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Innsbrook experiment

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This view is from the master bedroom loft of a new designer home by renowned environmental architect James Cutler. (Kevin Manning/P-D)

NESTLED AMONG the white oaks in Innsbrook, the latest home sitting on 6,000 acres of lakes and woods has a somber aesthetic and revolutionary aspiration.

Designed by James Cutler, the architect most renowned for crafting Bill Gates' \$97 million, 66,000-square-foot home

in Medina, Wash., the comparatively modest three-bedroom home in Warren County is priced at just under \$1 million.

Working with the national builder Lindal Cedar Homes, the modernist house of wood and glass has been adapted for modular construction. Tract homes, watch out: This designer home has a conscience, and it is being packaged for transplant in a neighborhood near you. It will be unveiled to the public during a Labor Day weekend celebration.

The concept of razing trees, blanching the earth and constructing uniform boxes, regardless of the natural terrain, is a long-standing tradition Cutler would like to subvert. He designed this house to conform to the landscape, not dominate it.

Lindal sells the building materials for this home, but it's not like buying a do-it-yourself house kit. Cutler's firm has to be hired to consult on any building project if you want to call it a Cutler home. It's still not cheap, but this alternative to a cookie cutter would save clients hundreds of thousands in original design costs. The project is being tested as a way to jazz up ho-hum custom houses with generic themes such as faux Tudor and French country.



Speaking by phone from his office on a converted houseboat in Bainbridge Island, Wash., Cutler said he didn't agree to this project because he needed the money or the exposure. He's busy and

wealthy. He's also frustrated.

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"I'm not always proud of my profession. The building industry treats the world . . . cruelly," Cutler said. "It's like waking up in the morning and looking in the mirror and seeing that you're the bad guy, you're the one killing the plant life, not some other faceless guy in an office far away - you."

It's simple economics. Architects have to design buildings that are cost-effective for builders. Bulldozing the land and building a box is quick, easy and efficient. But Cutler believes there is a better way that can be affordable.

OK, this particular \$939,000 house, constructed on 1.52 acres at the edge of a lake, probably isn't going to show up next door unless you're in a resort corridor, but if the business model is successful, other environmentally conscious designer homes could become available.



The 2,820-square-foot dwelling in Innsbrook goes to great lengths to honor the landscape. The master bedroom loft overlooks the living area, and several panes of glass that climb from the

floor to the ceiling provide a nearly 180-degree view of the woods and lake wrapping around the home. Unexpected, unfinished slim metal tension bars stretching from one side of the room to the other provide an interesting structural element that supports the lean construction. It is an industrial element that other contemporary architects might have opted to cover with plaster and drywall or wooden beams.

Plywood lining the balcony and simple lumber with natural stains quietly illustrate architectural necessity in plain view.

"Allowing the framing to reveal itself and the plaster and paneling to reveal itself provides an understanding of the framing and wood that you have killed to put up a wall. Everything should have a chance to tell its story. That's how you get a higher richness of detail," Cutler said.



In other words, he wants people to look at one of his homes and appreciate how hard the wood and masonry are working. He frowns on pristine-white box rooms overwhelmed by finished elements that

completely hide the inner workings. Cutler is tired of homeowners and home builders taking construction materials for granted.

Before he began designing the structure, Cutler visited the property and flagged every tree he wanted to keep. The living room is supported by rock pillars that mimic the limestone formation visible across the lake. And the most intriguing elements of the home are glass panels that allow you to look through multiple walls to see the beauty of the surrounding landscape. Other windows are carefully placed to frame views of the house itself. Look out a first-floor bedroom window and

glimpse the clean lines of Cutler's intriguing patterns of wood and glass defining the living room. Look out the upstairs master bedroom suite, and the roof supports above and rain gutters of the garage below are crafted with eye-catching features.

"Everyone has a different view about the style of the house," said interior designer Stephen Patton of Frank Patton Interiors, which furnished the home. "Some people say it's got Asian influences, others say Shaker, and some say mission style, and so I took a touch of each to make everyone happy."

But like Cutler, Patton's guiding design principal was a gift from nature. He took the color palate from sycamore tree bark. He thought the sycamore logs looked beautiful inside the black Swedish wood-burning fireplace stove situated against the glass wall in the living room. Woven fabrics, contemporary rattan objects and leather in subdued hues of sage, brown and brick red populate the structure.

Patton incorporated the work of local artists Vicki McAlister, Billyo O'Donnell and Jeff Vaughn, who each provide an interpretation of natural scenes from the surrounding environment, including photographs, landscape paintings and mixed-media abstracts.

"I didn't want the furnishings to overpower the view. This house is all about the views not drawing too much attention to the interior," Patton said.

But when you direct your focus inside, the details are subtle and comforting. It is a solid home despite the cathedral ceilings and thin walls that could feel precarious in less practiced hands. And it is a cozy environment, despite the prevalence of glass and the overwhelming presence of the outdoors.

Visiting a designer home, most people would expect to see bold architect signatures - grand gestures and attention-grabbing executions of craft. Few would expect the transparency you'll find at this home.

"He wanted everything to look like it grew up out of the earth," said Dan Miesner, Innsbrook's general manager of construction. He said that for a typical home, he receives a 30-page blueprint and one drawing of the complete structure. The Cutler home came with the usual blueprint and about 600 drawings. The sketches specified intricate details providing critical support and shrewd juxtapositions of wood and metal so as to leave nothing to interpretation.

"I believe strongly in (protecting) the future of the landscape," Cutler said, "so I like things that are endemic, that depict what's beautiful in the real world as opposed to the world we create." The key, he said, is architecture that conforms to the environment around it. He maintains that "the worst thing you can say about a building is that it looks designed . . . or fashionable."

It's not easy being an ecologically conscious builder. There are potshots to endure.

"People say we are elitist," because of the hefty price tag of his projects, Cutler said, but he isn't convinced that his type of design philosophy has to remain an option only for the uber-wealthy.

"That's why this (Innsbrook home) is an experiment. Whether we can take this to a commercial market remains to be seen, but if it works, it could change the national market," Cutler said.

Cutler's firm, Cutler Anderson Architects (established in 1977 as James Cutler Architects), has received six National Honor Awards from the American Institute of Architects and more than 30 other national and regional awards. The company is involved in a number of national and international projects, including residences in Majorca, Spain; Napa Valley, Calif.; the Hudson River Valley in New York; the Big Island of Hawaii; and the Capital Hill Library in Seattle, as well as a prospective plan for a federal building in Portland, Ore., that Cutler maintains will "have something no one's ever seen before."

"There's a lowest common denominator in this business, and I'm sick of it. I'm not naive, but I know something else is possible," Cutler said of the environmentally conscious building.

"Look at Ikea (home furnishings). There's good design that's affordable, and it gives people a comprehension of materials and building, and it's incredibly acceptable to people.

"Can that work with housing? We'll see. I'd love to do a tract housing project in an urban setting."

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