A House for Now and the Future

A hillside home with a simple, barrier-free floor plan features an exercise pool in an enclosed courtyard

BY WILL FOSTER

Here in the Northwest, winters are long, wet and dark, the perfect environment for a raging case of cabin fever. After 20 years in a small house with tiny windows, my wife and I wanted a new home with plenty of space, a strong connection to the outdoors and lots of natural light. With a nod toward the future, Anne and I also wanted most of the house to be wheelchair-accessible, which created a more spacious house with wide doors, generous hallways and more space between furnishings.

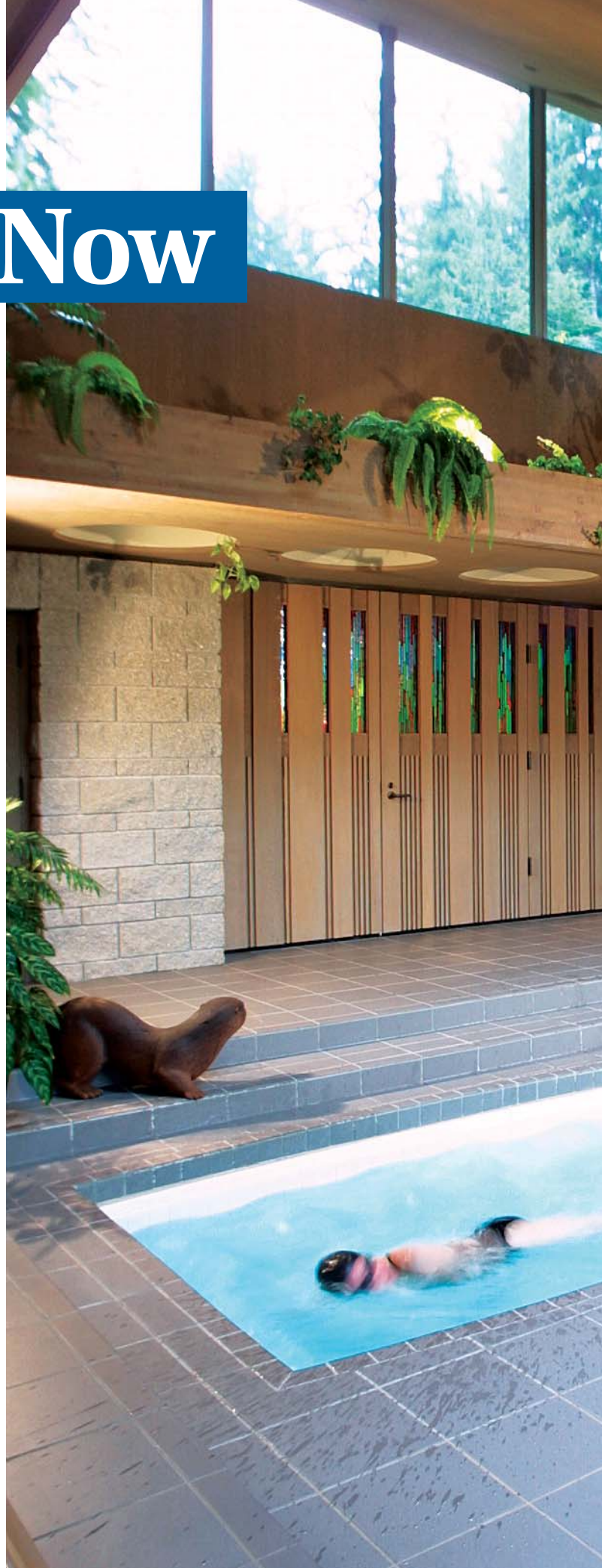


Shelter built into the hill. *Sited on the south-facing slope, the house backs into the hillside. A series of landings leads to the main entrance at the back. Photo by Michael Mathers, taken at A on floor plan.*

Our requirements were simple. We don't have kids, so our basic needs were straightforward: a master bedroom and bath, a guest suite, living/dining/kitchen areas, a small study and support spaces such as a laundry and garage. We also wanted an indoor pool ("Feedback," facing page).

Other requirements were more subtle. Our lifestyle is fairly informal, so we didn't need separate dining or living rooms for entertaining. All spaces were meant to be used all the time. We also wanted to use straightforward materials in a natural manner.

I've always admired the National Parks architecture in the Northwest, from the grand lodges to the smaller structures





FEEDBACK

SWIMMING IN PLACE

Swimming is important to my wife, Anne, so we wanted some sort of pool in the house. We considered a full-length lap pool, but enclosing and dehumidifying such a large space would be cost-prohibitive. Then we stumbled on a pool called a resistance swimmer; it offers the same exercise in a smaller space (photo taken at B on floor plan).

We chose the 42-in. deep SwimEx model 400S (SwimEx Systems; 800-877-7946; www.swimex.com). We investigated other resistance swimmers, including some that generate a narrow current with a water jet. Unfortunately, swimmers using this type of pool must maintain great concentration to remain centered in the flow. In contrast, the SwimEx pool uses a concealed 3-ft. dia. paddle wheel to create a smooth, even current across the width of the pool. With the pool's conveniently located switches, the swimmer can adjust the current speed from barely perceptible to a raging 4.5 mph.

A number of technical aspects complicate the pool's installation, and the first is weight. The pool's 2600 gal. of churning water weighs close to 11 tons and requires a structure capable of supporting 425 lb. per sq. ft. In most cases, a slab on grade will do the job, but it's a good idea to consult a structural engineer, especially if you plan to elevate the pool. The second consideration is size. Although the pool at the surface measures about 6 ft. by 11½ ft., the paddle-wheel enclosure, motor, pumps and filtration equipment take up about 12 ft. by 20 ft. by 5 ft. of space below the deck.

The installed price of the SwimEx pool varies from $24,000 to $40,000, depending on model, options and difficulty of installation. While the initial cost is close to that of a full-size pool, the major savings are in the smaller space used and the smaller volume of water to be heated and maintained.

After using the SwimEx pool for several years, we have yet to be bored with swimming in place. The variable current works well for freestyle and breast stroke, but long-limbed people may have difficulty with the more vigorous backstroke and butterfly. And the best part? No flip turns!

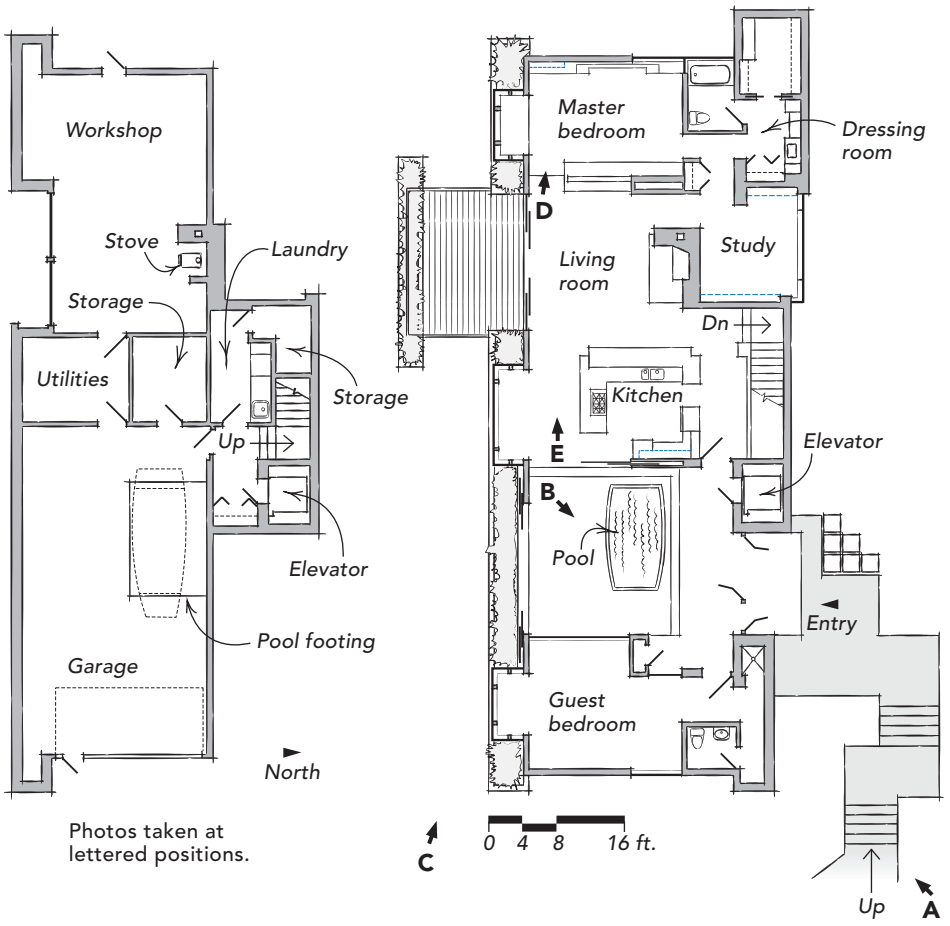
— W. F.

ONE FLOOR HAS IT ALL

To create a wide-open plan that takes future accessibility into consideration, the Fosters wanted to group the main living spaces on one floor. Given the steep, uniformly sloping hillside, it seemed logical to stretch the house across the site and work with the contours of the land. The resulting linear plan situates the guest suite and family living spaces at opposite ends of the house; an interior court separates the two areas and functions as the pool room. A garage and workshop occupy the lower level.

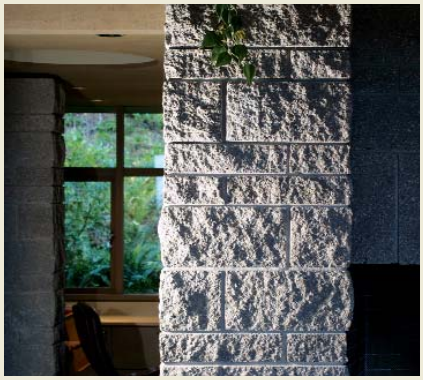
SPECS

Bedrooms: 2
Bathrooms: 2
Size: 4434 sq. ft., including garage
Cost: N/A
Completed: 1999
Location: Montesano, Washington
Architect: Will Foster
Builder: Nevills Construction



Photos taken at lettered positions.

SMALL DETAILS ADD TEXTURE AND COLOR. Contrasting with the smoothly painted walls, the split-faced block was stacked in a random pattern of 4-in. and 8-in. blocks.



such as picnic shelters and restroom facilities. These smaller buildings frequently were constructed with a high base of native stone topped with log walls and a heavy roof. This practical architecture looks at home in a natural setting and resists deterioration by holding the wood walls well above ground level. We used the same concept for our house, but instead of stone, we built our wooden house on a tall base of concrete block (photo facing page).

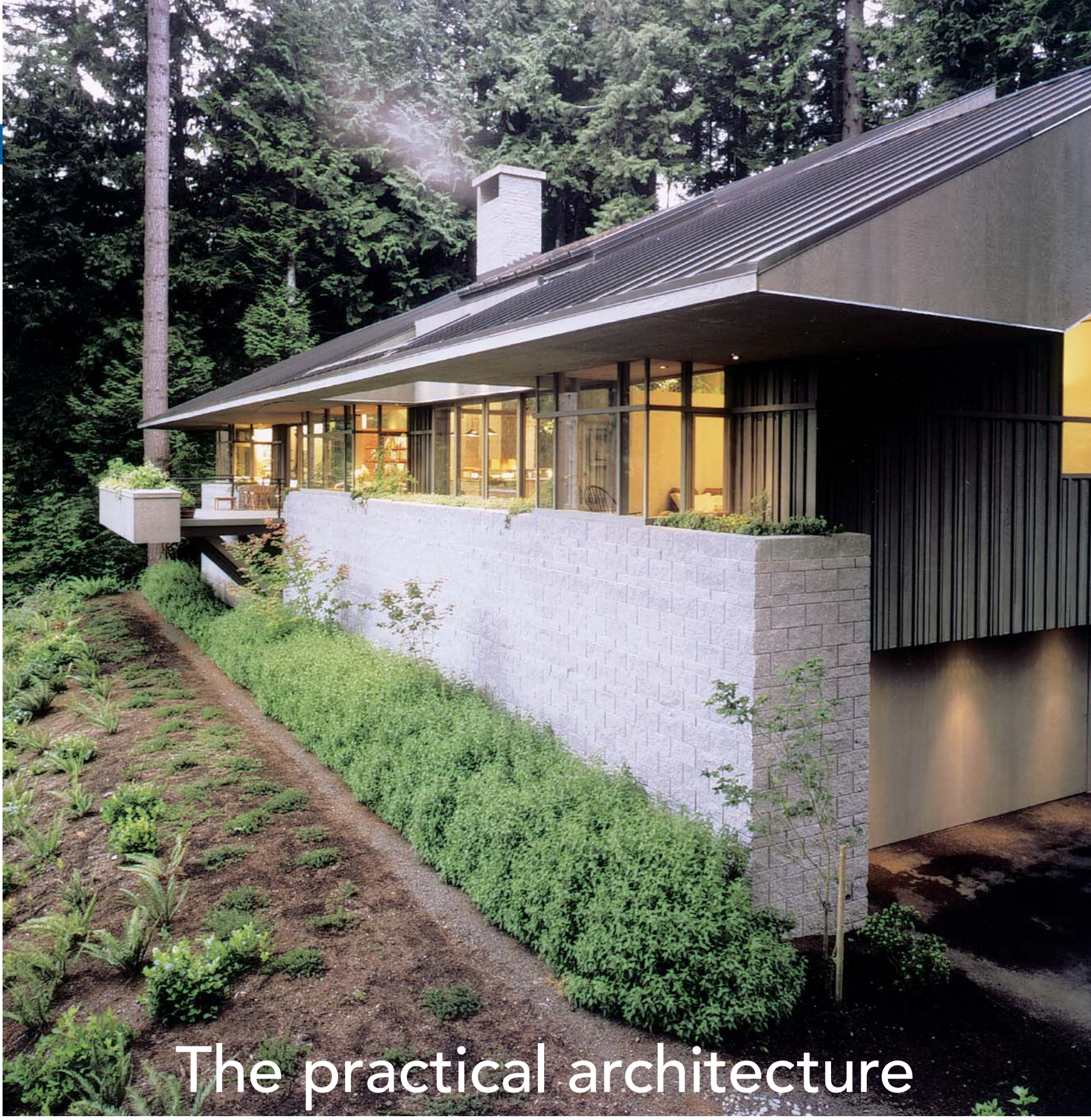
The house is topped with a standing-seam metal roof, which helps to shed the needles that fall from the surrounding evergreen trees. Inside, rough-sawn cedar plywood covers the house's ceiling, which is separated visually from the walls by a dark, recessed band of trim (top photo, p. 108). The dark trim band allows the plywood to read as one unbroken surface that runs from one end of the house to the other. This effect, combined with ample use of glass in the main living spaces, gives us the feeling of living in an open-air pavilion.

A court for all seasons

The interior court was conceived as an indoor/outdoor space and separates the guest

Rising above the elements. *A tall foundation of split-faced block anchors the house, which in turn is sheltered from windblown rain by a roof with wide overhangs. Large skylights and tall clerestory windows illuminate the interior. Photo taken at C on floor plan.*

Floor-plan drawings: Paul Perreault



The practical architecture of Northwestern National Parks looks at home in a natural setting.

Photo this page: Michael Mathers



There are no barriers to

Relaxing with plain geometry. *At the end of the house, the master bedroom (photo above, taken at D on floor plan) is a quiet space of unadorned walls and a wide expanse of ceiling. Instead of moldings, the author designed reveals at the ceiling and floor, and around the windows (photo right). As seen from the kitchen (photo facing page), the house's main living space is essentially one big room with an open, pavilionlike feel. Photo taken at E on floor plan.*



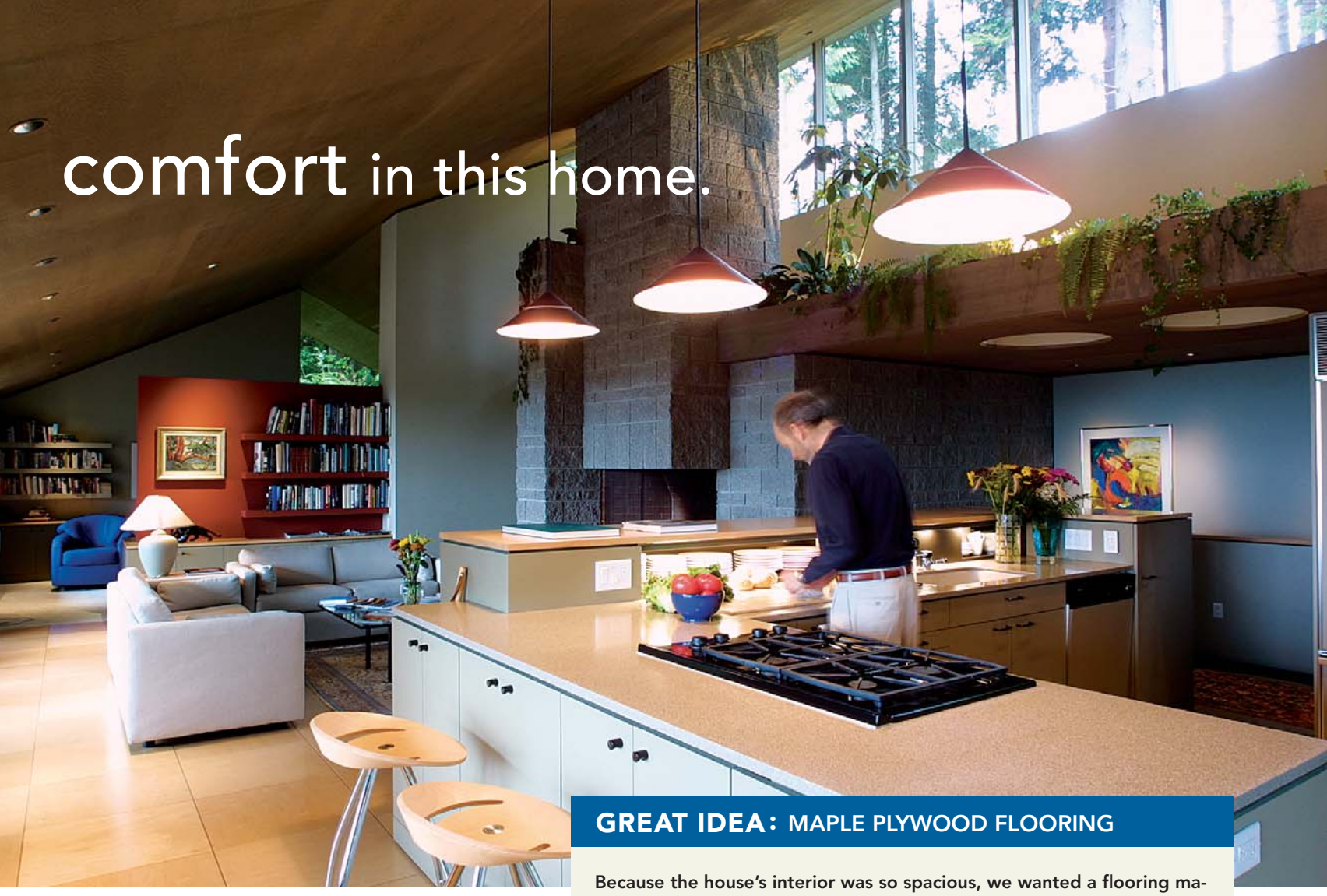
area from the main living spaces (floor plan, p. 106). But other intentions are more subtle. As a part of the entry, the court combines elements of the exterior with the warmth and shelter of an interior space. During our long, gray Northwest winters, this space is a welcome retreat for swimming and relaxing in the abundant natural light that streams in through the huge skylight and south-facing windows. During warmer weather, windows in the south wall slide along the outside of the house to create a 15-ft. wide opening. Similarly, the three sections of the front door fold back into a 12-ft. wide opening that looks back into the trees.

Within the main living area, the kitchen (photo facing page) serves as a pivot around which other spaces are arranged. The cook can socialize with others gathered in the living room, dining room or court, and we are afforded quick access to the entry to greet guests. A large glass door between the kitchen/dining area and the court disappears into a pocket to join the two spaces.

Modern materials can feel rustic

The National Parks buildings that inspired me are built of native stone, cedar shingles and large beams of clear fir, hemlock or cedar. Although these materials are essential to the structures' rustic feel, they are becoming increasingly scarce and expensive. To evoke this feeling with modern materials, I used more affordable processed materials in a manner that suggests the random forms found in nature. For example, as an alternative to quarried stone, split-faced concrete block was laid in random courses (photo p. 106). On the exterior and in the swimming-pool court, rough-sawn plywood is covered with heavy cedar battens that have been sized and spaced in a seemingly random manner to suggest tree bark or a thick forest viewed from a distance.

Radiantly heated floors greet our feet in the bathrooms, hallway and court. The floors are



comfort in this home.

covered with 12-in. sq. porcelain tile. The floors in the living, dining and kitchen areas also are covered with tile, but in this case, they are made of wood ("Great Idea," right).

We used ¾-in. maple plywood sawn into 2-ft. squares with sawblade kerfs cut into the edges. Each square was glued down with construction adhesive and nailed through loose splines set into the kerfs. A ⅛-in. wide strip of contrasting black walnut glued into the gaps covers the spline. The regular pattern created by these materials contrasts with the random feel of the block and provides a rhythm and scale to the house's interior spaces. □

Architect Will Foster lives in Montesano, Washington. Photos by Charles Bickford, except where noted.

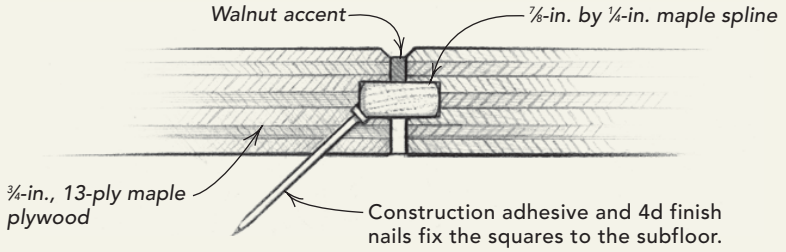
ONLINE CONNECTION

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

GREAT IDEA: MAPLE PLYWOOD FLOORING

Because the house's interior was so spacious, we wanted a flooring material that was commensurate in scale and that still created a rhythmic pattern. As an experiment, we hired Petersen Cabinets of Shelton, Wash., to make 2-ft. squares of ¾-in. thick, high-density maple plywood. (They also built the house's cabinets.) The 13-ply squares were glued to the subfloor (drawing below) with construction adhesive, secured with finish nails through the saw kerf and finished with a water-based urethane afterward. A loose maple spline aligned each square to its neighbors; a walnut accent provided a contrasting color. Although the surface dents under heavy impact, the flooring holds up well under normal foot traffic. —*W. F.*





Drawing this page: Bob La Pointe