

Set for Life

A compact new build takes cues from boat design to create a long-term, low-maintenance home

BY KILEY JACQUES

With an eye toward retirement, the owners of this quirky, Craftsman-inspired abode on Orcas Island, Wash., visualized a getaway cabin that would ultimately become their year-round residence. Accustomed to sailing, they are at ease in efficient, compact spaces, and they wanted their new house to be similarly organized. The empty-nesters worked with Stoltz Kau Architects to plan a long-term, low-maintenance, and highly livable home with lots of personality.

Finding adequate space for guest accommodations and storage in the 1585-sq.-ft. envelope topped the list of priorities. “They were looking to us for guidance on downsizing,” says principal Susan Stoltz. “They wanted to be comfortable just the two of them, but they also wanted to be able to invite their kids and guests—essentially they wanted to have room to absorb people. That was a fun challenge for us because we enjoy maximizing every square inch of a project.”

Strategies and opportunities

Believing built-ins are “the classic space saver,” Susan and her partner, David Kau, incorporated them throughout the house. There are single built-in bunks in the living room and bedroom, plus a double in the library. The design makes use of the space beneath the library—a half-level up—where a storage area is tucked behind a swinging door that also serves as a bookcase. In the study, waist-height bookshelves add storage space without overpowering the room, and there are trundle drawers beneath the built-in beds. Rolling barn doors at the top stair landing convert the open-concept library into a private space, and there’s an outdoor platform designed for a tent to be set up during warm months. In sum, the house can sleep six extra people.

Of course, all of these built-ins needed to be custom-made. They are the result of a collaboration between Steve Diepenbrock of Morningstar Builders and Mark Padbury, a cabinetmaker and former boat builder. Steve describes the main room’s built-in as a tight-squeeze scenario. Along the western wall, which measures just 16½ ft., they included a media cabinet, a 6-ft. daybed, and a woodstove. To compress these features, they needed to locate the woodstove as close as possible to the corner of the room. However, International Mechanical Code 308.6 prohibits installing a woodstove within 36 in. of a combustible surface. To skirt the issue, they surrounded the stove

SPECS

Bedrooms: 1

Bathrooms: 1

Size: 1585 sq. ft.

Location: Orcas Island, Wash.

Architect: Stoltz Kau Architects,
stoltzkau.com

Builder: Steve Diepenbrock,
Morningstar Builders

Cabinetmaker: Mark Padbury





Creating character. The design incorporates items salvaged by the homeowners, including antique windows, a wood column, and a porthole.

with fieldstone with a 1-in. air gap behind it. To vent the air gap at the wood mantel, they split it into two pieces. Where the stove pipe required minimal clearances, they swapped out portions of wood with a steel detail.

So that someone sitting in the daybed would feel connected to the outdoors, the team aligned the windowsill with the height of the daybed and dropped the level of the finished floor closer to grade. To do that, they hung the floor joists off ledgers attached to the foundation, which made it tricky to bring plumbing and electrical from the crawlspace into the perimeter walls. The issue was addressed using chases in the concrete and by taking advantage of the toekick space to snake wiring up and over the stem walls.

Of the three-feature built-in, Steve says, “Keeping track of it dimensionally and tying it all together with trim details was pretty specific. The tighter the space, the less room for transitions. Things land on each other very quickly.” He also notes the large number of windows in the house meant that many of the seismic shear walls required extra layers of plywood, as well as a thicker 3x sill plate to allow for shear nailing.

Delineating the house

“The house is an assemblage of components that were built for specific purposes,” says David. The architects stacked multiple volumes in a small footprint, each of which relates to the site. “Every dormer and window you see is a response to something outside,” Susan explains. For instance, one dormer looks out at Glacier Peak, part of the Cascade Mountains, while another is aligned to view a cove. “It was designed from the inside out,” she says, noting that the form was of less concern. “The design was driven by the function of the spaces and the overall site. We let the form evolve organically.”

Contributing to the unusual form is the wide variety of Loewen windows. Each was chosen to maximize the views. The decision to leave them void of trim was a way to smooth out the differences. The designers used contrasting materials on the exterior to differentiate the skin of each volume—a move that prevented it from becoming a “blob of a home.”

Some materials were chosen with maintenance in mind. The great room’s exterior, for example, is clad in Hardie board, which is easier to access and repaint. “When it comes to downsizing for retirement, we are always



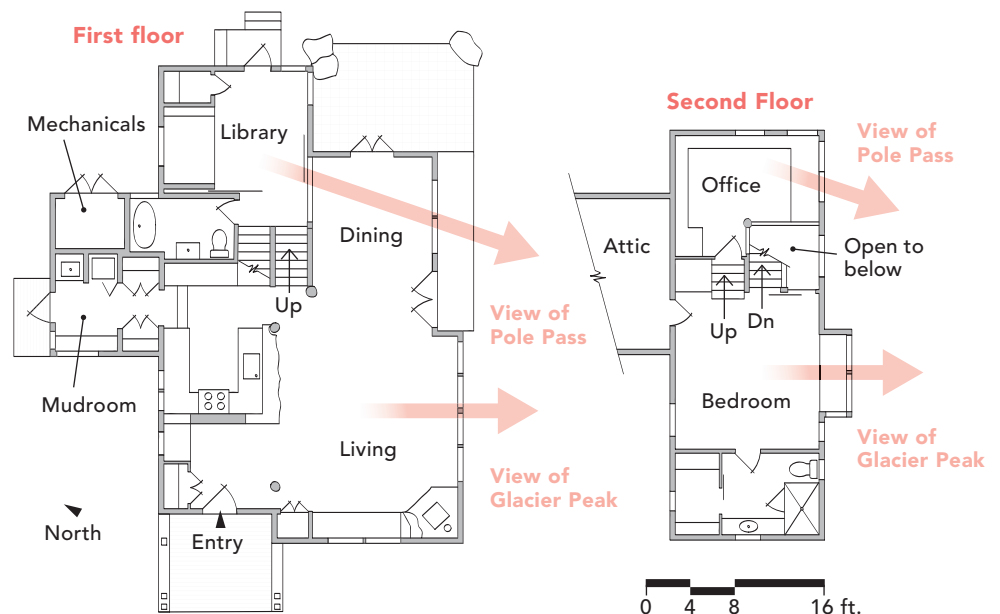
Three-feature unit. The entertainment center, full-length daybed, and fireplace come together in compressed style.



Finding space. Built-in bookshelves open to reveal extra storage space beneath the stairwell, which leads to the library/private guest room.

BUILT-INS AND BEAUTIFUL VIEWS

Rooms are oriented and organized to capitalize on the spectacular Orcas Island views. Each space is constructed to work on multiple levels, and maximized storage options keep the small house from feeling cluttered.





Double duty. The bedroom built-in features a clever venting system that can be opened or closed to either allow or block heat from the woodstove below.



“While an empty nest needs to feel comfortable for just one or two people most of the time, families hate the idea of not having a place for kids and friends to stay.”

—Susan Stoltz, Stoltz Kau Architects

thinking about maintenance and how we don't want people on ladders,” says Susan. To that end, they used untreated cedar shingles for the main volume's upper-level exteriors. “You don't have to do anything to cedar shingles for 40 years, and then you can take them off and compost them.”

In the same vein, a large percentage of the building materials are recycled and recyclable. This is in keeping with the island population's commitment to environmental stewardship. Additionally, the European woodstove is the primary heat source and meets Washington State's strict emissions code. Plus, only native wood species were used—cedar and Douglas-fir logs were salvaged from the site; local western maple was spec'd for the floors despite eastern maple being a harder wood; the kitchen cabinets are alder, a common Northwestern tree; and the kitchen countertop was made from a wind-felled elm tree salvaged from nearby Woodland Park Zoo.

Showcasing unique details

To personalize their home, the clients wanted to incorporate things they had collected over the years into the structure. The wood column in the office, for example, is made from a log the owner found while boating; it was a Herculean effort getting it to the island. The two leaded interior windows between the master bedroom and the office are another pair of finds. They bring in light for the light collector that runs through the house. The original intent was to use salvaged interior doors, but the challenge of hanging them led to the decision to use barn-style and pocket doors, which are also valuable space savers.

In historical boats, it's common for stair treads to double as drawers. Similarly, in the bedroom built-in, each tread is aligned with a dresser drawer, which makes them read as one unit. Other boat-inspired details include the bookshelf wainscot in the office and the turned-wood finger holds and drawer pulls.

Of note, too, is the vent beneath the bedroom built-in, which was designed to let in heat from the woodstove below.

In addition to weaving in many custom details, Susan and David found ways to belie the home's small stature. They used corner windows and a corner barn door to direct the eye along the diagonal, which makes a room feel longer and wider. Likewise, they went with white trim around the windows, which makes each room look bigger than if they had used a contrasting wood trim. “Your eye stops around a wood frame,” explains Susan, “whereas if it's white and blends in with the wall, your eye goes out the window.”

All told, this house is set to serve its occupants on multiple levels—as a getaway, as a writer's studio, and as an eventual retirement destination. □

Kiley Jacques is design editor. Photos by Taj Howe, courtesy of Stoltz Kau Architects, except where noted.