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## The thrill of restraint



FALL QUARTER 2008 \* The Seattle Times

# light & shadow

TRADITIONAL CONCEPTS  
TEMPERED WITH  
RESTRAINT IN  
A MODERN 'TEAHOUSE'



**northwest living**

by Leora Y. Bloom |  
photographed  
by Benjamin Benschneider

**Part of the beauty** of this house is the way it was built: The wall of windows (which is actually taller than the ceiling), the minimalist staircase that seems to float and lead nowhere (it actually turns and takes you upstairs as you'd expect), and the long bookcase (which can be lit from underneath) help counteract the heavier materials. The suspension light above the dining table is from Inform Interiors.



**The roof is suspended** and anchored to the central concrete blade, and a “lantern” is formed by clerestory windows in the resulting gap formed between the house and roof. The windows bring light all the way to the basement and allow for better air circulation on warm days. The slots below the windows allow light in and out of the master bedroom on the left. The painting in the stairwell is a print by Joan Mitchell.



**D**AVID AND ROBIN Chell happily compare their home in Shilshole to a modern Japanese teahouse, thanks to the subtle uses of many Japanese elements. But where the Chells see Japan, their architects see Italy.

“One theme that really inspired us was the transfer of light,” says Robin. So much so that their architects at Studio Ectypos, one Italian by birth (Michele Marquardi), the other by heritage (Lucia Pirzio-Biroli), called the house “Chiaroscuro” on their drawings. From Italian, *chiaroscuro* is “the treatment of light and shade. An effect of contrasted light and shadow created by light falling.”

Pirzio-Biroli explains that the way she and Marquardi like to work is to take traditional concepts, say *chiaroscuro*, “and think of more primary images like the use of light and dark. These are ideas that are extracted. So you wouldn’t walk in here and say that this was a Japanese ▶

**A green roof** edges the upper terrace and wraps around the house in front of the master bedroom, framing the view of Bainbridge Island and, on clear days, the Olympic Mountains. The upper gutters drain into it, and the roof works as a filter. The deck is made of ipe. The second-story structure is cantilevered and finished in stucco to emphasize its separation from the main structure below.

## wabi-sabi: beauty in transience

**THE CHELLS** are "fascinated with the concept of imperfection being beautiful," says Robin. One of the key elements to wabi-sabi is the celebration of transience and the marks we leave behind. So trowel marks on the concrete floor communicate the way they were made, and the white marble kitchen countertops will stain from use over time. The Chells appreciate that "it's a really easy way to live. It's nice to not worry about setting your glass on the table and leaving a ring."

Robin recommends Leonard Koren's "Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers" to anyone interested in learning more.



**The lower level** is home to Robin Chell Design, where Robin works with Jeannie Kalkus and Kerstin Williams (who designed both this kitchen and the main one upstairs).

## ►LIGHT & SHADOW

teahouse or a Tuscan villa, but there are certain qualities about it that evoke that." In fact, every room in the house gets natural light, and is decorated by carefully orchestrated shadow.

A study in light, as well as restraint and simplicity, the Chell home was a design collaboration of the two owners and the two architects. "Simplicity is much more difficult to achieve than complexity," warns Marquardt. So the group spent time exchanging ideas.

At the beginning, the Chells brought many images, several of them Japanese, to the architects. David has traveled and worked in Japan, and introduced Robin to the culture just in time for them to visit her sister there three years ago. As a result, much of the Chells' wish list was Japanese-inspired: the show of restraint; the use of natural, readily available mate-

## ►LIGHT & SHADOW

rials; the unfolding of spaces; and the influence of wabi-sabi (the concept that there is beauty in imperfection).

Coming up first with the big picture allowed them to ensure that every structure inside has a multitude of functions and that restraint abides. They even showed restraint in size: With 2,500 square feet, the house includes a live/work space for Robin's design firm, Robin Chell Design. The compact plan was also part of a greater plan for sustainability, which included a green roof.

While the Chells certainly showed restraint in that no detail is gratuitous or ostentatious, their design shows absolute precision and incredible attention to detail. The result is a feeling of balance and light, despite the use of heavy materials such as steel and concrete. For example, a single, central concrete blade supports not only the roof but each of the floors, and creates a "lantern" which draws light from the top floor all the way down to the basement; the steel treads of the stairs are perforated, allowing light to pass through; and when two materials come together there is a reveal, so the walls seem to float above the floor, the stairs don't touch the side walls, and a bookcase lit from beneath appears to float as well.

As requested, the building materials star as themselves, and wherever possible, were left exposed.

And as for the unfolding of spaces, the Japanese use it to create a feeling of anticipation and adventure. To that end, the Chells' front door is at the back of the house. Inside, a small entryway forces you to take a few important steps and turn a corner before you get to the main living space and discover the stunning view of Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains. And although that space seems wide open, a steel beam creates a false horizon, so the farther into the room you go, the larger the view is.

"When you design a house, you're designing something that fits somebody who is unique," says Pirzio-Biroli. So while the Chells' light-filled glass home may not look like a Japanese teahouse, what's important is that, to them, it feels like one. ■

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