

# Custom Home

hanley wood

The Art and Craft of Custom Home Building ■ Mid-August 2006

## Happy 60th, Boomers

What's the next move?



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# Mid-August 2006

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# Simple in Seattle

Bill Lahr never saw the completion of his Seattle custom home. His wife, Karen, is often asked by friends if that makes it difficult for her to enjoy the house overlooking Puget Sound the couple planned together. On the contrary, Karen Lahr fondly remembers working together to figure out where and how to create the place that would be the primary (but not full-time) residence of their “future plan.” She says she feels at peace in this house. “Bill’s death makes it more precious to me,” she says. “I always think of this house as my home.”

The Lahrs searched for a place to retire that wouldn’t feel retiring. They wanted to maintain their active lifestyle someplace more temperate than Minneapolis, their long-time home. They also wanted a locale appealing enough to lure their two grown kids and extended family and friends for visits. Over a number

## Low-key living with a view.

of vacations, Seattle won their hearts for its weather (yes, the weather) and its personality. The city’s big enough to host myriad activities ranging from the physical to the cerebral to the soulful. “When we visited there was always so much to do,” Karen says.

Once they found the right city, it was then time to find an architect. “Bill and Karen knew former clients of mine and they liked what they saw of my work,” says architect Thomas Lawrence. It was also a good match of personalities. “My husband and I were very opinionated. Tom could take that and not be offended and still work within his aesthetic,” she says.

Lawrence helped the couple find the right property for their new home—a lot close to the city center that showed off the rugged grandeur of its surroundings. This site faces due west, taking in a wide-angle view of Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains in the distance. Karen says the spot makes her feel connected to the city. From the terrace she can watch two ferries constantly ply Seattle passengers across the sound. In minutes she can be at Pike’s Place Market to pick up fresh produce or sitting in a





A slim aluminum overhang tops each set of windows on the western façade. Those metal casings provide elegant cover up for mechanized shades when they're not in use.





The stunning chandelier above the dining table was discovered by the owners. The flying fixture adds a touch of whimsy to the serene architecture.





Pioneer Square coffee shop enjoying the city's most famous caffeinated export. Although the site is stunning, the existing house didn't take advantage of it, so Lawrence and the Lahrs decided to start from scratch.

"We wanted cleaner lines and less clutter as we got older," Karen says. The couple was paring down their belongings and simplifying their lives. They sold the Arts & Crafts house in Minneapolis they had occupied for decades and prepared to live the nomadic life that Karen maintains today. She moves among her Seattle home, a Minneapolis loft, two condos—one on the Florida coast and the other in Tucson where her son is finishing college—and regular visits to her daughter in New York. And while the longest and most frequent stays are in Seattle, time away from the house led to a request for easy upkeep.

Lawrence took those three factors—spectacular views, clean lines, and maintenance-free materials—and started drawing. "We worked on the design for more than two years," says the architect. The Lahrs weren't in town that often and their concurrent loft renovation required most of their immediate attention. Lawrence notes that the interior layout was easily set. A double-height dining room commands central focus, with an open kitchen on one side and a seamless segue into living space on the other. A split bedroom plan occupies the second floor. The master suite sits above the kitchen, with two guest bedrooms across the void. The two bedrooms overlooking the vaulted dining room feature sliding glass panels that open to the space below. The panels' bonus effect is to create excellent cross ventilation in addition to the light and spatial interaction Lawrence had in mind: "We wanted the idea of all the rooms communicating with each other as well as with the views."

His clients' goal of having less stuff led Lawrence to omit a basement and attic and to include built-ins in every room. The casework offers efficient and compact storage for greater functionality while generating a sleeker look by reducing freestanding furniture. A garage was included in the plan with room to spare for bicycles and other outdoor equipment. "The whole process was about simplifying design," Lawrence says.

Finding the right exterior look wasn't as easy. The Lahrs gave Lawrence a book of Japanese farmhouses as a starting point, but the couple kept coming back to their more modern mantra of clean, simple, and maintenance-free. Homeowners and architect eventually realized that contemporary forms better fit their program and allow the house to open up to its gorgeous environment. Lots of glass on the western façade was a given. Lawrence encouraged his clients to decide on a



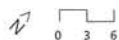




First Floor



Second Floor



Zinc panels on the garage align with those inside the entryway to give a sense of continuity to the appendage. The zinc gutter system was a splurge.

## Second Skin

Parklex panels consist of stratified high-density lumber treated with phenolic thermoset resins and compressed under high temperatures and pressure. The wood-resin product features a natural wood surface but performs like a composite in resisting the elements. When used on the exterior, the panels, which are spaced about an inch from the building's walls, act as a rain screen, allowing moisture to run off and evaporate quickly.

On the Lahrs' house, the system also allows easy access to the electronic shade screen equipment installed behind panels. The necessary panels can simply be unscrewed from the batten system they are attached to and removed. "You can take these panels off and then re-shell the entire house in a matter of days—like a giant jigsaw puzzle just screwed together," says Sean McRory, job superintendent for SBI General Contractors.

McRory had never worked with Parklex panels before using them on this house, but he was impressed with the material for its ease of installation and good looks. "It works like regular plywood," he says. Although it cuts easily, Parklex is pricey, so limiting waste is essential. Architect Tom Lawrence carefully arranged the 4-foot-by-8-foot panels so that most of them could be used whole.

Manufactured in Spain and widely used in Europe for more than a decade, the product has been available in the U.S. since 1999. For more information, go to [www.parklex.com](http://www.parklex.com).—S.D.H.







roof form first and let the building fall into place from there. A shed roof reigned triumphant in the end. The basic form fit the mantra and meant the elevation overlooking the water could soar up to catch the distant mountain peaks.

An exterior material was next on the selections list. Karen had seen Parklex panels on a building in Minneapolis and liked the warmth of the natural wood finish. Lawrence got on board with the choice because of the product's durability. "The panels have a thin wood veneer impregnated with a resin, so there's virtually no maintenance," he says. Using them as a rain screen with a gap between the panels and the exterior walls offered other advantages as well. The mechanical requirements of the house were mostly concealed behind the panels along with the hardware for an extensive motorized screen system that can be activat-

ed to shade the west-facing glass. Standing seam metal roofing and zinc panels on the garage complete the straightforward, easy-care palette of materials.

In the end, the pieces came together into an easygoing and graceful structure. Despite the melancholy of her late husband not witnessing the finished house, Karen Lahr sighs with pleasure every time she walks through the front door. "I keep seeing this house as a bento box," she says with a smile. "It's a little plain on the outside, but when you open it up you see the details ... and it hits you as this piece of art."  
—*Shelley D. Hutchins*

Project Credits: Builder: SBI General Contractors, Mountlake Terrace, Wash.; Architect: Lawrence Architecture, Seattle; Interior designer: Carol Belz & Associates, Minneapolis; Lighting designer: Chaffee Lighting, Minneapolis; Living space: 2,400 square feet; Site: .24 acre; Construction cost: \$400 a square foot; Photographer: Benjamin Benschneider.