BUILDING WITH QI, THE BREATH OF LIFE

BENDER-DE MOLL RESIDENCE

LOCATION: NEAHKAHNIE, OREGON **ARCHITECT:** TOM BENDER

THE NEW ASIAN HOME
KENDRA LANGETEIG
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ABOVE: This simple cedar-shingled cottage was designed and built by Bender in 1976. Bender and de Moll are still happy to call it home.

ABOVE RIGHT: An electrical cable spool serves as the table in the Japanese-style dining area, an elevated platform with floor seating.

Tom Bender, a visionary thinker at the forefront of the sustainability movement, has helped to revolutionize Western building practices with his path-breaking research, writing, and "energetic environmental design." In his commitment to ecological architecture, Bender follows in the tradition of the Northwest architects, noted for their deep respect for nature. As a feng shui expert who pioneered the use of this ancient science in America, Bender embraces a more profound connection with nature in his design practice. "Energetic environmental design draws upon considerably broader, deeper, synthesizing process tools, as opposed to the intellectual-analytical process of conventional design," says Bender. That process involves an intuitive assessment of the optimal flow of subtle energy—or *qi*—of a structure in relation to its environment.

Every feng shui master develops his or her own interpretation of the traditional texts and has a favorite collection of tools, and every situation presents a new design problem or "puzzle" that can be solved in numerous ways. This specialized intuitive art hardly subscribes to the one-size-fits-all strategy of much Western home building. Bender

FAR LEFT: Bender modeled the built-in storage cabinet/staircase after the traditional Japanese *tansu*.

LEFT: Bender selected a door handle with great regional character: "The root's shape keeps alive its difficult life, growing squeezed between the pebbles on the beach."

FACING: The glass walls of the living room slide open for a powerful connection with the ocean environment.

arrives at a site equipped with traditional compass and dowsing rod, but he always listens to the body's wisdom, or gut instinct, to inform him how to direct his intention toward the most energetically beneficial orientation and plan.

Place is key to Bender's design practice, whether designing a residential structure, a church, or a bank. Finding a location already rich in qi is a big head start. With this strategy, he follows the example of the ancient cultures of India, China, and Japan, whose temples and shrines were built on "power spots"—natural sites where spiritual energy flows in abundance. Positive energy, however, can be manifested on any site where it is needed. Bender believes that in the Western world we have lost our vital connection with the environment by creating architecture out of tune with the deeper reality of a place. He promotes the use of native materials to impart meaning and connection, along with recycled materials.

Hiking along the Oregon shore below Neahkahnie Mountain in the 1970s, Tom Bender and Lane de Moll discovered the land that was destined to become their home. Their attraction to the location was so powerful, "it was like the finishing piece of a jigsaw puzzle," says Bender. Neahkahnie, a Tillamook tribal name for "home of the gods," seems a fitting residence for an architect of the sacred who seeks every opportunity to "tap into and activate" qi. The modest home Bender designed and built in 1977, a 1,200-square-foot, cedar-shingled cottage (virtually unchanged

in thirty years) models his design philosophy and sustainable ethics.

The cottage architecture connects with its spectacular natural setting through the use of simple local materials and openness to the outdoors, aesthetic principles important to the Northwest school as well as to the Japanese architectural tradition. The strong Japanese influence in Bender's work is indebted to a Rockefeller fellowship in Japan in the 1960s under the tutelage of Teiji Itoh, architectural historian and author of *Japanese Environmental Design*. A Japanese aesthetic defines the home's simple, functional interior, economic use of space, and minimalist furnishings.

Bender and de Moll make ingenious use of recycled materials in the décor. Interior walls and cabinets are made of wood recycled from demolished chicken coops.

The house models energy efficiency as well as spatial and material economy with passive solar orientation, and a woodstove (made from a recycled automobile engine block) that serves as the main heating source. Handmade *shoji* (paper screens) on the stairs bring light into the entry and retain heat in the lower level. In place of a refrigerator, Bender designed a "cool box" tucked away in a kitchen cupboard that draws in cool night air through a series of ventilated compartments.

Thirty years of ocean weather have mellowed the woods in the Bender house, and thirty years living apart from the "deceitful noise of media-dominated city life" have deepened Bender's connection with nature in design.