

A Little House in the Big Woods

A roof-wide skylight brings light and drama to a small house inspired by a Pacific Northwest Indian village

by Victoria Holland



A metal roof sheds leaves and pine needles. Sited close to the surrounding trees, a porch and a stone path connect the small bathhouse (left) with the main house. The steep 9-in-12 pitch helps the metal roof to shed debris. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

Peeled logs provide the framework. A sleeping loft stands over the sunken living area. A custom-fabricated skylight cuts a swath of light through the roof, brightening the vaulted interior and providing a view of the surrounding trees. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

In my childhood, I grew up in a quiet, wooded place where I became accustomed to seeking solace among great fir and cedar trees. Bellevue, Washington, has since become much busier, and although many of Bellevue's trees have been felled to make way for roads and buildings, the land my parents own there is still a refuge for me.

In 1980 I purchased a small parcel of the land, a heavily wooded site filled with cedar trees and sword ferns. For the next decade I lived in a tiny cabin there—once our playhouse—while working as a building contractor. After building houses for others and living in that tiny cabin, I finally mustered the resources to build my own home, a five-year-long process.

I knew my future house had to be an open space with a lot of light. I also wanted to capture the wonder and the sense of possibility that I had once felt as a child playing in the woods. Above all, I wanted to remain connected to nature and to explore my own ideas about materials and design. I found that considering resale value or matching neighborhood styles inhibited my creativity.

Massive logs provide both setting and structure—The traditional homes that were built by our local Native Americans were called longhouses. These longhouses had carved poles at each end that supported massive structural logs. Standing as great guardians, these poles were sources of inspiration that I drew upon for my own house.

I was also determined to set the building among the trees as unobtrusively as possible with the main siting axis following the sunlight through the clearing. Dark, gray winters in the Northwest are oppressive, and I wanted to maximize the amount of light that my house would receive.

The year before I began construction, I found four straight, tall Douglas-fir trees about 16 in. in diameter for the enveloping arms of the structure. They were cut in early July, peeled on site and then left to dry. Peeling bark with a floor scraper, or spud, is a lot easier with summer-cut logs because the dark-red cambium layer adheres much more tenaciously to the wood of fall-cut or winter-cut logs. After I let the logs dry for a year, I washed them with a bleach solution to kill a dark mold that had settled on them, giving them a beautiful silver-gray finish (photo facing page).

The rest of the building is conventionally framed around the logs. The 2x6 exterior walls are covered with 1x4 horizontal tongue-and-groove clear-cedar siding (photo left) stained



SPECS

Bedrooms: 1

Bathrooms: 1

Heating system: Propane-fired hydronic radiant floor

Size: 832 sq. ft. in main house; 220 sq. ft. in bathhouse

Cost: N/A

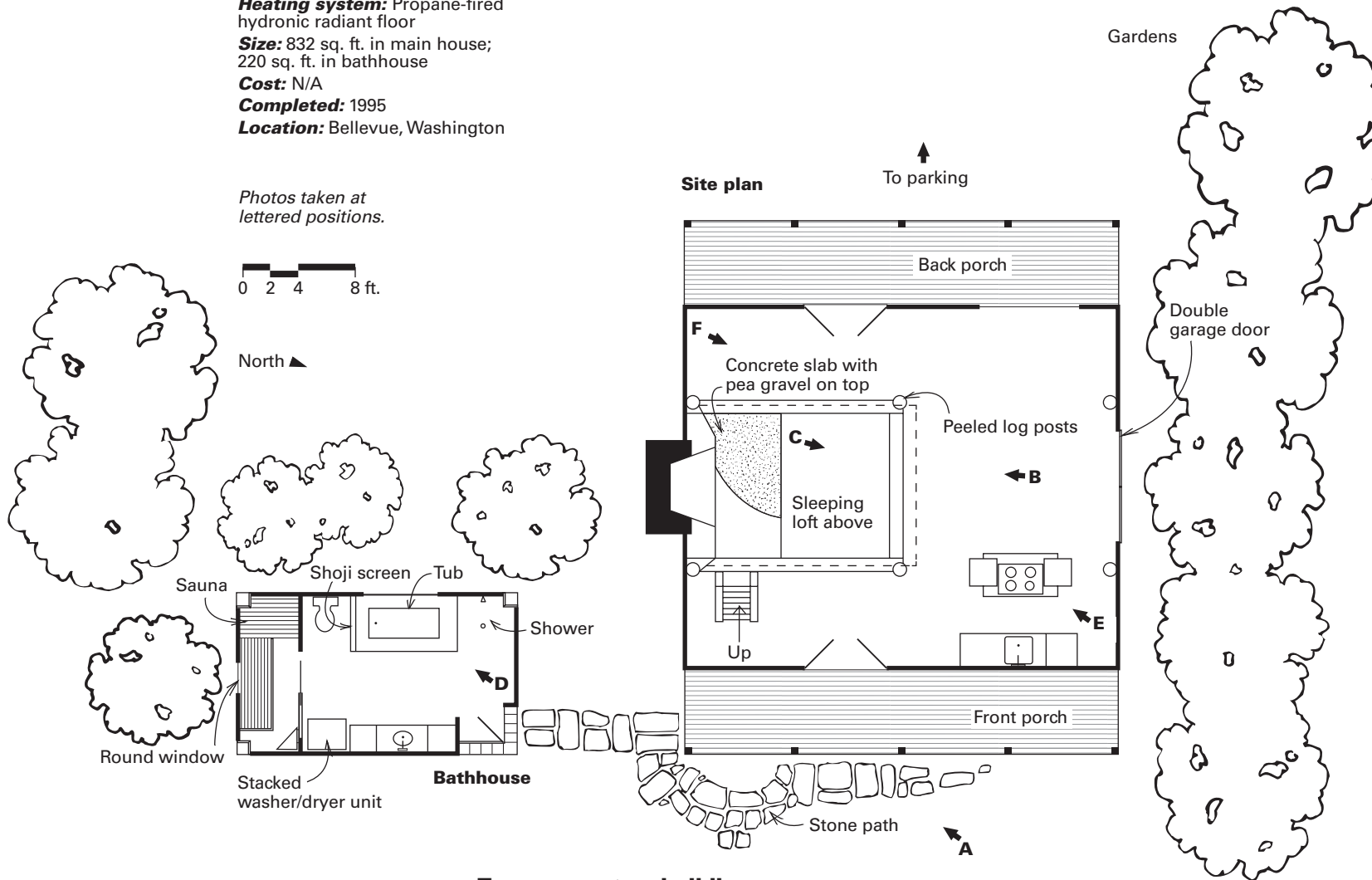
Completed: 1995

Location: Bellevue, Washington

Photos taken at lettered positions.

0 2 4 8 ft.

North



Two rooms, two buildings

Nestled among the trees, this simple home's open plan focuses on the hearth, the sunken floor in front of it and the sleeping loft above. The separate bathhouse requires a walk outdoors, reinforcing the connection with the natural world.

to match the color of aged-cedar bark on the surrounding trees.

A heated beach runs through it—Like the basic peeled-log framework, many of my other ideas for this house arose from an inspirational visit to a Kwakiutl tribal village on Vancouver Island. In native longhouse design, the raised floors along the sides are used for sleeping or private areas, and the lower central core is the communal area and fire pit.

Instead of a fire pit, I settled for a more conventional Rumford-style masonry fireplace (photo p. 99). Its shallow depth and angled sidewalls throw heat across the room, and in a power outage the fireplace can easily heat the entire building. The firebox opening is about 4 ft. high by

5 ft. wide. Although I originally intended to stucco the cinder-block chimney, I liked the understated patterns of the block so much that it remains unfinished. The line of the poured-concrete hearth continues as a horizontal wooden step around the sunken area and visually draws attention toward the fire.

Underneath the removable sunken hemlock floor in front of the fireplace is a 6-in. deep "beach" of pea gravel on top of a radiantly heated concrete slab (photo left, p. 103). In the dark of winter, the floor panels can be raised, revealing a warm beach perfect for relaxing in front of the fire.

The rest of the house, plus an adjacent bathhouse, is also heated by hydronic radiant tubing. Fed by propane-heated water, the radiant

floor offers even heat and no blower-induced drafts or noise. Beware: Don't leave Christmas gifts of chocolate on the floor under the tree!

Another therapeutic element that lifts the temperature and the spirit is the separate bathhouse and sauna (photo right, facing page). The sauna looks directly out on a great cedar tree through a round window. It is a wonderful place for reflection. There is no bathroom in the main house, which might be a real burden in a harsher climate. But I like the short walk outside and the resulting sense of ritual.

A house in the woods needs a lot of light—

I originally intended to install a single 8-ft. by 7-ft. multilite garage door on the gable end opposite the fireplace. I decided that two would bring



A glass-block floor lets the light through. Mounted in a custom-fabricated 675-lb. steel grid, the glass blocks allow sunlight from the skylight above to pass through the floor of the sleeping loft and onto the living area below. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

more continuity for viewing the tall trees (photos p. 103). Stacking another fixed-panel door above the first opens that entire wall to the trees and lets in a lot more light. Less expensive than prebuilt windows, the glazed garage doors also provide the loft with a view.

In flooring the loft, I realized that it darkened the living area by blocking light from the skylight above. So I removed the wood floor and had a 5-ft. by 11-ft. steel-grid frame fabricated that would support a floor of 8-in. glass blocks (photo above left). The glass-block floor diffuses sunlight from above into a delightful, starry pattern of light and color below.

A 5-ft. wide skylight cuts a light-filled swath through the building's roof (photo p. 99). Made by Milgard Manufacturing (3800 136th St. NE,



Japanese detailing distinguishes the bath. Although located outside, the bathhouse is hardly an outhouse. A radiant slate-tile floor heats the feet, while a sauna at the far end of the bathhouse warms the body. A toilet hidden by a shoji screen and a compact washer/dryer complete the layout. Photo taken at D on floor plan.



A cast-concrete countertop completes the kitchen. Removable cantilevered cutting boards slip over the ends of the countertop and make a convenient snack area. Water stains and spots on the concrete mimic the mottled look of natural stone. Photo taken at E on floor plan.



The hemlock floor lifts to reveal a pebble beach. Three hinged floor sections allow the sunken area in front of the fireplace to be opened to the aggregate below. The warm beach is a great place to wiggle toes in front of the fire. Photos taken at F on floor plan.

Garage doors are an alternative to custom windows. Glass-paneled garage doors open the gable end to the view of the surrounding trees. The upper unit is fixed, and the lower door raises up.

Marysville, Wash. 98271; 360-659-0836) of anodized aluminum, the skylight consists of four ladderlike pieces bolted together on site. The skylight rests on a steel bar that ties the ridge boards together and is set 4 in. below the roof plane to accentuate the idea of a slice taken out of the building.

Everything—frame, attachments, supports, the screws used in securing the exterior grid bars after glazing—was electroplate-painted a brilliant magenta. Like the cosmos flowers of the same color in the garden, the bright magenta contrasts with the dark-green forest. In fact, I took a flower to the paint store for color-matching.

Once the skylight was glazed, finished and paid for, I spent the following winter under giant blue tarpaulins because I had run out of money for the roofing. But the skylight was worth every penny. It allows for less use of artificial lighting

year-round. In rain, leaves or snow, the skylight provides a continuous canvas of change.

A simple design and honest materials—I wanted to avoid plastic-laminate countertops in the kitchen, so I experimented with concrete (photo facing page). I poured the tops upside down into a hardboard mold on the floor. Then my friends helped lift the 300-lb. slabs in place. I wasn't worried if the countertops didn't turn out the first time; concrete mix is cheap, and I have a sledgehammer to erase the mistakes.

I tried several sealers, but none was impervious to oil and water. After I got over the first spot, I happily watched as the marks grew into a mottled look approximating stone. □

Victoria Holland is a designer and builder living in Bellevue, Wash. Photos by Andrew Worman.

