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the key's under the mat

A Washington couple's lucky guests get to stay in a shorefront house of their own.



few hosts offer house-guests the keys to a personal waterfront getaway. But when the owners of this Bellevue, Washington, property greet visitors, that's exactly what they do.

Several years ago, while living comfortably in a large house they'd built overlooking Lake Washington and the Seattle skyline, the couple learned the property next door had become available. Suddenly the thought of owning a guest cottage a short stroll across the garden seemed irresistible.

Built as a summer cabin in the 1940s, the guesthouse stood close to the lake, within sight of city lights and snowcapped mountains to the west. A 1960s renovation had left the interior dark and the floor plan choppy, with an awkward staircase that split the house in two. (The dingy, half-timbered siding didn't do much for the exterior, either.) Most prospective buyers considered the house a teardown, but this couple liked its simple lines and shorefront location. To them, all it needed was some corrective surgery and a major infusion of light.

They hired Mark Elster of AOME Architects in Seattle to update the four-bedroom house and add the coastal character it lacked. "I wanted it to feel really warm, cozy, and cottagey," says the wife. Due to zoning restrictions, the existing footprint couldn't be altered, but finishes were fair game. Working with builder John Michael

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Transforming the original living room (below) into a bright great room (above) required new windows, a new fireplace, and the removal of some interior walls. To provide needed structural support, architect Mark Elster installed new steel ceiling beams. Additional wooden beams disguise irregularities in the roofline and provide visual interest overhead.



Hall, Mark wrapped the gloomy exterior in butternut-color shingles and replaced old windows with new divided-light casements that lend cottage character. Inside, Mark and John relocated the offending staircase to expand the front hall, and oriented the new vestibule to face the main house next door. They installed reclaimed-pine floors and refreshed tired rooms with canvas-color walls and slightly distressed beaded-board wainscoting.

Though the home's main attraction is the astounding view, almost all of the original waterfront spaces were small and poorly designed. The couple wanted one big, open room, so Mark removed interior walls and installed floor-to-ceiling windows with true divided lights. Now, when windows and doors are open, the room feels like a breezy pavilion. The homeowners often open the sliding doors so their guests can enjoy the sensation of dining al fresco while remaining under cover—a smart idea on the rainy coast.

But the owners don't need visitors to enjoy their private retreat. Sometimes they wander down the path from the main house just to savor a glass of wine or watch the sunset. "This is a more relaxed space," says the wife. In fact, the couple is entertaining thoughts of moving in full-time when their last child leaves home. Who knows? They may end up becoming the guests who never leave. 🍷

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