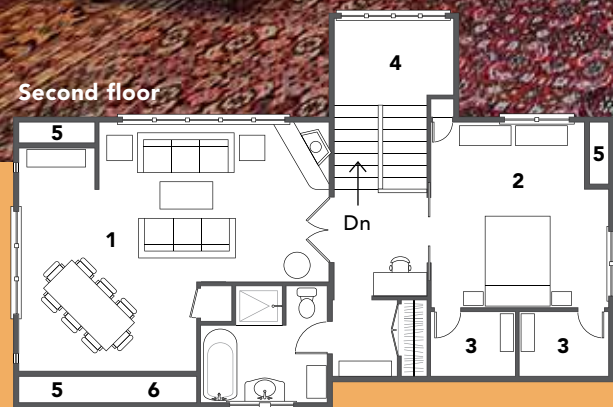
Modern kitchen with a period look. The kitchen's period-look fir cabinets were built by a local craftsman using reclaimed straight-grain fir. Soapstone countertops, period-style lighting, and a large apron-front sink complement the home's farmhouse style.

—Kathy Stetz,
the homeowner

Salvaged-stock interior

The original cabin's floors and walls were covered almost entirely with Douglas fir. We spent several months removing as much of the wood as we could with Burke bars and a host of pry bars. The boards were then resawn to create wainscoting, ceiling boards, and the coat rack and bench near the entrance. Some of the boards became walls in our workshop. The interior doors came from Ballard Reuse in Seattle. One side of the doors was varnished and the other heavily painted.

We used a low-temperature heat gun to remove the paint from the flat surfaces and 3M Safest Stripper on molded sections. After applying the stripper, we left it covered with plastic for 4 to 6 hours and then removed the softened paint with coarse steel wool and an assortment of scraping tools. After removing the paint, we sanded the surface to 120 grit with a Bosch random-orbit sander. Smaller areas were sanded with a small belt sander and a Fein oscillating multitool. The smallest areas were sanded by hand. After the doors were finished with two coats of water-based polyurethane, a local craftsman prepped them and hung them on jambs. Whenever possible, we used period or reproduction hinges and hardware.



- 1 Living area
- 2 Master suite
- 3 Closet
- 4 Landing
- 5 Storage
- 6 Mechanicals

The second floor contains the master bedroom, a full bath, and a comfortable living area with a propane fireplace. Like the first-floor living room, the upstairs living area has south-facing water views. The stair tower, an 8-ft. by 10-ft. addition to the original footprint, connects the first and second floors and provides a refuge in the form of a reading nook on its oversize landing.

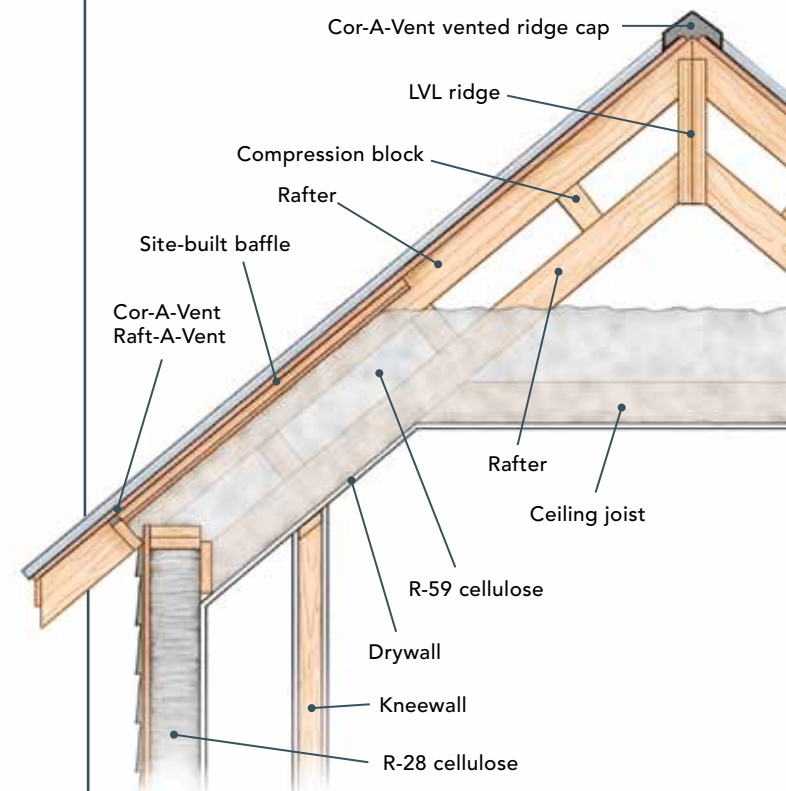


More than a stairway. The staircase to the second floor has a window seat at the landing—a perfect spot for reading a book or enjoying a cup of coffee. Underneath the landing is an 8-ft. by 10-ft. laundry room with grade-level access to the outdoors.



Modern bath with timeless appeal. The 10-ft. by 10-ft. upstairs bath has 1-in. hexagonal floor tile, period fixtures, and white subway tile that give the bath a historic look with modern conveniences. The toilet is tucked into an alcove adjacent to the shower.

Making room for insulation



The house has staggered double-stud walls filled with dense-pack cellulose insulation. The roof is also super-insulated with stacked pairs of rafters arranged like a truss with top and bottom chords. The deep space provides more room for cellulose insulation above the sloping ceiling and the space between the rafter pairs acts as a thermal break. The unusual rafter arrangement has a second benefit: The upper rafter creates the exposed rafter tail with the right proportions to complement the rest of the exterior.

Stair tower makes it work

behind fixed railings to close off the stairs. This provides an easy transition between human and canine needs. Last but not least, the structure of the porch discretely encloses 5000 gal. of rainwater collection beneath it.

The scope of the renovation allowed us to address the issue of aging in place. The enlarged bathroom provides a wheelchair-friendly environment with a roll-in shower, and the weaving room can be utilized as a future master bedroom. These two features ensure that essential needs can be provided

on the main floor. The few steps up from grade at the entry are a result of the existing foundation, but can easily be addressed with a modest ramp if and when needed.

Efficient shell, reclaimed details

Kathy and David's historic home in Seattle was chronically cold, so they wanted their new home to be more comfortable. We addressed that need with a quality building envelope and a multilayered heating system. The envelope contains R-28 double-

stud walls filled with dense-pack cellulose, a high-R-value roof (R-59) and a better-than-code (R-38) floor system. Air leakage is a big part of envelope performance, so we taped the sheathing joints and used fluid-applied flashing around window and door openings.

To complement the envelope, we installed a heat-recovery ventilator to ensure the home has a steady supply of clean, fresh air. The ventilation system has high-performance filtration that helps keep pet fur and dander under control. The heating system consists

of traditional floor-mounted radiators heated by an electric boiler coupled with radiant-tile heat mats and propane fireplaces to ensure that the home will stay warm, even in a power outage.

Climate change and seismic activity in our area continue to encourage us to think about how best to support personal and community needs in the event of disrupted services. In addition to the enhanced thermal envelope, this home also has a backup generator, heating system, and water storage on hand. The

thinking is simple: If our needs are met, we are more available to help others in need.

My clients wanted a home that expressed their attention to craft and appreciation of materials. Much of the native fir used in the home was salvaged and resawn by a mill in nearby Port Townsend. The kitchen cabinets were hand-built in David's shop. Finish-carpentry details blend seamlessly into the architecture. My clients weren't spectators in this regard—Kathy spent countless hours restoring historic doors for use in the interior

while David used his woodworking skills to build the custom entry coat rack.

Overall, the house has a warm glow. It can be seen in the rich character of the interior and exterior woodwork, but it runs deeper. It's a feeling evoked when you walk through the space—it feels like home. □

Matthew Swett is owner of Taproot Architects in Langley, Wash. Photos by Michael Stadler, courtesy of the homeowners.