



The House on Windy Beach



On an exposed site, cedar logs buttress a small vacation house against West Coast elements

BY CHARLES MILLER

In 1989, I met a builder at a lumberyard overlooking the Northern California coastline. We started talking about his projects, and he told me about one potential job that had him tied in knots. “I’ve been asked to bid on an Obie Bowman project,” he said. “I don’t know whether I should. If I get it, it could be the most important project of my career. On the other hand, it could put me out of business.”

Such is the reputation of Obie Bowman, architect of some of coastal California’s most memorable houses. Even though the houses

are typically modest in size, they sizzle with originality. Pushing the edges of conventional construction techniques, they often include unconventional materials. A Bowman house might have boulders in the bathroom or a layer of sod on the roof. One house has a brick fireplace that starts out in a running-bond pattern, then morphs into an abstract gumbo of clinker bricks. As you can imagine, these projects can be as tough to bid as they are to build.

Site-specific design is another Bowman hallmark. His buildings reflect the nature of the landscape they occupy, resulting in a portfo-

lio of houses completely different from one another. This one, overlooking a majestic stretch of desolate Oregon coastline, is no exception.

Shaped by elemental forces

When the Oregon coast is pounded by winter rains, surging rivers carry fallen trees, scrubbed clean of their branches, out of the forest and into the ocean. The trunks eventually come ashore in the coves, piled by waves into tangles that achieve a structural balance. Studying these beached logs gave Bowman an idea for the house. Given its lo-



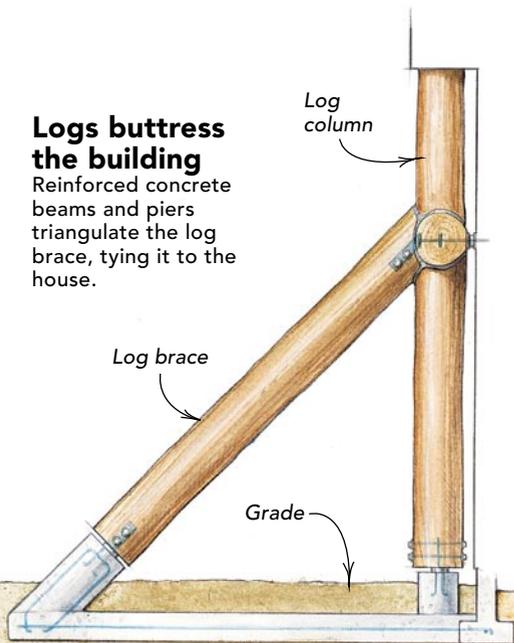
The bow points out to sea. On a wild stretch of Oregon coastline, this weekend retreat stands braced against the frequent storms by cedar logs from the local forest. Glowing like a lantern, the view loft (facing page) cantilevers over the deck. Photos taken at A and B on floor plan.



The entry is on the lee side. Flanked by the garage, a buttressed fence and the hill in the foreground, the entry courtyard is protected from the prevailing winds. A row of plant shelves leads to a deck atop the garage. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

Logs buttress the building

Reinforced concrete beams and piers triangulate the log brace, tying it to the house.



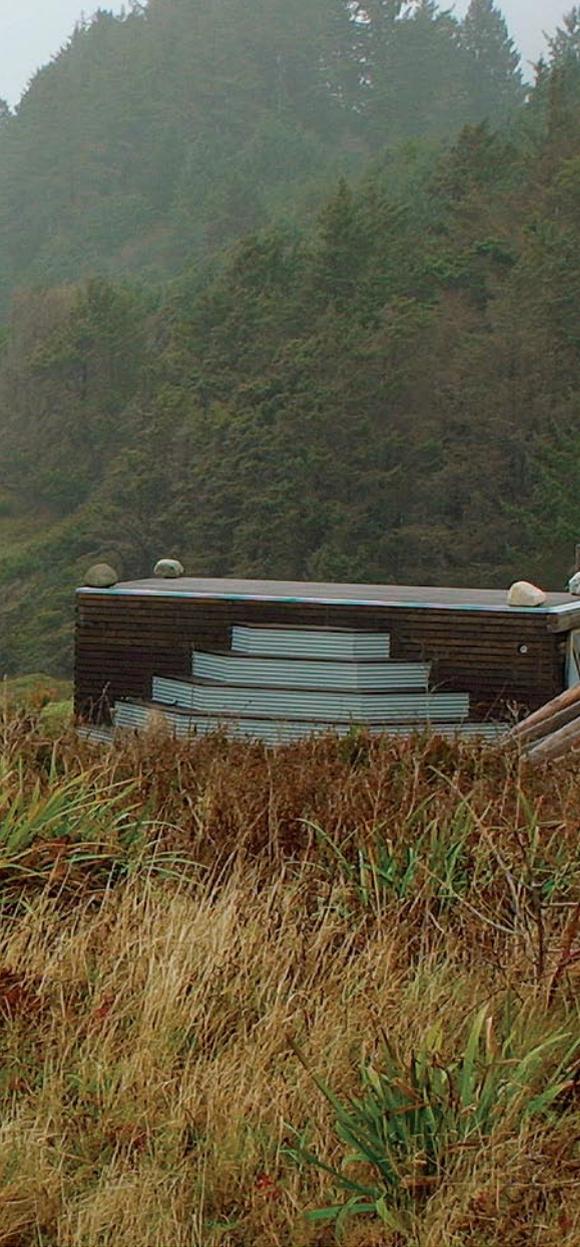
cation, the house had to be able to withstand 90-mph winds. Why not fashion a structure of native logs into an exposed system of braces that could buttress the house against those winds? This idea led to a tree-trunk exoskeleton of posts, cantilevered beams and buttresses that support the house and brace it against the elements (photos p. 112, 113).

The house sits on a triangular flat, sheared off the finger of a small ridge that drops 50 ft. to the beach. The westward corner of the triangle points out to sea, bisecting a 180° coastal view. Bowman flipped through various floor-plan ideas, studying how they might best embrace these views. The plan finally came down to a simple reduction of the site's shape: a right-triangle floor plan pointing out to sea,

with glass walls facing northwest and southwest (floor plan, facing page).

Entered from the east side, where the roof comes to its lowest point (photo above), the house progresses from a sense of shelter to one of almost complete exposure. The view dominates the west side of the house (photo p. 116), which culminates in a loft that reaches toward the water. This loft is the perfect place to sip hot coffee and watch the waves as one of Oregon's 90-mph rainstorms slams the coast. Outside, the loft shelters the ocean-side entry.

Balancing the expansive living room, with its tall windows and high ceiling, are the bedrooms and the kitchen (photo p. 117). The two bedroom suites are politely placed at opposite ends of the house in the remaining



Doors over doors. When it's time to close up the house, a pair of barn doors can be pulled together and padlocked. The doors hang from rollers on a track and are aligned at their bottoms by steel angles that ride in the slots between deck boards. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

points of the triangle. Tall steel-frame pocket doors close off the bedrooms from the main space. The doors have colorful panels made of a common material treated in an uncommon manner ("Great Ideas," photo, p. 117).

Getting the logs into the house

John Harper remembers the first time he saw the plans for this house. In his 35 years as a builder, the closest he'd come to constructing a scribe-fit log-butressed house was a stick-frame ranch with fake-log siding. But like other builders who are drawn toward creating the unfamiliar, he couldn't resist. He put in a bid to build the house and put out the call for some good local logs.

Centuries ago, Spanish sailors stopped along this part of the Oregon coastline to fix their ships. They were seeking a specific kind of wood: Port Orford cedar, prized for its strength and rot resistance. Taking advantage of this resource, Harper bought several truckloads of Port Orford cedar logs and graded them for size. The 16-in. to 24-in. dia. logs were set aside for the frame. The others were cut into 1x boards and stacked in the garage to dry.

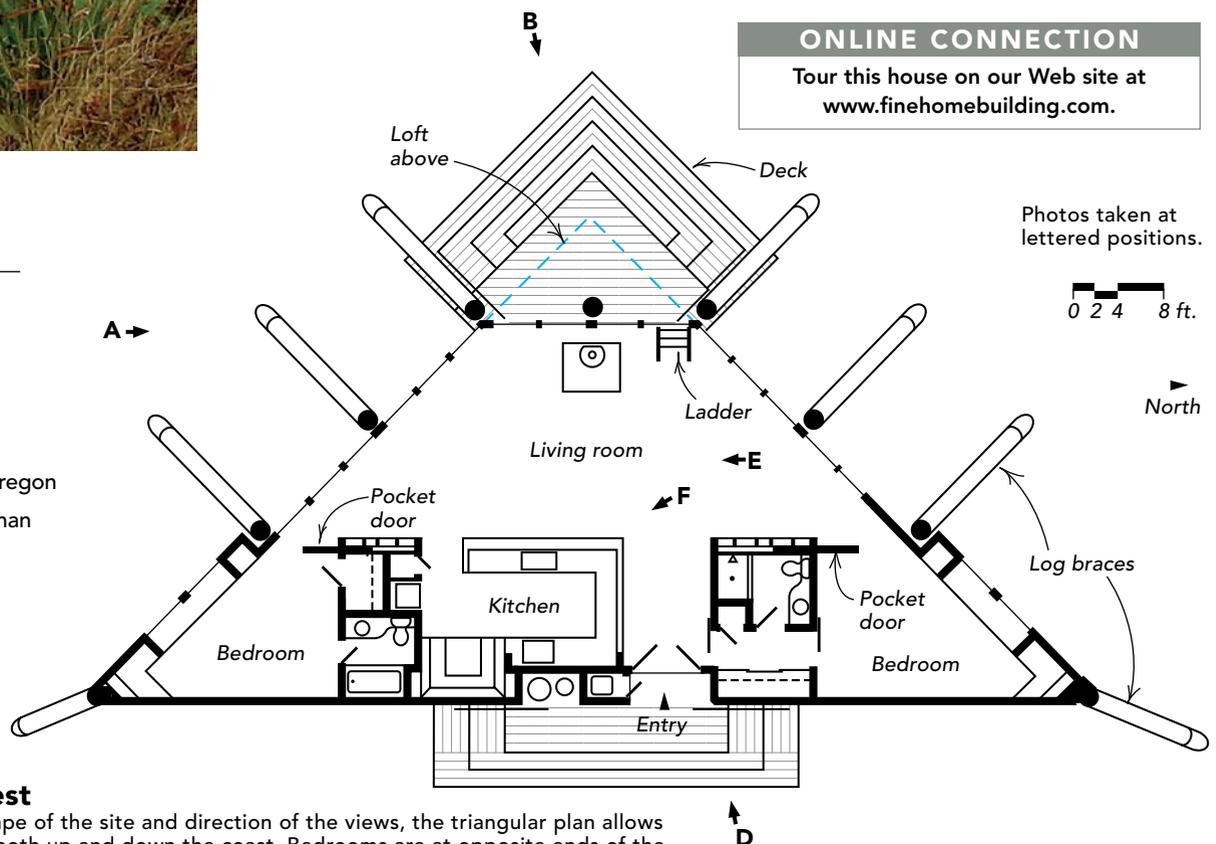
The log buttresses do brace the house against the winds, and tying them into the foundation and the log columns that carry the roof was by far the toughest part of building this house. At wall intersections, four logs come together in a carefully fitted assembly

ONLINE CONNECTION

Tour this house on our Web site at www.finehomebuilding.com.

SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 2
- Bathrooms:** 2
- Size:** 1860 sq. ft.
- Cost:** N/A
- Completed:** 2000
- Location:** Southern Oregon
- Architect:** Obie Bowman
- Builder:** John Harper



The plan points west

Taking its cue from the shape of the site and direction of the views, the triangular plan allows generous windows facing both up and down the coast. Bedrooms are at opposite ends of the house, tucked behind pocket doors that recede into cavities behind the bookcases.





GREAT IDEA: IF STAINED CONCRETE MAKES ATTRACTIVE FLOORS, WHY NOT DOOR PANELS?

Concrete came out of the garage and took up residence in the house during the '90s. It arrived as pigmented concrete floors, polished concrete countertops and textured-concrete fireplace surrounds—massive pieces that say: I'm not fake. I'm heavy, I'm solid. Architect Obie Bowman, on the other hand, has found a way to make concrete light, almost translucent. And most of the ingredients he uses are commonly found at Home Depot.

The big pocket doors that close off the bedrooms from the main room are composed of a steel frame filled with ¼-in. thick Hardibacker panels (photo left). The panels, which are typically used as tile underlayment , were turned into color-field paintings by project architect James Jorgensen.

Jorgensen spread out the panels on the bluff, wet them down and then applied a thin (15:1) wash of Mission Tan pigment . While they were still wet, he sprinkled spoonfuls of Miracle-Gro plant food  on the panels in random patterns, followed by a scattering of Ironite pellets  the size of BBs. As the fertilizers and pigments dissolved, they spread across the panels as blooms of brick red and coppery green. When the panels dried, the colors remained as integral stains. Builder John Harper finished them with a couple of coats of water-based satin-urethane varnish.

—C. M.

(top photo, p. 113). There, they are bolted to one another by way of custom-made ¾-in. thick steel plates concealed within the logs.

To get them to fit, Harper had to hang each buttress from his boom truck, get it close to position, mark it for scribing, remove it, chainsaw it, put it back, brace it from below at the correct angle and repeat until snug. In this manner, Harper worked his way around the house, supporting the buttresses from below and letting them run long so that they could be lopped off in line with one another. Then he still wasn't done.

At the ground, each buttress is bolted to a cylindrical concrete pier connecting to a concrete beam that reaches out from the house's foundation (drawing p. 114). Each cylindrical pier was cast in place in cardboard forms wrapped with steel tape to keep them from deforming in their angled state.

By the time the log work was done and the house enclosed, the dehumidifier in the garage had done its work. The stacks of 1x cedar were dry enough to find their way into the house as paneling, cabinets, decking and trim. Outside, the cedar boards are arranged as horizontal siding boards over battens affixed to an exterior plywood shell.

A couple of years have passed since John Harper finished this house. He's still got a trunk full of 24-in. ship-auger bits that he wore out boring holes for the buttress bolts. They're one more reminder of the unforeseeable details that rode in with this project. But as he points out, he has built a lot of houses, and this is the one that people are still talking about. And yes, he's still in business. □

Charles Miller is the editor of *Houses*.
Photos by the author.



High windows in the west. The ceiling and windows rise as they move toward the view, culminating in the loft (photo facing page, taken at E on floor plan). The kitchen and bedrooms are tucked along the east wall, where the lower ceiling imparts a sense of enclosure (photo right, taken at F on floor plan).

Sources

- L. M. Scofield pigments (800-800-9900; www.scofield.com)
- Miracle-Gro (www.miracle-gro.com; 800-645-8166)
- James Hardie Co. tile underlayment (888-542-7343; www.jameshardie.com)
- Ironite (www.ironite.com; 800-677-9941)