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# Structurally Speaking

**R**esting on a steppe in Washington's Methow Valley, David and Margaret's house looks past rolling sagebrush hills to snow-cruled mountain peaks. But for David, the best view is when the sun sets and the landscape disappears. A serious amateur astronomer, he chose the remote valley as the perfect site for a family home with an adjacent outbuilding from which to view the stars.

"I still think of the place as an observatory with a cabin attached," David says, only half-joking. But it turned out the "cabin" provided many more architectural possibilities than the unadorned shed nearby from which David scans the skies. In a practical sense, the couple's goal was to design a part-time getaway they could share with their college-age children and perhaps occupy full-time in the future. But there was an architectural agenda as well. David and Margaret envisioned a house that would blend into the mountain landscape, with an open design that would support a casual lifestyle. At the same time, David also wanted a home where craftsmanship took center stage, where structural elements were exposed as an integral and intriguing part of the design.

## Blending into the mountain

In designing this new home, both the couple and their architects, Ray and Mary Johnston, saw immediately that the views would define the structure. "It became very obvious that the primary feature was the view to the southwest," David recalls. "That shaped our thinking about the house and led to this long, stretched-out design with lots of opportunities to take advantage of the vistas."

At the same time, they did not want a house that would spoil the natural surroundings. "We knew we wanted it to be inconspicu-

**NOT YOUR TYPICAL MOUNTAIN CABIN** *The open floor plan (left) allows family and guests to mingle easily and take in the views.*

A family's mountain retreat comes together as an eloquent sum of its parts

BY DEBRA JUDGE SILBER



# Long and low, the house follows the land

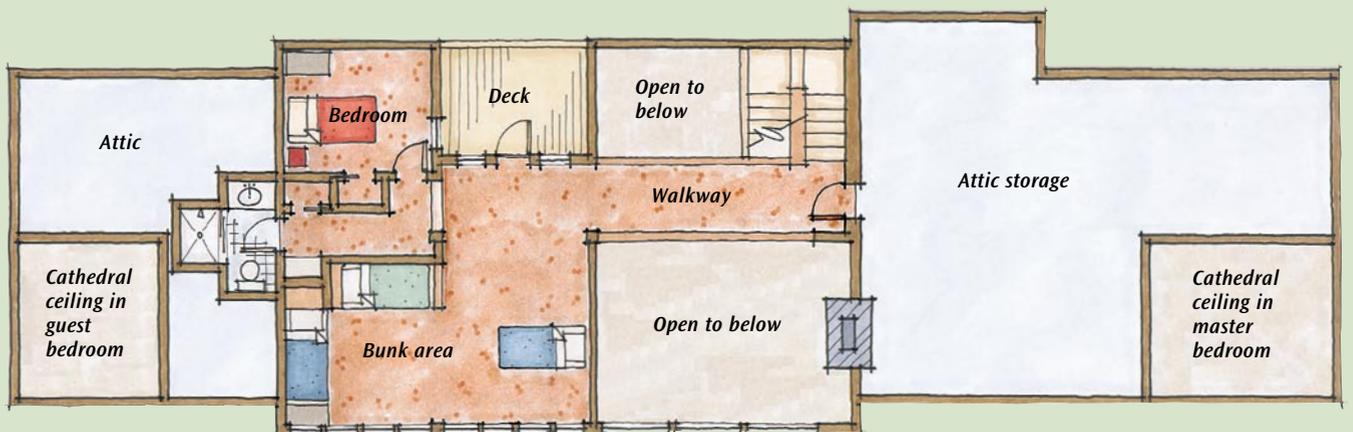
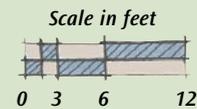
THOUGH 96 FEET LONG, the low profile of this family retreat helps it disappear in the rolling landscape of Washington's Methow Valley. Public areas—the kitchen, dining room, inglenook, and living room—merge in the center of the house, with the primary guest bedroom and the master bedroom suite at either end. Additional sleeping space is available on the second floor, which is open to the first floor on either side of the bridgelike walkway.



**DOORWAY IN DISGUISE** Indigenous features, like this sliding barn door, help the house blend in with its rural surroundings.



**FIRST FLOOR**



**SECOND FLOOR**

**COOKING FOR A CROWD** The wide concrete-topped island between the kitchen and the dining area provides ample room for David to prepare meals as well as a place for guests to gather and chat. The “floating” cedar ceiling helps define the space without the use of walls.

ous and blend into the landscape,” David says. “There are people who want to put their house on the top of a ridge and make it look like a French chateau, but we wanted to go in the other direction.”

The Johnstons obliged with a long, low design that follows the topography. “It made sense for the house to be another line in this group of lines,” Ray Johnston explains. The angles of the gray roof rise and fall like the mountains; the gray-green-stained cedar siding vanishes against the sagebrush. To further help the house disappear, Ray suggested incorporating a standing-seam metal roof and a 5-foot-wide sliding barn door that conceals the main entry, which is set on the end rather than on the front of the house.

### A design that emphasizes togetherness

“It’s become sort of a family gathering place,” says David, who escorts visitors on a variety of outdoor adventures: camping, rock climbing, hiking, and in winter, cross-country skiing. Margaret estimates three-quarters of their time in the valley is spent in the company of guests.

Sliding the big front door aside leads to an unheated vestibule where the snow from skis and winter boots drains through the wood-slat floor. A hinged door opens to a small inside entry with access to both the main hallway and, to the side, a sauna, laundry room, and pantry—all located as convenient stops for those returning from outdoor activities. Indian slate tiles, selected by Margaret for their beauty and low maintenance, cover nearly all the floors on the main level.

A center hall runs the length of the house, from the mudroom to the master bedroom suite. Doors at various points open to a guest suite, office, and studio; in the middle of the house, the public areas blend into each other. Here’s where guests and family get to mingle—helping David cook in the kitchen, gathering for dinner in the dining room, taking in the views from the liv-



**INSIDE OUT** A matched set of doors on both sides of the house creates a breezeway that cools the dining area during the valley’s hot, dry summer. The doors’ European glide mechanism enables them to be opened and closed with a fingertip.



**SEPARATE SPACES**

*The second-floor walkway above helps distance the intimate inglenook (right) from the open living room. The living room fireplace (below), meticulously crafted of Montana ledge stone, was inspired by a similar one at a local inn.*



ing room, or curling up in the snug inglenook (see sidebar, facing page), warmed by a wood-burning stove.

While cozy, the house has a very uncabinlike openness because of the high ceilings in several areas, including the guest room, master bedroom, living room, and inglenook. A switchback stair leads to the second floor, where an open walkway links a bath, a small bedroom, and an open sleeping area with two built-in bunks. The bridgelike walkway was Ray Johnston's idea, but David loves the almost nautical feel of the galvanized pipe railings strung through wooden supports.

While the layout of the house is casual and friendly, it provides just enough privacy to put guests at ease. The main guest suite is at the opposite end of the house from the master bedroom. Upstairs, in addition to the bunk area, there is another small bedroom. And the bunk room itself, originally designed to open





## Warming up the conversation

**WARM AND COZY**  
*Heated by a wood-burning stove, the inglenook is a focal point and the coziest place in the house.*

**ONE OF THE CABIN'S MOST WELCOMING FEATURES** is the fir-and-cedar-lined inglenook, where cushioned, bunk-size benches on both sides of a wood-burning stove encourage a relaxed gathering (or serendipitous snooze). While its clean, crafted look blends seamlessly with the home's Japanese-inspired aesthetic, the inglenook is actually based on a similar feature in the Montana bungalow where Margaret grew up. "I have a lot of good memories of it," she says of the fireplace alcove in her childhood home, "of coming in from skating and sitting by the fire, of my mother making us hot cocoa and bread-and-butter sandwiches. In the winter you could have 10 people in there, piled up like kittens."

Originating from medieval fireplace surrounds and evolving as the cozy "chimney corners" of 16th-century England, inglenooks fell out of favor as rooms became more comfortable and fireplaces more efficient. But they experienced a rebirth in the bungalow and shingle-style architecture of the early 1900s. "Being from the Northwest, you can't help but become aware of them," says Ray Johnston, although even there, inglenooks all but disappeared in the postwar housing boom. Now, in the 21st century, the inglenook is seeing a revival of sorts, fueled not only by the warmth it provides but also by its role as a built-in invitation to reading, conversation, board games, and other nonelectronic forms of entertainment.

The high, vaulted ceiling of this inglenook is atypical, but the design allows it to borrow some of the spaciousness of the living room area while maintaining the closeness of the traditional inglenook. "It is the coziest place in the house," David says. "Even in the summer, we'll hang out there."

over the living room as a loft, was later closed in on three sides to afford those using it a bit more privacy.

The kitchen—a walk-through L-shape that skirts a wide concrete-topped island—was designed as a center of activity. "No matter what you do, people always gather in the kitchen, so we figured we might as well succumb to the inevitable," David says. "It's very easy for people to cluster around the island and chat and eat."

On warm summer days, the family creates a breezeway through the dining area by sliding open the doors on opposite sides of the house. Just outside the dining area, a sheltered wooden deck faces the view. "It's like a stage set," Margaret says. "You're nestled against the hillside with a 180-degree view of the mountains."

### Letting the structure speak for itself

"David has a greater-than-average appreciation of well-made things," notes Ray Johnston, an attribute that delighted the architectural team and distinctly influenced their design of the house. They decided to show off, rather than hide, mechanical elements like the steel straps and bolts that hold support pillars together. Further interest was added to those structures by separating the 4x4 posts composing them with narrow wooden strips. "We like



**COUNTER-INTUITIVE** David wasn't sure he wanted the concrete countertops Ray Johnston recommended. Now, impressed with their beauty, he likes to refer to the material as "Icelandic granite."



**INTERCONNECTED**  
A finely crafted switch-back stair (left) leads to the overhead walkway (above) and the upstairs sleeping quarters.

**A NATURAL LOOK**  
Margaret chose the Indian slate tiles used throughout the first floor for their texture, color, and ease of care.





**LIGHT TOUCH** *The house is illuminated with a mixture of low-voltage fixtures that include reading lights in the inglenook and a cable system mounted on the second-floor walkway (left).*

There's a real  
spareness to the  
house—everything  
is functional.

—David, homeowner



**INDOOR/OUTDOOR** *The slatted floor in the unheated vestibule just inside the main door allows melting snow from skis and boots to drip away.*



to let the building tell its story structurally, how it's connected—joists resting on beams, beams resting on columns," Ray says. "There's not a lot of Sheetrock in this house."

It's a construction method with a number of challenges—among them, finding creative ways to accommodate wiring, insulation, and ducts typically hidden in walls and ceilings. In the kitchen, for example, a floating wood ceiling houses recessed lighting and obscures vents. Most rooms have in-floor radiant heat, and the use of cable lighting systems sneaks the wiring in as part of the design. It was also crucial to protect the interior structural components from weather damage during construction. The contractor accomplished this with a combination of prefinishing, careful sheathing against the elements, and planning construction in accordance with the long-range weather forecast.

But the greatest challenge is making sure everything fits together from the start. "You have to be more precise right from the foundation," Ray Johnston explains, using as an example the bridge above the living room. "That bridge is held up by columns that are located within a pattern in the slate floor. If the foundation for those columns were off, not only would the bridge be misplaced, but the pattern on the floor wouldn't work." That level of precision requires open communication and the involvement of everyone working on the house, says Johnston, who credits builder Rick Mills of North Cascades Construction with pulling it all together. "The degree to which this house is finished like a boat or a large piece of furniture is due to his attentiveness and his meticulousness," he says.

The attention to detail is clearly seen in the woodwork—in the cedar wainscoting along the hall, in the generous fir trim throughout, and in the exposed structure of the second-floor bridge. It's also stunningly showcased in the switchback stair and beside it, the inglenook, where hundreds of small pieces of cedar are fitted together in a cozy, boxlike alcove.

The sense of shelter you feel in the inglenook repeats itself throughout the house, even in its more open spaces—like the living room, where a large window flanked by two sliding doors provides a broad view of the hills, or on the rear deck, a favorite place for David and Margaret to settle down with a cup of coffee. "We wanted the house to be a haven," David says, "a place where we could hear birds singing, listen to the wind, and look at the sky." Until dark, that is, when David sets off on the dimly lighted path to the observatory and turns his attention upward. "This is a place," he says, "where you just leave the world behind." **■**

*Debra Judge Silber is an associate editor.*

**For more information, see Resources, page 92.**