



LITTLE HOUSE, BIG WINDOW

A HOME THAT BLURS THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE LAKE AND THE LIVING ROOM

Seattle architect Tom Kundig pays close attention to how things around us work—and he has a knack for turning these observations of a small detail into a big event.

The architectural firm of Olsen Sundberg Kundig Allen Architects, in which he shares a partnership, is known for demonstrating dramatic flair in their modernist designs, like when they put giant wheels on vacation residences in a compound to get around an environmental-impact statement that limited the square footage of permanent structures. The finished project was dubbed a herd of Rolling Huts. Necessity does seem to be the mother of invention, and this is one inventive group of designers.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER, UNDINE PRÖHL



But nowhere is this penchant for making a whimsical design detail of an otherwise ordinary feature more elegantly illustrated than in Kundig's interpretation of a Northern Idaho lake-side "shelter in the woods" for a physician, his wife, and their two young children.

For starters, entry to the structure is accessed through a massive nineteen-foot-high, six-foot-wide metal door, the scale of which the architect purposely exaggerated to bring attention to the height of the surrounding pine trees.

But the most dramatic surprise waits within the relatively small and compact cabin, or as Kundig describes it, the "little house, big window."

In an ingenious response to his clients' directive to make their home as open to the water as possible, Kundig designed an enormous twenty-by-thirty-foot window wall that flips up to expose the entire living space to the forest and the lake.

The fact that the movable window wall bridges the interior with the elements is certainly extraordinary, but just how it opens is even more remarkable. In a world where technology

rules at an increasingly rapid pace, Kundig delights in the simple sensory aspects of the architectural experience, favoring direct and powerful design gestures. His first idea was to use an uncomplicated counterbalanced system based on sandbags. That was abandoned for a power-generated system that treated the wall like a giant garage door.

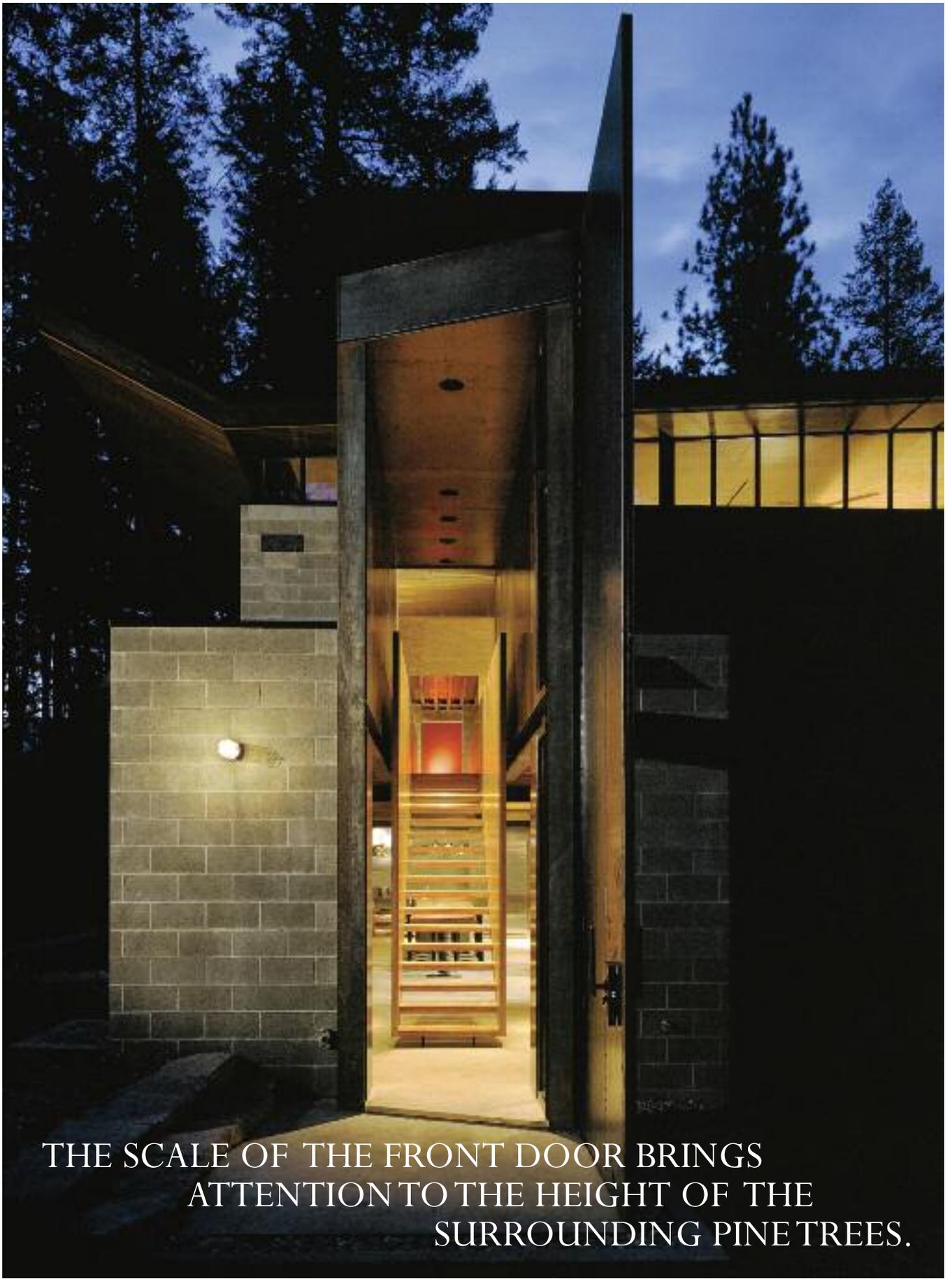
But his desire to involve the user in the process of opening the door proved "too irresistible"; the final solution is a giant hand-cranked wheel that combines a set of gears similar to a bicycle with the principles of counterbalance. Designed in collaboration with Turner Exhibits near Seattle, Kundig calls it The Gizmo, and its sophistication lies in its simplicity. Anyone from a small child to an elderly adult can easily and safely open the six-ton steel and glass window with a simple rotation. The result is amazing, and, as Kundig points out, is "not unlike the opening of a tent flap, allowing fresh air and unimpeded views to enter the cabin proper."

Doric Creager, who introduced the homeowners to the architect and whose Spokane-based residential contracting firm,

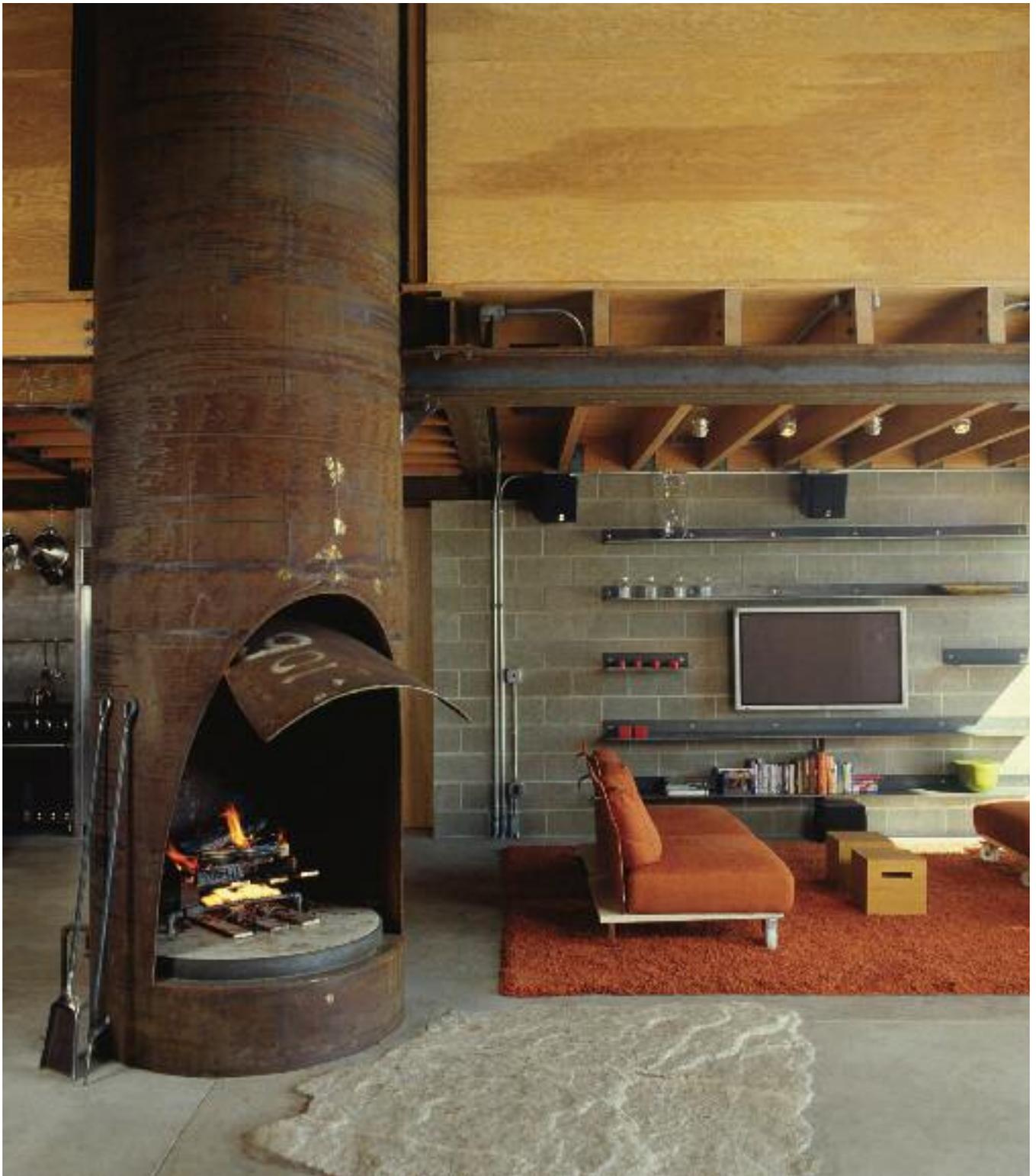




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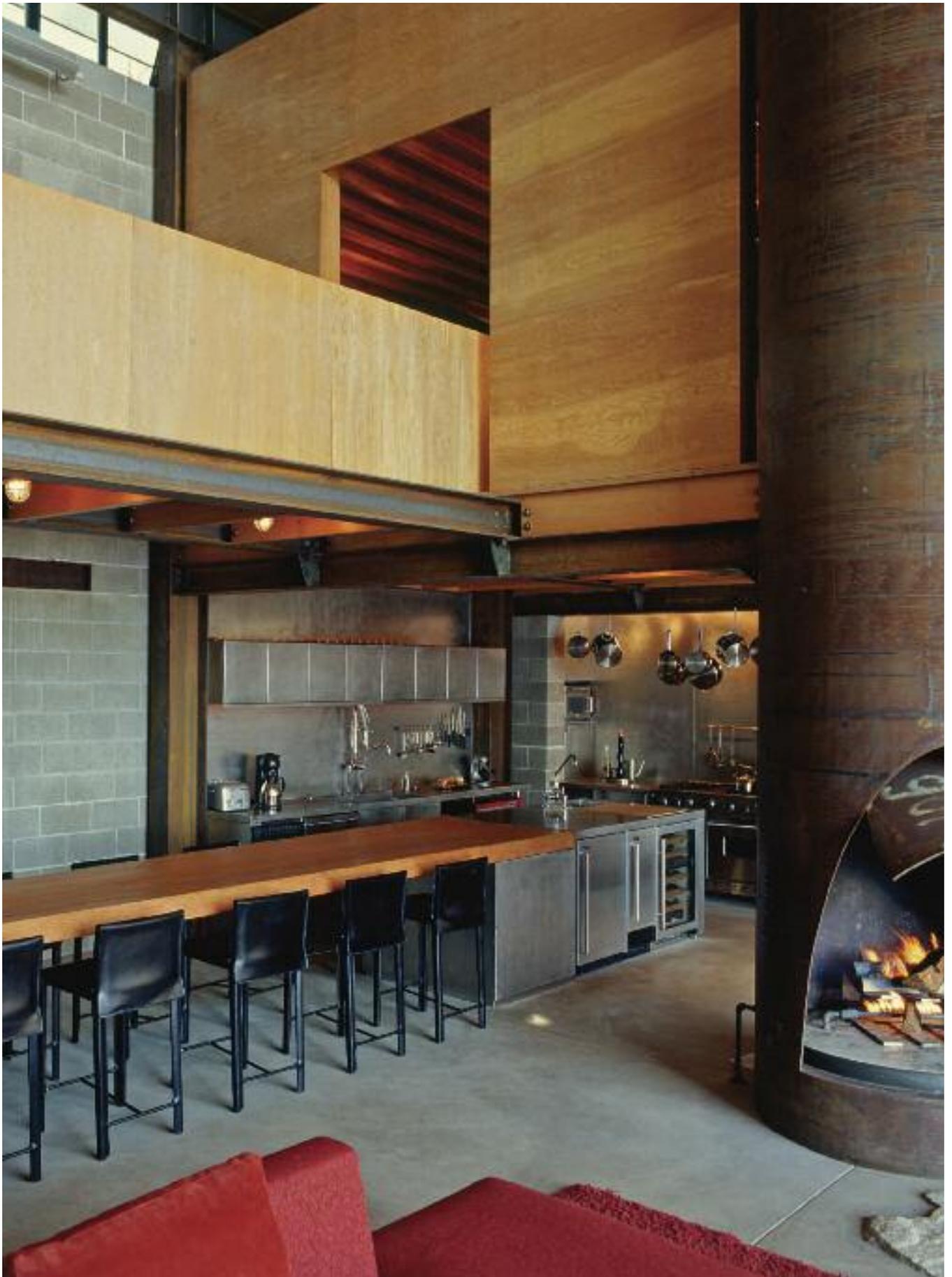


MC Company, built the cabin, considers the project one of his most demanding, but also the job where he and his crew had the most fun.

“The couple was young, sophisticated, and well-traveled,” he says. “They knew they wanted a contemporary, industrial look, but until Tom Kundig came into the picture, no architect could

get close. The finished house looks extremely simple, but the devil is in the details.”

Creager laughingly compares building the cabin, which sleeps ten, to “building a space shuttle for a fixed price” because every design element required extensive development by Kundig and had to be custom fabricated or adapted. The





architect provided more than a hundred pages of working drawings, which were often adjusted in the field as the best building techniques were agreed upon during the year the house took to complete.

“We started with the shell of the structure, and every week it would get detailed down to the nuts and bolts,” says Creager. “We really enjoyed that process and the dialogue with the architectural team.”

As much as Kundig is celebrated for his Willy Wonka-style one-off details such as The Gizmo, he is also known for his appreciation and liberal use of no-maintenance building materials. In this instance, structural steel framing, insulated concrete block, 1¼-inch marine-grade plywood, and concrete floors imbedded with ultra-efficient hydroponic heating coils compose the bulk of the materials list.

“In keeping with the notion of a cabin, the materials were left unfinished to naturally age and acquire a patina that fits in with a natural setting,” the architect says.

When asked which designers, past or present, most influence his work, Kundig names as one the famed Australian architect Glenn Murcutt, whose motto is “touch the world lightly.”

“I think a primitive connection to nature is found in all of us,” Kundig reflects. “In this case, I like the way the big window dissolves the boundary between the inside and the outside of the house.” ■



ARCHITECT TOM KUNDIG'S FIVE TIPS FOR MAKING SMALL SPACES FEEL IMPORTANT:

1. Look for ways to create strong indoor/outdoor view relationships, which help expand your sense of space. Remember, extra height helps.
2. Make spaces flexible so they can be adapted. For example, your dining room can also be a library. Instead of doors, use moveable walls for added versatility.
3. Emphasize natural daylight. It's better to have one large opening to increase the sense of scale than many small ones.
4. Allow some areas, like bedrooms, to be small and intimate, but make one area feel prominent and larger.
5. Each architectural element, cabinet, or piece of furniture should multitask. Put everything to work.