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PHOTO OPPORTUNITY


A photographer fashions a home and studio that pays homage to the past



The street façade (opposite, top) features a succession of solid walls, save for the lanternlike cupola marking the front door. Windows dominate the view side (opposite, bottom), which includes a towering pivoting door opening to the central studio/living area (this page).

By Fred Albert

Photographs by Paul Warchol



Candles, spotlights and uplights illuminate the 26-foot-tall studio/living space. Painted "booties" add a whimsical touch to the rollaway teak tables. Offices are located behind the fireplace wall; a slide of one of the homeowner's photos is projected onto another wall (*opposite*).



Forget the panoramic view of Puget Sound and the unbroken chain of mountains etched across the horizon.

What really attracted Carol Bobo to her neighbor's North Seattle property was the light. Plentiful and golden, it brought the landscape into startling relief, and reflected off the house to give people an almost-angelic glow.

"It was magical," muses Carol, a photographer, "just magical."

Carol wanted to bask in that light every day. She got her chance seven years ago, when the octogenarian owner agreed to sell her the property. Initially, Carol hoped to turn the postwar Roman-brick rambler into a photography studio, "but there just wasn't enough light inside during the day and not enough room, and it was in decay."

She assembled a team of passionate professionals—among them architect Tom Kundig, interior designer Janice Viekman, craftsman David Gulassa, and builders Frank Firmani and Glenn Madawi from Charter Construction—and asked them to come up with a combination home and studio as primal as a Mayan ruin and as mutable as a shadow striking a wall.

Part sculpture, part shelter, the completed house is an imposing amalgam of rough concrete, raw steel and glittering glass, crowned by a roof of lead-coated copper. Inside, a team of designers and artisans collaborated on every detail, down to the molded-urethane toilet seat in the powder room.

While the design is forward-thinking, the details owe a debt





to the past. Carol had become close to the former owner, Laura Menconi, and wanted the new house to pay homage to the old one, even though their styles couldn't be more dissimilar. "Carol said that Laura's spirit had to stay on the site," explains Kundig, a principal at Olson/Sundberg Architects.

Kundig accommodated her wishes, incorporating part of the old home's front wall into the new structure. Slightly skewed from its surroundings (Kundig rotated the new house a bit to take better advantage of the view), the wall—now dubbed "Laura's wall"—still betrays vestiges of its former life, including some father-son notes scrawled in pencil nearly half a century ago.

"Carol's a client who appreciates irony," says Kundig. He and the design team exploited that trait with an Alice-in-Wonderland array of spatial permutations, from a 14-foot front door that opens into a tiny entry hall, to a hidden door that services a minuscule powder room sheathed in copper leaf.

The centerpiece of the house is a 26-foot-tall photography studio-cum-living area framed in steel. A varnished plaster ceiling arcs overhead and extends outside, sheltering the Mondrianlike wall of west-facing windows. A steel grid suspended from the ceiling holds theater-type lighting and nearly a dozen hanging spotlights fashioned from bud vases. A massive pair of caged fans help regulate the heat rising from the radiant concrete floors below.

Inspired by the messages preserved on Laura's wall, Carol made sure the new home would leave a legacy of its own. Shop notations were preserved on the exposed I-beams and stair frames, and the steel was left unfinished so it would rust over time. Footprints and stains are allowed to accumulate on the unsealed concrete floors, and pillar candles are left to flicker atop mounds of molten wax.

Furnishings are few: a trio of rugged teak tables, matching benches, a sectional and an Aubusson rug. "It's a powerful house," acknowledges Viekman. "You can't just put any old piece of furniture in it." Most of the furnishings are set on casters, allowing Carol to transform the space from living area to studio in a matter of minutes.

An open kitchen anchors one end of the space. The massive island boasts a concrete counter top, integrated concrete

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: A hidden door reveals a powder room sheathed in copper leaf. The master bath's counter top extends outside the house. The kitchen includes a concrete island and imbuya burl cabinets. The master bedroom overlooks Puget Sound and features hand-painted closet doors and a custom-made bed.

sink and concrete cabinet doors that swing out on bronze casters. A concrete table extends out from one end for dining and retracts when not in use.

The kitchen's back wall defines one side of a utility core containing pantry, powder room and laundry area. The walls here are covered with a veneer of imbuya burl—a swarthy Brazilian wood whose richness provides a sensual counterpoint to the industrial materials around it.

"HONESTY IN MATERIALS WAS VERY IMPORTANT FROM THE BEGINNING."

No effort was made to trim the veneer's craggy edges or fill the telltale knot holes. "Honesty in materials was very important from the beginning," says Viekman. "Things don't try to be what they aren't."

The north end of the house is dominated by a pair of offices, while the south end contains the bedrooms and caretaker's quarters. Given the home's 3,500 square feet of living space, the master bedroom is small—just large enough for a sinuous, '20s-style bed framed in crinkly, crepelike fabric and a row of rusticated closet doors painted by John Rizzotto.

Carol opted for a more industrial look in her daughter's bedroom. Here, the floors are raw plywood and the walls are bare Sheetrock (taped and mudded, but not painted). "Carol walked in here and said, 'Oooh! That's so cool!'" Kundig recalls. "So we sealed it just the way it was."

Carol asked landscape architect Richard Haag to help weave together the daring new house and the rather dated pool and yew trees that flank it. Haag responded by planting a field of ornamental grasses between the house and the yews, linking the two with paths built from concrete shards salvaged from the old basement floor.

When the project was completed, an architect at Olson/Sundberg brought in a selection from Lillian Hellman's memoir, *Pentimento*. The passage expanded upon the book's title—an art term used to describe what happens when a canvas is painted over but the original image remains visible.

Everyone agreed that Carol's house is an architectural embodiment of *pentimento*. Although the old house was razed and a new one built on its foundation, the soul and history of what came before continue to shine through, undiminished. ■

