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A MAN AND HIS VAN

After a year on the road, and hundreds of outdoorsy photographs, like this Washington beach scene, Mike Brown discovered his passion, and the place he'll call home



The same dynamic duo that remodeled Travis Penn and John Wicher's previous home next door — Prentiss Balance Wickline (then Prentiss Architects) and general contractor Schultz Miller — reteamed, joined by interior designer Holly McKinley, to build the couple's new home, on a super-steep site in Washington Park. The concrete foundation is anchored by 57 auger cast pilings. "I remember one of the engineers saying, 'When the big quake comes, I want to be here,'" says Penn.

CLOSE TO THEIR HEARTS

A Washington Park couple builds a contemporary new home on the lot next door and fills it with their favorite things

THE FIRST TIME architectural opportunity knocked, Travis Penn and John Wicher lived in Queen Anne. It was an actual knock. At the door was their neighbor, Geoff Prentiss, just delivering a neighborly how-do-you-do. He is an actual architect.

That was a while back, but some initial connections span time and distance.

The couple later moved ("When they were going to work on the Fremont bridge, we thought, 'Let's get the hell out,'" Penn says), and alighted on a heavenly but devilishly steep site in Washington Park, with an older, one-level home on one arm of the T at the end of a dead-end road. They had escaped bridge construction but steered right into home construction. Working with general ▶



In the great room, under a 17-foot-high ceiling, light shines through opaque shelves holding vases from Venice. "They work with the horizontal mullions," says architect Geoff Prentiss. "And there's storage in the window seats. They give a depth to the room." (The TV hides behind a sliding panel above the fireplace.)

"On the main level, a connected kitchen, living and dining space opens onto an ipe deck and a stone terrace that steps down to a hillside garden," says Prentiss. "From the house, the deck or the terrace, you feel as though you're floating above the lake." The open plan makes entertaining a breeze, says Wicher. "Travis can be cooking in the kitchen and still be part of the conversation, whether it's inside or outside [there is outdoor access in three places]. Wherever you set up a bar, people won't bottleneck." The cabinets to the left hold lighted shelves filled with easily accessible cookbooks. "We wanted a really clean look. We also tend to be packrats," Wicher says. "Virtually any space has storage."

BELOW: "This is not a bedroom for someone who has a fear of heights," says Penn. "When they have the Blue Angels, you feel you can see in the cockpit."



contractor Schultz Miller, their former neighbor and his firm (then Prentiss Architects, now Prentiss Balance Wickline) added a second floor and "did a pretty extensive remodel," Prentiss says.

When architectural opportunity knocked again, it was right next door. On the other arm of that dead-end T, a green farmhouse dating to 1916, concealed by spreading greenery and stealthily sliding down that heavenly hill, went on the market.

"It had been so overgrown," says Penn. "We said, 'Why don't we buy it and control it ourselves?'"

Initially, the couple rented it out, thinking they'd build a new spec house and sell it. But then, Penn says, "John and I realized it'd be the only house we'd ever design from the ground up."

Now *there's* an architectural opportunity. The dream-team duo reconvened, joined by interior designer Holly McKinley. And now, rising up, up, up from a concrete foundation anchored by 57 auger cast piles, Penn and Wicher's all-new, transitional, thoughtful home rests securely on its slope, its 5,320 square feet filled with ▶



The artwork on the walls of the dining area are by Gerry Lisk of Boise. "We found the big one first, and the other one was at [our home on] Whidbey," says Penn. "They kind of complement each other." Adds Wicher: "We also thought: 'What piece can you put there that doesn't dominate the dining room but you can see from the living room?'"





A custom two-story wallpaper map of the world fills the wall behind the main stairway. “We all love the design of it,” says Prentiss. “It picks up on the wood and windows.”

abundant light, majestic viewpoints and artful remembrances of special people and places.

The palette is consistent, neutral and warm — rift-sawn white oak paneling and plank flooring — with “an overall feeling of a home of warmth, embracing color with highlights,” says Prentiss (one of those happy highlights: the workout space over the garage, with an orange staircase that’s “an homage to ‘Pee-wee’s Playhouse’”). The lines are crisp; the trim is minimal. The custom details are distinct: “We were able to measure the size of our dinner plates to make sure they fit in the cabinets and closets,” says Penn.

“These guys are very organized,” Prentiss says. “They knew what they wanted.”

For example: In the dining area, there’s one drawer for napkins, and another for place mats. Because often, this transitional, thoughtful home also is filled with people.



At the top of the main staircase, above Penn’s grandmother’s settee, hangs “Millie,” “a piece we picked up in Austin, Travis’ hometown,” says Wicher. “I always feel like she protects us.”

“The prime driver was that we entertain a lot,” says Wicher. “We wanted flow.”

The sleek, shiny kitchen at the heart of the home — both spatially and spiritually — smoothly connects the living and dining areas in a great room of great impact. “My advantage in helping them is that we’re friends,” says Prentiss. “I’ve been with them when they’re entertaining. I knew to eliminate bottlenecks.”

Wicher and Penn also wanted “a really clean look,” so, says Wicher, “Virtually any space has storage” (including a cleverly hidden cookbook nook, designed by Prentiss Balance Wickline architect Brian Watzin — who had not worked on the home next door — in one end of the kitchen cabinetry). They also wanted everything *not* in storage to shine.

“Family is important to us,” says Wicher (visitors get to pick their preferred upper-level guest room: mountain view or lake view). “So are travel and art. It’s not highly valuable, but it’s meaningful. That had to be incorporated.” Adds Penn: “Places were designed for specific pieces — things that have memories and meaning.”

The Buddha in the living area belonged to Penn’s grandmother; a table was his mother’s. The clock in the hallway had been Wicher’s great-grandparents’. There’s a painting from Bali, and two vases the couple picked up in Venice. Penn’s grandmother’s settee sits at the top of the stairway.

Oh. That stairway. It’s a wood-and-glass work of art itself — slim and solid and geometric — and behind it: a fantastic, massive two-story map of the world, on wallpaper.

“We knew we had this big wall and wanted something, but we couldn’t imagine what,” says Penn. “What about a mural? What about a map? We found a place in Bristol, England. You send the dimensions and the areas you want. Once it was installed, work kind of stopped.”

This time, in a custom home of lasting connections and repeat collaboration, opportunity knocked right inside the front door. **■**

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